Lakatos and non-dualistic ethics

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Long abstract.

This paper argues for a non-dualist position, which is oriented towards incrementally overcoming the duality between subject and object, with associated dualities. This is not a metaphysical position but a means of withdrawing from our habitual metaphysics into practice. It requires *provisionality of belief*, a state which needs to be understood in psychological terms rather than being fully definable philosophically. The philosopher of science Imre Lakatos, though working in rationalist terms, provides very useful indications as to the ways in which successful scientific discovery depends on such provisionality. Lakatos's view of the scientific heuristic resembles non-dualism in maintaining the aspiration for objectivity alongside a full recognition of the relativity of knowledge. In this paper I attempt to apply Lakatos's understanding of the scientific heuristic to help identify types of ethical tradition which are successful or unsuccessful on similarly heuristic criteria.

Lakatos adopted a sophisticated form of falsificationism in which he recognised that no theory can be determinately falsified any more than it can be verified, because auxiliary hypotheses are always needed to make an observation relevant to the truth or falsity of a theory. Drawing on the history of scientific successes, Lakatos nevertheless argued that there are rational criteria by which a scientist can reject an apparently falsified theory. These are that a new theory should be available not subject to the same falsification, explaining the previous empirical successes of the first theory, and predicting new facts which would otherwise appear improbable.

Lakatos also provided an account of the development of theories in traditions he called *research programmes*, each research programme sharing core unfalsifiable premises (the *negative heuristic*) which are combined with auxiliary hypotheses to create successive falsifiable theories (the *positive heuristic*). The working-ground of most science lies within research programmes, modifying the positive heuristic, but scientists also have to decide when to continue with or abandon research programmes which are degenerating. Such decisions are not clear-cut because an unfruitful research programme may still revive. It seems clear from Lakatos's account (though it is not Lakatos's conclusion) that effective decision making and thus objectivity in such decisions on the part of scientists depends on a psychological balance of disposition between attachment and scepticism towards theories.

Lakatos's account of the scientific heuristic is then applied to moral traditions. A moral tradition will begin with some core ideas which specify the *telos* of human life with some necessarily associated beliefs, corresponding to Lakatos's negative heuristic. A positive heuristic will then develop including some more specific contextual beliefs, together with associated practices. When these more specific beliefs begin to diverge from people's experience, tensions develop which lead to a crisis for that moral tradition in which the positive heuristic is modified into a slightly different theory, allowing the negative heuristic to remain unthreatened and the tradition to continue.

Moral traditions could be of a religious or non-religious nature, provided that they have been influential on some people's values and encountered the reality of human experience (the equivalent of scientific experiment) rather than remained theoretical. Like Lakatosian research programmes, moral traditions go through progressive and degenerative phases according to the extent to which they accord with the experience of their followers. As with scientific traditions, there is no clear point at which a moral tradition begins or ends because its negative heuristic cannot be subjected to any experiential evidence: the negative heuristic in both cases is thus the object of faith, but this faith can be boosted by experiences which appear to confirm the positive heuristic and thrown into doubt by experiences which appear to deny it. Falsificatory experiences may lead merely to a modification of the positive heuristic, and, as Lakatos suggests, it is only the failure of the tradition to come up with new theories in the face of falsificatory evidence predicting new confirmatory experiences which are likely to lead to the decline of the tradition.

A wide range of experiences might serve as confirmatory or falsificatory in moral terms, including religious experiences and empirical events whose absence when expected may be taken as falsificatory. Lakatos's criteria for rational choice in maintaining or abandoning a tradition will now be applied to two types of unsuccessful tradition (*eternalism* and *nihilism*) and one more successful type of moral tradition (the *Middle Way*) using an adapted Buddhist typology.

Eternalism is *the disposition to make cognitive assumptions which are the locus of supposed objective value, regardless of their consistency with experience*. The locus of supposed objective value in eternalism consists in a moral foundation which is taken to be universal and to which it is assumed we have access. Its chief features can thus be listed as *representationalism, moral foundationalism, cosmic justice* and *freewill.*

Access to a universal value depends on the possibility of an isomorphism between the universe, which is taken to offer the essential source of morality, and the mind which is taken to represent, understand and imitate it: eternalism thus requires a *representationalism.* This representationalism supports moral foundationalism, which takes the isomorphism for granted as the basis of an epistemological claim that we have access to a ground of universal value. The existence of that value in the structure of the universe provides the grounds for belief in *cosmic justice*, whereby a system of moral compensation is predicted, supporting the belief that future events will satisfy moral desires more fully than present ones. *Freewill* is usually required as the rational mechanism by which moral and non-moral desires can be sorted and the moral ones selected to be in accordance with cosmic justice.

Belief in each of these features depends on a dogmatic selectivity, assuming that a holistic assessment of either a given object, the universe as a whole, or the self is possible. But the phenomenal nature of our observation makes firm holistic conclusions impossible: we can only make provisional theorisations. In the case of the individual self, holistic assumptions are made in which features of the dualising ego are taken to be representative of the whole psyche, and thus the whole mind is taken to have qualities of consciousness, intentionality and volition which separate it from the universe.

Eternalism thus fails to enable the further discovery of universal values because of its dogmatic dependence on the selection of certain features over others. The psychological balance required for effective discovery is not cultivated, but instead dogmatic faith in eternalist assumptions is maintained by dualistic opposition to nihilist ones.

I define *nihilism* as *an adherence to values which are believed to be (at best) merely self-consistent and without ultimate foundation*. It is thus a disposition to reject any suggestion of value having ultimate foundations, but not a failure to have values, since all actions can be seen as expressive of values of some description and it is impossible to live without acting in the world. Nihilism is a disposition towards views of *value* and thus completely compatible with a cognitivist objectivism. Value is taken to be subjective because of the contingent nature of the selection of objects which are taken to be valuable. In either case the moral foundationalism of eternalism is denied and is replaced with a *moral coherentism* which limits the field of value to the sphere of coherence offered by a social group or individual. Either cosmic justice or freewill also tend to be denied, leaving either the subjective experiences of the selectively-defined self (existentialism) or supposedly purely cognitive facts about the universe (scientism) as the default value.

The denial of moral foundationalism and its replacement by coherentism, however, is just as dogmatic as its assertion. Doubt about the metaphysical grounds of universal ethics does not justify its rejection, only provisionality of belief about it. Lakatos makes it clear that abandonment of a theory is heuristically not always the most effective response to doubt about it. The coherentist loci of value which remain to the nihilist also depend on dogmatic assumptions, for example about the parameters of self-interest. Any coherentist approach requires the rejection of what lies beyond the sphere of coherence on no better grounds than its distant or unknown nature.

Nihilism is thus as dogmatic as eternalism, since despite its appeal to experience it supports only a selective interpretation of that experience. In particular it excludes those areas of our experience which offer an aspiration towards objectivity. It thus fails as a theory of value for similar but converse reasons to eternalism, since it offers only dogmatic scepticism with regard to universal values rather than a methodology through which heuristic judgement can be developed.

In contrast, the Middle Way between eternalism and nihilism enables movement beyond egoistic identification with theories of universal value or sceptical rejection of them. To do this it must offer a genuine pragmatism in the place of representationalism or expressivism, whereby meaning can be attributed to the unknown as well as the linguistically formulable. Building on such a pragmatism, an epistemology of the Middle Way needs to adopt features of both moral foundationalism and moral coherentism, with both foundations and coherencies being understood in provisional terms. The foundational element consists in the process of theorisation, whereby assumptions must be made as the basis of a theory, for heuristic progress to be made. The coherentist element consists in the process of testing against experience, which cannot extend beyond the field of coherence created by the assumptions of the theory.

When it comes to value assumptions, the Middle Way needs to replace the static assumptions about the grounds of value found in eternalism and nihilism with an ethical methodology which can stand the test of comparison with Lakatos's scientific methodology. It needs to provide a practical training in attaining the psychological balance required to continue effective investigation.

In the terms of Lakatos's system, the Middle Way is without a negative heuristic. Its apparent negative heuristic is just the ultimate falsity of all views. It also assumes that desire is the source of value. The value of the absence of absolute facts becomes the most basic part of the positive heuristic, implying non-attachment. In addition to this, to offer an ethical methodology, auxiliary hypotheses must be introduced, to produce falsifiable methods of improving objectivity of judgement, and I draw these from the Buddhist tradition.

The Buddhist tradition here offers three interrelated methods: morality, meditation and wisdom, all of which seek to provide the conditions to develop objective judgement. Like a scientific method, this ethical method yields apparent confirmations, of which not too much account should be taken. It is also falsifiable through experience, although the individual must judge the period of time in which to judge that falsification has occurred through the absence of expected progress.

Full Paper

(N.B. This paper has been quite substantially modified from the version which won the Fu Essay Contest)

1. Introduction

The position I wish to develop in this paper of that of a non-dualist ethics. By "non-dualism" I mean a philosophical approach which attempts to overcome dualistic assumptions such as those between subject and object, together with associated dualisms such as those between absolute and relative, mind and body, or reason and emotion. As a philosophical approach this culminates not in an impregnable philosophical position but in a *practice*: in my case this means Buddhist practice. Non-dualism is thus not a metaphysical position (except in a critical sense), but a processual, incremental method of withdrawing from metaphysical positions. As a philosophy it is nevertheless not purely negative, because it can also make assertions about what views are pragmatically helpful in enabling that withdrawal.

An important part of non-dualist philosophy also consists in illuminating the relationship between philosophical views and psychological states, since it is the nature of the interdependency between the two which determines whether they are merely mutually reinforcing or conducive to a process of disengagement from views[1]. It is this interdependence between philosophy and psychology which enables us to make sense of the idea of *provisionality of belief* which non-dualism requires. Any position which the non-dualist adopts in the process of withdrawal from metaphysics needs not just to be philosophically compatible with its provisional status, but to be held in a psychological state which is provisional (although a thorough application of the non-dualism of reason and emotion would

also indicate that philosophical belief and the psychological state in which it is held are not ultimately distinguishable).

The idea of provisionality of belief has been developed in a parallel, though more rationalistic, way, by the modern British philosopher of science Imre Lakatos (originally a follower of Karl Popper). Like the best non-dualist and Buddhist thought, Lakatos seems to me to have engaged honestly with the problem of the relativity of all enquiry, but without letting go of the aspiration for objectivity. It is the ways in which the ideas of Lakatos can be used and adopted to a non-dualist approach that I wish to explore in this paper. I shall argue that Lakatos's understanding of the heuristic approach which applies successfully in scientific discovery can be used to support a version of the Buddhist classification of ethical traditions into eternalist and nihilist types (which are ineffective) and the non-dualist Middle Way (which is heuristically effective).

2. Naïve and sophisticated falsificationism

I shall begin by giving a brief account of Lakatos's sophisticated methodological falsificationism[2], in order to show ways in which its methodology may be helpful to an understanding of ethics.

"Falsificationism" in general, is the view, developed by Popper, that objectivity of scientific knowledge is gained through the falsification of theories that have been hypothetically advanced through observation. But Lakatos rejects as "naïve falsificationism" the view that a given theory can be determinatively shown as false by an observation[3]. There are no observations unimpeded by expectations and therefore no observations which can be uncritically accepted as falsifying a theory. Lakatos also points out that most scientific theories are in any case not directly falsifiable, since a theory cannot be applied in order to predict an observation without an infinite chain of auxiliary hypotheses linking the theory to the observation (e.g. that other unknown conditions will not interfere, that the mode of observation will not create distortions etc.).

A more sophisticated form of falsificationism, then, admits the conventionality of falsificatory judgements: Lakatos describes these conventional judgements in terms of the deliberate decisions of scientists either to stick to a theory which has apparently falsifying observations or to reject it (though it seems possible that some of these judgements may be unconscious). Nevertheless Lakatos thinks that criteria can be applied to give objectivity to these judgements. He argues that even well-corroborated falsificatory observations should not lead to the rejection of a theory unless there is a new, alternative theory available which fulfils certain criteria. These are that the new theory should not be subject to the same falsification, that it should explain the previous empirical successes of the first theory, and that it should predict new facts which would otherwise appear improbable (which can then be used to either corroborate or falsify the new theory).

This means that a certain degree of dogmatism is considered rational by Lakatos when a scientist sticks to a theory in spite of conflicting observation. He provides a number of historical examples of such an attitude turning out to be correct in the light of later observations. Theories are perceived as linked together in chains which Lakatos refers to as *research programmes*, where each theory is a modification of the preceding one, sharing core assumptions which remain

inviolable within the scope of the tradition. These assumptions, which he calls the *negative heuristic*, are unfalsifiable, perhaps even metaphysical in nature, but, together with auxiliary hypotheses, they generate falsifiable theory which is the active working-ground of the research programme and is called the *positive heuristic*. It is this which changes as a research programme develops and one theory gives way to another.

From Lakatos's account[4] it becomes obvious that the crucial factor in the success of science in making progress towards objectivity is not any formula which could be applied rigidly to every case so much as the dispositions of the scientists involved. A scientist has to employ the full subtlety of his intellect to balance subjective against objective factors. A scientist who is too heavily egoistic may continue to grimly hang onto his theories as the evidence piles up against them, whilst one who is too detached or sceptical may just as irrationally give theories up too easily when later evidence may still turn out to support them. In both cases the factor working against objective progress is egoistic attachment, either of a direct nature (attachment to a theory which is seen as part of oneself) or an indirect nature (attachment to the idea that theories are inadequate). An effective scientist (or group of scientists) needs a balance of faith in her theory and scepticism enabling her to see its weaknesses. Her faith will be boosted by confirmatory observations predicted by her theory, and her scepticism will be awakened by observations which appear to refute the theory, but which should dominate over the other is a matter for a fine judgement of the conditions involved.

3. Research programmes and moral traditions

A particularly interesting element of Lakatos's system is his approach to the problem of how to judge between different research programmes. He sees research programmes as in competition with each other in an almost evolutionary fashion, being born in the mind of some theoretical genius, developing in a fecund, "progressive" phase and then degenerating before finally dying through the death or desertion of its final scientists. Research programmes cannot thus be seen as right or wrong, but only as progressive or degenerating. The key factor in judging whether or not a research programme is progressive is the fruitfulness of that programme in producing new theories which make novel predictions, but there is no clear-cut point at which a programme ceases to be fruitful, since even when it appears to be degenerating it may still revive and suddenly begin to be fruitful again.

Against this account we can set that of Kuhn[5] who talks of "paradigms" rather than research programmes, and argues that although there are a number of criteria that can be used to judge between the merits of paradigms, there are no criteria for judging priority between the criteria other than the assent of the community involved. Ultimately I think Kuhn is in some ways closer to the truth in that he takes the most important factors of scientific progress to be psychological: but he does not consider whether there might be psychological criteria for progress. However, Lakatos's account may actually be more *useful*, in terms of offering scientists some justification for their discipline, because it continues to offer some sort of value (albeit a limited one confined to the scientific sphere of assumptions) in the form of a criterion for distinguishing traditions. The lack of clear-cut definition in this criterion may actually be a merit, since it encourages subtlety and balance of approach.

The Middle Way I want to advocate may be illuminated by a comparison between the problems of prioritising scientific traditions with that of moral traditions. By a "moral tradition" I mean something similar to Lakatos's research programmes, except that the goal of a given tradition is seen in terms of an overall goal for human beings rather than merely the acquisition of cognitive knowledge. A moral tradition will begin with some core ideas which specify the *telos* of human life with some necessarily associated beliefs, corresponding to Lakatos's negative heuristic. A positive heuristic will then develop including some more specific contextual beliefs, together with associated practices. When these more specific beliefs begin to diverge from people's experience, tensions develop which lead to a crisis for that moral tradition in which the positive heuristic is modified into a slightly different theory, allowing the negative heuristic to remain unthreatened and the tradition to continue.

Moral traditions could be of a religious or non-religious nature, provided that they have been influential on some people's values and encountered the reality of human experience (the equivalent of scientific experiment) rather than remained theoretical. Christianity, for example, has a core *telos* for the individual believer of obeying God's will, with some associated core beliefs about the role of Jesus in making this will known to human beings. Numerous modifications can be seen to the positive heuristic from the early church to modern sectarianism. Likewise, the impact of Utiliarianism on Nineteenth-century England, together with its various stages of theoretical development through Hume, Bentham, Mill, Sidgwick etc., might also well qualify it as a non-religious moral tradition.

Like Lakatosian research programmes, moral traditions go through progressive and degenerative phases according to the extent to which they accord with the experience of their followers. As with scientific traditions, there is no clear point at which a moral tradition begins or ends because its negative heuristic cannot be subjected to any experiential evidence: the negative heuristic in both cases is thus the object of faith, but this faith can be boosted by experiences which appear to confirm the positive heuristic and thrown into doubt by experiences which appear to deny it. Falsificatory experiences may lead merely to a modification of the positive heuristic, and, as Lakatos suggests, it is only the failure of the tradition to come up with new theories in the face of falsificatory evidence predicting new confirmatory experiences which are likely to lead to the decline of the tradition.

A wide range of experiences might serve as confirmatory or falsificatory in moral terms. Religious or spiritual experiences are one obvious example. Where such experiences are predicted by the positive heuristic of a religion, they will also be taken as confirmatory of its negative heuristic and thus confirm the person's commitment to the source of value it offers. Despite the skills of religious leaders in explaining the fact of an individual *not* having such experiences in terms of auxiliary hypotheses (e.g. that individual's lack of faith), a widespread or persistent absence of expected religious experiences might also serve a falsificatory function.

A non-religious type of confirmatory or falsificatory experience might relate to how far predictions about the relation between conditions found in the positive heuristic have turned out to be true, both historically and in terms of individual lives. If we take Utilitarianism as applied to public policy as an example,

legislators might review sociological evidence as to how far a law geared towards producing the greatest happiness of the greatest number was actually having that effect: if it turned out that it appeared to be having a minimal or counter-productive effect, the legislators might question whether this particular situation could be improved through legislation rather than questioning the negative heuristic (i.e. the very value of bringing about greater happiness for the greatest number).

But can Lakatos's criterion of fruitfulness be applied to moral traditions to provide some estimation of their relative value? To argue that it can, in the following two sections I will try to apply Lakatos's criteria to *types* of moral tradition and show that it can be helpful (though not definitive) in distinguishing traditions which lead towards objectivity from those which do not. The typology of moral traditions that I shall adopt is an adapted version of the Buddhist one between *eternalism* and *nihilism*[6].

4. The methodological failure of eternalism

First I want to look at *eternalism*, which I define as *the disposition to make cognitive assumptions which are the locus of supposed objective value, regardless of their consistency with experience*. Being defined as a disposition, eternalism (like nihilism and the Middle Way) is thus a psychological tendency generally associated with a particular type of philosophical belief[7]. I shall try to show the failure of this *type* of moral tradition without attempting to identify it too definitely with particular historical traditions[8].

The locus of supposed objective value in eternalism consists in a moral foundation which is taken to be universal and to which it is assumed we have access. Its chief features can thus be listed as *representationalism, moral foundationalism, cosmic justice* and *freewill.* Access to a universal value depends on the possibility of an isomorphism between the universe, which is taken to offer the essential source of morality, and the mind which is taken to represent, understand and imitate it: eternalism thus requires a *representationalism*, which may take a rationalistic (e.g. Platonic Forms, Kantian Categorical Imperatives), empiricist (e.g. Natural Law) or revelatory (e.g. Biblical revelation, intuitive conscience) form. This representationalism supports moral foundationalism, which takes the isomorphism for granted as the basis of an epistemological claim that we have access to a ground of universal value. The existence of that value in the structure of the universe provides the grounds for belief in *cosmic justice*, whereby a system of moral compensation is predicted, supporting the belief that future events will satisfy moral desires more fully than present ones. *Freewill* is usually required as the rational mechanism by which moral and non-moral desires can be sorted and the moral ones selected to be in accordance with cosmic justice.

In eternalism, then, a metaphysics of value is supported by an epistemology, which is in turn dependent on a philosophy of language. At each of these levels, though, some features of our experience are selected over others as in accordance with the value that drives that selection. At the level of representationalism, some features of our experience become the focus of our attention and are taken to be those of the object represented. At the level of epistemology, some features of objects are taken to be the basis of knowledge from which metaphysical claims can be deduced. And at the level of metaphysics, certain features of the universe and of ourselves are selected as the locus of value, ignoring other features which

may contradict the value claim that is being made. In making claims of cosmic justice, it is the features of the universe which appear to indicate intrinsic justice which are alighted upon, not those which do not: the rewarded hero rather than the happily retired torturer. Likewise in making claims of freewill, we alight upon our experiences of choice rather than the evidence of our conditioning.

The rationalisation of such selectivity depends on the (explicit or implicit) claim that the selected features can legitimately take the place of the whole, which is primarily an epistemological claim. It is assumed that we can have knowledge of the whole apart from knowledge of its constituents, because the whole is more than the sum of its parts. A holism is thus claimed at key points in the process of the justification of eternalism: whether in the identification of objects, the formation of beliefs about the universe as a whole, or the formation of beliefs about the self as agent.

As Popper[9] argued, the study of whole things (or whole systems) is impossible, since in order to observe or comment on anything we focus on certain of its aspects. The study of wholes, he argues, is not to be confused with the study of the organising principles of systems, since the organising principles are simply another aspect of the system. Following this argument, it seems impossible that we could ever have knowledge of the whole of any system. Popper, however, does not follow through the logical implications of this argument (at least at this point), since it can also be used to show that any given quality or relation of an object that we identify as a "thing" cannot be known. Since every system appears to be made up of an infinite regression of subsystems, any identifiable "part" of a macro-system will also in turn be the "whole" of a micro-system. The argument carries the broader implication, then, that our understanding is phenomenal and that the identification of any particular system is contingent on our own selective processes both in the process of observation and the process of theorisation. The selection of features about which to theorise, then, must be as provisional as the theories themselves.

At the level of the individual human being, it may be argued that consciousness, intentionality, and/or volition may only be explained as characteristics of the whole human being: all three of these elements tend to be involved in freewill claims. However, if Popper's point is correct, then we cannot investigate these features as a whole. We experience not "consciousness" as a whole, but objects of consciousness, not "intentionality" but intentional objects, not "volition" but choices. I think that these mental features are best explained not as features of the whole being but as features of the *ego*: the leading edge of our consciousness, intentionality and volition is directed by our desires, the most fundamental of which is the continuation of the ego itself. The ego is not to be identified with the total being, being itself part of a system the maintenance of which involves completely involuntary processes such as digestion, but what the ego does is to provide us with a sense of value towards all things connected with it, whether these be consciousness, the body, external objects, knowledge or views. This ego only exists in differentiation from the psyche as a whole by virtue of its dualising tendencies, and thus when it is taken to be representative of the whole mind that mind is placed in dualistic opposition to the universe: freewill is opposed to determinism, consciousness to matter etc.

Whether applied to the nature of the universe or to the nature of the self, then, eternalist selectivity is merely dogmatic. The selection of features which constitute the basis of moral value is not put forward provisionally, as in a Lakatosian account of the heuristic process, but assumed to be the basis of all thought about value. Eternalist dogmatism is a necessary corollary of its holism, since that holism consists not merely in the *search* for knowledge of universal values but the belief that it has been achieved.

The methodological failure of eternalism, then, rests on this dogmatism. Mere theory is taken to be law, leading to dogmatic faith as the basis of value. This leads to a corresponding under-emphasis on the value of criticism from those whose experience leads them to question eternalistic assumptions. This suspicion of criticism arises from the assumption that criticism undermines value and will necessarily lead to nihilistic positions. Without an appreciation of the value of criticism, there is little to check the development of authoritarianism and intolerance in eternalist institutions, leading to nihilistic counter-reactions and an endless cycle of conflict fuelled by egoistic identification with views. Although provisional assumptions of objective value are required for progress, as I have argued, a failure to recognise their provisionality leads to either the dogmatic adherence to much-discredited theories or (again using the analogy of scientific theory) to the production of ad hoc hypotheses – unfruitful new theories which attempt to prop up the tradition but do not make any novel conditional predictions.

In Lakatosian terms, then, eternalism has failed to provide a successful type of ethical theory because it depends on dogmatic adherence to its negative heuristic (of representationalism, moral foundationalism, cosmic justice and freewill), beyond which no investigation of universal value is judged possible. Its followers have not attempted to cultivate qualities of balanced heuristic judgement, instead stressing the duality between this view and nihilism that is the basis of faith. That the individuals following this approach have reached only a limited understanding of the nature of the universal values they seek is scarcely surprising.

5. The methodological failure of nihilism

I define *nihilism* as *an adherence to values which are believed to be (at best) merely self-consistent and without ultimate foundation*. It is thus a disposition to reject any suggestion of value having ultimate foundations, but not a failure to have values, since all actions can be seen as expressive of values of some description and it is impossible to live without acting in the world. Nihilism is a disposition towards views of *value* and thus completely compatible with a cognitivist objectivism. It thus unites the scientistic tendency in modern analytic philosophy with the Nietzschean and existentialist tendencies in modern "Continental" philosophy.[10]

Nihilism, like eternalism, relies on a representationalism whereby certain limited features of our experience are taken as representing objects: or occasionally, as an alternative, on an expressivism which takes all meaning to be the expression of a self, although this self has itself been implicitly identified through the dogmatic selection of defining features. A different approach is taken in understanding the relationship between represented (or expressive) objects and the grounds of value, however: value is taken to be subjective because of the contingent nature of the selection of objects which are taken to be valuable. This subjectivity may be taken to stand in contrast to the objectivity of "facts" (in the *scientistic* version of

nihilism), or to merely follow the subjectivity of all our understanding, whereby both facts and values are incorrigibly relative (in the *existentialist* version). In either case the moral foundationalism of eternalism is denied and is replaced with a *moral coherentism* which limits the field of value to the sphere of coherence offered by a social group or individual. Either cosmic justice or freewill also tend to be denied, leaving either the subjective experiences of the selectively-defined self (existentialism) or supposedly purely cognitive facts about the universe (scientism) as the default value. In the former case an emphasis on freewill remains, and the denial of objective demands results in subjectivism, whilst in the latter, a scientific description of cultural or linguistic relativism becomes the point of departure for asserting the value of believing in the biologically or socially determined nature of all values.

The denial of moral foundationalism and its replacement by coherentism, however, is just as dogmatic as its assertion. It requires just as much selectivity to deny as to affirm that there are causal processes in the universe which provide us with the basis of a belief in some form of moral compensation whereby our desires are met more fully or profoundly by a process of moral discrimination: for our experience provides us with comedy as well as tragedy. As with any other theory about the universe, doubt exists as to its representational truth: but Lakatos makes it clear that the best heuristic strategy does not always consist in the abandonment of a theory on the grounds of doubt. The most justifiable response to the sceptical arguments often employed by nihilistic philosophers against ethical universality is thus not relativism or subjectivism, which abandon such universality, but provisionality of belief, which recognises the contingency of our knowledge.

The coherentist loci of value which remain to the nihilist also depend on dogmatic assumptions. The debate about the nature of a prescriptive rationality in analytic philosophy, for example, has failed to either satisfactorily identify a criterion of rational self-interest, or to provide a reason why we should follow such a rational criterion when this does not necessarily coincide with our actual immediate desires[11]. To create an individual rationality, the objects that are taken to be of value to the self have to be defined with regard to time, as it is not clear how far into the future I should identify with “my” needs, and a simplistic account of my nature has to be cut directly through the rich complexity of my actual identifications, many of which may be with others or with universal causes.

These sorts of difficulties reveal those of criteria of coherence as providing grounds of value in general. Any criterion of coherence must select only those features of our experience which can be fitted within a rationally circumscribed sphere, rejecting what lies beyond purely because of its distance from our concerns (according to our current conception of what those concerns are), or because of its unknown nature. But either of these two criteria provide grounds only for provisionality, not for rational exclusion. Just as the concentration of a scientist’s efforts on a particular field of investigation can be pragmatically justified without the need to reject other field as unworthy, so the concentration of our moral efforts on a particular sphere of coherent activity does not need to be justified by an affirmation only of the value of that sphere, but only by a recognition of our actual limitations.

The failure of nihilism thus consists, like that of eternalism, in its dogmatism. Like any form of dogmatism, it appeals to some aspects of our experience to the exclusion of others. The dogmatism is more striking for the fact that it begins with an appeal to experience, but that experience is interpreted only in ways which deny eternalism, thus creating a new negative dogmatism. The area of our experience which it most completely denies is that which aspires to develop in the direction of a universal value, particularly the exploratory and self-transcendent urge towards objectivity expressed in differing ways in science, the arts, religion, philosophy and altruistic activity. In all of these spheres of activity, coherentism alone fails to explain the nature of the objectivity which we can succeed, or fail, in relatively achieving according to our degree of recognition of the unknown beyond the rational view we have hitherto assembled. It also fails to explain the justification of the value judgements which even the most hardened of nihilist philosophers continue to make. In Lakatosian terms, its negative heuristic, which consists in the denial of universal value and the assertion of coherentism, remains unquestionable as a negative metaphysical premise beyond which lie only the delusions of eternalism, and it is this dogmatic position which is offered instead of a methodology capable of cultivating the judgement required to move beyond it.

6. The Middle Way: a tradition without negative heuristic

Against the methodological failures of eternalism and nihilism I would argue that there is such a thing as a successful methodology both in science and in ethics: it maintains a balance between faith in theories and criticism based on discrepancies between theory and experience, and it can be generally identified by its fruitfulness in leading to new theories and new discoveries. The "balancing" between faith and criticism is a matter for a finely trained judgement, which not only has a good knowledge of the types of condition under investigation but has advanced to some extent beyond egoistic identification with theories or with scepticism against theories.

The Middle Way also needs to avoid the representationalism which I identified as a feature of both eternalism and nihilism. This does not mean that we can wholly avoid our natural tendency to think in representative terms, but that we can psychologically overcome the dualism of eternalism and nihilism only to the extent that we can make that representationalism truly provisional. Such a provisionality can only be achieved by having an alternative conception of the meaning of our language which is neither representationalist nor expressivist but genuinely pragmatist. According to a pragmatist conception, the meaning of our language (and other representations) can be understood solely in relation to its use: but if "use" is understood too narrowly either in relation to a representation of its social context (e.g. Wittgensteinian language games) or a fixed concept of the individual (as in expressivism), pragmatism tends to slip back into nihilism. In order to leave a space between the Scylla of representationalism and the Charybdis of expressivism, significance needs to be understood as extending incrementally beyond language and to be associable with the unknown as well as the known.

Building on such a pragmatism, an epistemology of the Middle Way needs to adopt features of both moral foundationalism and moral coherentism, with both foundations and coherencies being understood in provisional terms. The foundational element consists in the process of theorisation, whereby assumptions must be made as the basis of a theory, for heuristic progress to be made. The

coherentist element consists in the process of testing against experience, which cannot extend beyond the field of coherence created by the assumptions of the theory. As already outlined a balanced heuristic process involves both scepticism about theories (undermining the foundations) and faith in them (providing a coherent basis for investigation).

When it comes to value assumptions, the Middle Way needs to replace the static assumptions about the grounds of value found in eternalism and nihilism with an ethical methodology which can stand the test of comparison with Lakatos's scientific methodology. There must be a way for our values to be developed and stretched in the direction of objectivity, challenging the limitations of our egoistic assumptions. It would perhaps be a mistake to talk about "ethical methodology" at all if it consisted only in the cognitive process of assessing moral theories and not in the development of an objectivity of disposition which is both integrated (affectively coherent) and non-egoistic (affectively firmly founded). Ethical methodology, then, must be of a type to provide a prior training, where needed, to allow the possibility of objectivity in scientific methodology and in the methodology of cognitive moral assessment in ethics, by undermining the dogmatism which can prevent either from being effective. It is from Buddhism that I primarily draw my suggestions for such primary ethical methodology.

In the terms of Lakatos's system, the Middle Way is without a negative heuristic. This means that it does not have any completely unfalsifiable core doctrines. Its core doctrine is simply the absence of factual doctrines, i.e. the falsity of all views, a doctrine which would be immediately falsified by the categorical proof of any theory whatsoever: if this categorical proof is lacking we have every reason to suppose that the doctrine is true. The falsity of all views is not itself a view, as I explained above, so much as a disposition to recognise the unknown which follows from the complete abandonment of representationalism. The other thing at the core of the Middle Way is not a doctrine but a value: this is not to be reduced to a cognitive statement of any particular quantity being of value, only the assertion of value as it is increasingly discovered through the integration of our disparate desires. It does not make sense to talk about a value itself being falsifiable or unfalsifiable (only a statement about it can be so) and a rejection of it is contradictory, since to reject it would itself be asserting a value, the value of rejecting value. This is equivalent to saying that human beings always have desires, which implies that they value something as a matter of practical necessity.

Either of these core elements by itself would not enable the derivation of any positive heuristic to provide a methodology. The mere assertion of value would lead to eternalism, and the negation of fact would lead to nihilism, when coupled with any further auxiliary hypotheses. Put together, however, they do provide a methodology. The value of the absence of absolute facts becomes the most basic part of the positive heuristic, implying non-attachment. That this non-attachment to absolute facts (which are functions of the ego), together with a positive attachment to value in general, leads to the development of greater dispositional objectivity is the leading premise of primary ethical methodology. However, this can only be tested together with auxiliary hypotheses offering practical methods of cultivating a positive sense of value together with non-attachment. The Buddhist tradition here offers three interrelated methods: morality, meditation and wisdom. Morality here means the consequentialist and preceptual levels of ethics, which compliment the primary cultivation of dispositional objectivity. Meditation

means the use of deliberate concentrative and reflective techniques to develop greater positivity, insight (into the non-dual nature of reality) and awareness (which is instrumental to the whole process). Wisdom means the development of awareness of non-dualism and its application through meditation, study and reflection. These three methods need to be pursued together to be successful in transforming the mind and moving it towards dispositional objectivity. Whilst, of course, they pre-suppose the existence of the objective values they cultivate, they also offer a hypothesis as to the means by which we may know when to break the circle of mutually supportive theory and experience. At this point, then, practice must take over from philosophy to test the hypothesis.

The success of these methods, like that of any other method, is dependent on the presence of other satisfactory conditions, some of which may not even have been identified by the Buddhist tradition. As in the use of scientific methodology, then, a balance of faith and scepticism is needed: the "religious" origin of the method does not mean that progress necessarily comes easily or that the success or failure of the method and the truth or falsity of its heuristic assumptions can easily be distinguished from the effects of other conditions.

Like a scientific method, too, this ethical method yields apparent confirmations. In meditation, particularly, there is the experience of *dhyana* : a temporary state of immensely enjoyable awareness, positivity and integration. More generally there is an experience of greater positivity and awareness. However, the Buddhist tradition warns sternly that these confirmations are not to be relied upon and may merely become the source of new attachments which will drag the practitioner back to the beginning. This can be compared with Popper's attacks on the vanity of "verifications" in science, which show nothing about the continued operation of the theory in even slightly changed conditions. The happiness which one links to the practice of an ethical methodology may not be due to it at all but to entirely different conditions. Nevertheless, I would suggest that Lakatos is correct in taking apparent verifications as useful boosters of confidence, particularly at the beginning of the application of a methodology.

The theory can also be provisionally falsified by the absence of positive results from the use of the method over a given period or range of conditions, or from results which are actually contrary to those expected. The boundaries of these kind of tests perhaps need to be set by the individual using the method.

Here I have only been able to sketch out in very general terms the nature of the Middle Way in relation to Lakatos's heuristic. My main concern has been to be provocative, and to argue both that a Middle Way is necessary and that it is possible. Lakatos has provided only one of many possible points of departure. Many possible supporting arguments and clarifications have been omitted, but I hope that a much fuller account of the argument given here will eventually be published in the form of the thesis/book I am currently working on.

Notes

[1] In Buddhist terms this corresponds to a process of causal reaction (pratityasamutpada) which is either cyclic or progressive: see Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism* (London: Tharpa Pubns. 1987:6th Edn) 135-142

[2] The source throughout is Imre Lakatos "Falsification and the Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes", *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* I. Lakatos and A. Musgrave, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1974)
[3] A view sometimes unfairly attributed to Popper
[4] I say *from* rather than *in* this account because Lakatos himself would almost certainly not agree with this psychological interpretation of the evidence he assembles. Despite the ease with which his work can be interpreted in this way, Lakatos himself was committed to a rational understanding of objectivity, sharing the widespread Western assumption that a psychological account of scientific progress is an irredeemably subjectivist or relativist one.
[5] Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press 1996: 3rd Edn)
[6] Since I do not here have space to discuss the relationship between the use of these terms in the Buddhist tradition and my own use of them, my use is best just taken as stipulative. A detailed account of the features and histories of eternalism and nihilism according to this kind of analysis will appear in the thesis I am currently working on, entitled "A Buddhist theory of moral objectivity".
[7] Again, I do not have space to discuss the numerous issues which are raised by this general association. I must assume some sympathy on the part of the reader to the pragmatist defiance of the fact-value distinction which it involves, which I take to be due to the *priority* of values over facts. Facts are only found in affective, human, dynamic and psychological contexts and are thus expressions or instruments of value.
[8] If more concreteness than this is required, it can be said that examples of eternalistic philosophies are those of Plato, the Stoics, Christianity (and other types of theism), Descartes, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Schopenhauer, and the absolutist (rather than descriptivist) Utilitarians (e.g. Mill, Sidgwick). All these classifications are argued in detail in my thesis.
[9] Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1957)
[10] Examples of more or less nihilist movements or philosophers as argued in my thesis are the classical Sceptics, Aristotle (with modern Aristotelians), Hume, descriptivist utilitarians such as Hare, most other analytic philosophy including the logical positivists, G.E. Moore, and Wittgenstein, Pragmatism (subtly), Nietzsche, and the Existentialist and Postmodernist traditions.
[11] This is argued in more detail in Robert Ellis, "Parfit and the Buddha", *Contemporary Buddhism* 1 (2000)