

Experience, Explanation, End, Everything

June 10 Experience, Explanation, End - Everything - Alex Livingston

Alex argues that in light of our experience, recollected as explanation, we decide what to do to achieve pleasant ends – and to avoid unpleasant ends. He hopes to convince us that it is perilous to disregard an explanation just because it is "religious" or "traditional" and not reducible to a "scientific" one.

1: agreement and disagreement

1.1: assertion that presumes agreement

All dialogue begins by establishing or assuming agreement by all parties on some thing or things, doesn't it? And agreement by all parties on something means that they all believe it, which in turn means that they all hold it to be correct, factual, true, right (and I take those four terms to be synonyms), or, to put it another way, that they all consider themselves to be right about it.

1.2: being mistaken

Now, if two people disagree about something, one of them is mistaken. You might disagree with me about that, but, if you do, then one of us is mistaken. (I hope you get my drift.) I do not want to be mistaken. I want to get it right. If I am wrong I want to be corrected.

1.3: friendly disagreement

Now considering oneself right about something - that is, believing something - does not necessarily mean despising, condemning, or repudiating those who disagree or are not convinced. It is possible to vehemently disagree with people and yet still be friends with them, respecting them and their opinions and not doubting the sincerity with which they express them.

1.3.1: despite offence

So if we find ourselves having strong but opposing opinions, I hope we will give each other the benefit of the doubt and stay friends, even if you are offended that I should hold such a view or vice versa. It does not follow from being offended by a view or claim either that those who espouse it are hostile to you or that it is untrue. It was in fact my offence at something someone said here more than a year ago that gave me the impetus for this talk.

1.4: belief, confidence, and conjecture

1.4.1: authority

1.4.1.1: establishing credibility part of convincing communication

Part of convincing and persuading is establishing one's own credibility and authority. I ask for mutual respect: that no one expects, on the strength of their own declaration alone, to be taken as an authority on anything. On the other hand I plead for giving the benefit of the doubt, neither presuming mischief, denial, or wishful thinking, nor being impulsively dismissive or judgmental. I try to allow for the possibility of my having to discard some or all of what I believe: refinement, revision, and rejection are par for the course. I hope each of you will allow for the possibility of your having to discard some or all of what you believe.

1.4.1.2: no implicit acceptance (not a partisan)

I do not implicitly accept the authority of any particular communication or any particular source of communication. So please do not think that I toe the line of, let alone belong to, a particular disagreeable faction just because I believe some things its members allegedly espouse. In fact I have many views that are contentious even in the communities I most associate with and value. I am no partisan - at least not wittingly.

1.4.2: neither credulousness nor incredulousness

I am not advocating credulousness, but neither am I advocating incredulousness - indeed I am challenging both. I am urging avoidance of hubris and of stubbornly adhering to a belief, refusing to reconsider it and disdaining opposing views and those who hold them. I am especially warning against rejecting a view merely on the grounds of its most well-known advocates' other objectionable beliefs or their objectionable attitudes or behaviour. Let us be careful not to throw out the baby with the bath water.

1.4.3: being corrected

1.4.3.1: you please correct me

So, if you think I am mistaken about what I am trying to convince you of, I expect - indeed I hope - you will try to convince me to change my mind. I want you to disabuse me of my error. I am not immune to confirmation bias, though I dare say none of us is.

1.4.3.2: let me please correct you

But, as I am quite convinced of what I will be saying, if you do not agree with me I want to disabuse you of your error (as I see it), because the stakes could hardly be higher - I believe.

1.4.3.3: reaching agreement

To put it less bluntly, let us together try to get to the right answer - at least, what we will consider the right answer once we all agree on it. I do not see how to do any better than that.

1.4.4: consequences of being mistaken

Your beliefs affect the choices you make. In deciding what to do you reflect on what you believe - or at least conjecture - (to be the facts) about what you will experience in the future. Why do this? Well, apart from the enjoyment of working it out and satisfying your curiosity, you hope to anticipate pleasures and displeasures that await you. You could then at least celebrate the future delights in advance and steel yourself for the future miseries. But that is not all, is it? You also want to work out whether and how your choices - what you decide to do or not to do - will change what you will experience. You make decision-dependent predictions, in other words, you work out how it will be different for you if you do, say, X rather than not X. Now I hope it is clear from this that predicting something false, in other words, having guessed or believed wrongly how it will be for you in the case of the action you end up taking, could be disastrous for you.

1.4.4.1: confidence and betting

I am not claiming to have a recipe for certainty about anything in the future. In general we only have a certain degree of confidence about things yet to happen. Whenever we make a decision we bet; we bet on what we feel most confident of.

We can, however, do things which increase or decrease our confidence. But I will not go into that here.

1.4.4.2: example

An example. Suppose you have been at the beach for some time and suddenly the sea recedes so far and so fast that fish are left flopping about on the sand 100 metres from where the water used to come. Seeing that such a phenomenon has nearly always preceded a tsunami in the past, you would want to believe (or at least bet) at that point that a tsunami would shortly follow, would you not? Otherwise you might decide to stay right where you are and watch what happens next rather than immediately hotfoot it inland.

2: "science" and "religion"

2.1: naturalism

2.1.1: definition

I define naturalism as the doctrine that no uncaused mind or, more precisely, volition or intention, is necessary to explain anything. And I make no distinction between naturalism and philosophical materialism or physicalism (physics is derived from the Greek for nature). A catchcry of naturalism could be "physics is all there is". It asserts that once we have a "complete physics" we will have an explanation for everything. In other words, there are nonintentional alternatives to all intentional accounts - though these are not all known in detail yet.

2.1.1.1: Dennett's "physical stance"

As an aside, I suggest that naturalism is equivalent to the belief that Daniel Dennett's "physical stance" is adequate, at least hypothetically, to explain, and therefore predict, everything, that is, all experience.

2.1.2: "science" = naturalism

Now the word science is commonly used, in my experience at least, to mean naturalism in this sense, especially in philosophical discussions or as the opposite of "religion". That is to say, it is understood to refer to pure or natural science with the added condition that anything else is make-believe or "faith" therapy - superstition or "religion" in other words.

2.2: "religion"

Speaking of which -

2.2.1: popular understanding

In popular practice that word, religion, is closely associated with the idea of blind faith: belief for which there is no evidence, for which it is supposedly impossible for there to be any evidence, or even for which there is ample contrary evidence. It is widely asserted, often as if beyond doubt, that world views, belief systems, or philosophies that are not ultimately naturalistic fall into this category. This has the effect that theories or doctrines get classified - and effectively devalued - as "religions" merely on the grounds that they explain things, at least partially, in terms of conscious beings that are not beholden to physics or the natural world. But it is also a belief or view that such nonnatural explanations constitute blind faith or mere wishful thinking, and it offends me when this view is expressed as if were established fact and beyond contention, because doing so discredits anyone who even doubts it, let alone disagrees with it.

2.2.2: no merit in blind faith

Now I do not see any benefit in believing for its own sake: blind faith has nothing to recommend it. (But that is also a belief of mine, and therefore open to question like any other.)

2.2.3: here, religion = faith despite contrary evidence

Because of this popular understanding of religion, I prefer not to use the word. But for present purposes, because I cannot think of a better term, I will use it to mean a world view that is doggedly maintained in the face of all contrary evidence, in other words, a severe form of blind faith. I am therefore against all religion in this sense.

2.2.4: naturalism also possibly a religion

Naturalism can also be a religiously held view, then. And I wonder whether people like Richard Dawkins and Michel Onfray are not religious naturalists.

3: existence

I now want to say a couple of things about existence.

3.1: a thing exists if it explains something

If a thing A, say, explains something (a phenomenon, an experience) then A exists.

3.2: a thing explains = evidence exists for it

This is the same as saying that if there is evidence for something - that is, its effects are evident, or it exhibits to your consciousness what you would expect it to - then it exists.

4: nonexistence

4.1: something does not exist if it does not explain anything (meaning no evidence exists for it)

4.1.1: = a thing exists only if it explains something

Now I take the converse also to be the case, namely, that if a thing A explains nothing (in other words, it does not explain anything) then A does not exist. This is the same as saying that if there is no evidence for something then it does not exist.

4.1.2: otherwise no decisive nonexistence

If nonexistence were not defined like that we could never say something does not exist.

4.2: no evidence, no existence

So if there is no evidence for something then, fine, it does not exist.

4.2.1: but evidence impossible?

But to say there never will be any evidence for it, because it is impossible that there ever could be, so it is pointless to even look for it, and anything that purports to be evidence for it can be dismissed out of hand because it is ludicrous, is over the top, I suggest. It amounts to denial, to wilful, determined belief or "faith" in its nonexistence, does it not? For as long as I have no evidence for something, then, I agree, doggedly believing it exists would be self-delusion or blind faith. It would make sense for me to believe it does not exist, like I believe (or am at least very confident - most of the time, anyway) that unicorns, invisible white rabbits, alien flying objects, and parallel universes do not exist.

4.2.1.1: taking induction too far

But to refuse to consider it possible that they might one day be found to exist is taking induction - the extension of experienced patterns into the future - too far.

4.2.1.2: could result in false denial of evidence

Such a premeditated insistence on the nonexistence of something could - and I suspect often does - lead to ignoring or dismissing what is in fact evidence for it. This is an example of confirmation bias.

4.2.1.3: conscious, choosing entities (agents)

Now I take it we do not have a problem with affirming the existence of agents, by which I mean consciously causing selves or beings. It is agents' intentional or consciously chosen acts - their will or volition - that distinguishes them from other things. I use the terms volitional and intentional interchangeably to refer to this quality.

4.2.1.3.1: necessarily naturalistic?

But does it make sense to rule out the possibility of evidence for agents that are independent of physics, that are not naturalistic, that do not depend on nature to exist?

5: experience and evidence

Now there is only evidence because there is experience or sentience or consciousness. If evidence is not experienced it never arises. Evidence is always evident to a conscious being, a subject; a subject must be aware of it. In fact evidence can be thought of as that which is experienced, or even as experience itself. Evidence accrues only to individual subjects. You and I each have our own experiences, and they constitute the only evidence any one of us ever has. Evidence and experience are necessarily always from the perspective of a subject.

5.1: testimony

5.1.1: evidence of witnesses

One kind of evidence we rely on is the testimony of witnesses. This is the kind of evidence heard in court. But whenever we read something or are spoken to or understand any kind of message or signal we are also acquiring evidence. We are being communicated to by other subjects who have themselves acquired evidence and could be informing us of some of that evidence. Depending on how well we understand their communication, how trustworthy we judge them to be, and how consistent and well corroborated our understanding of the communication is, among other things, we take that evidence on board with some degree of confidence. We do this so frequently that we lose track of how much of what we believe is actually derived from what others have experienced. Yet we rarely cast doubt on the things we have come to believe this way merely on the grounds that the only evidence we have for them are signals to us from others whom

we trust both to have themselves believed what the signals communicate and to have been right in believing it.

5.1.2: history - evidence of witnesses past

Now it is the recorded evidence of witnesses - or, if you like, the evidence consisting of recordings of witnesses' accounts - from which, in large part, our knowledge of history, or at least our beliefs about historical events, comes.

5.1.3: testimony and documentation as evidence: in doubt until shown to be explicable naturalistically?

So, how do testimony and documentary evidence and indeed communication per se stand up to naturalistic scrutiny? Does naturalism have no truck with them until all feelings, beliefs, intentions and other experiences of people in the past and all their choices are fully explained in terms of unthinking, unfeeling, unintending matter or energy or whatever?

6: explanation

Now let us focus on explanation.

6.1: the unexplained

Explanation (or causation, which I consider by and large to amount to the same thing) must begin with something that just is, that just happens to be, since otherwise there would be an infinite regression of explainers or causes.

6.1.1: unless necessary

Unless perhaps we can meaningfully assert that all known existence "necessarily" is or has to be, independently of everything, including all languages and other symbol systems, along the lines of mathematics perhaps. But has anyone got anywhere trying to demonstrate that?

6.2: the big question - someone(s) or something?

The big question is whether this unexplained explainer - this ultimate origin, this brute particularity or given - is an independent, original and unexplained, volitional someone (or ones), with particular qualities, that just is, or an independent, original and unexplained, mindless something (considered as a whole) or stuff, with particular qualities, that just is?

6.3: no implied qualities

Note that I am making no representation as to the actual qualities of the root volitional someone or mindless something. The someone might be, from our point of view, nice or nasty, communicative or uncommunicative, tractable or intractable, trustworthy or treacherous, highly predictable or highly unpredictable. With the exception of communicability, all of these apply to the something as well! Whichever it is, we have not yet succeeded to completely overpower it, subjugate it, direct it according to our desires, control it; we are still at odds with it. We have not yet made peace with it; we remain to some degree or other at its mercy. Otherwise we would all be always having a good time all the time.

6.4: original someone or original something preeminent?

My contention is that a naturalistic ultimate origin is not unquestionably or automatically (of itself, inherently, essentially) superior, more probable, preferable, more civilised, more valuable, more sensible, or more sober than a nonnaturalistic, volitional (psychic, intentional, spiritual, mental, "religious") ultimate origin; it is not the default option, the "natural" or

obvious null hypothesis; it is not patently simpler or easier to deal with or to apply: given a choice between it and an equally effective, equally explanatory volitional account it would not win out by Occam's Razor; it is by no means the only intellectually tenable, or the only rigorously testable or evidentially supportable alternative.

6.4.1: appeal of the naturalistic

I do sense, however, its appeal as a somehow potentially all-encompassing and all-predicting and perhaps therefore a more intellectually satisfying theory, which considered alone could lead one to conclude that it is more desirable; but that is not the only consideration - on which I will elaborate more soon.

6.4.2: need not be either one or the other

There may even be both naturalistic and volitional explanations for the same phenomena, in which case whichever does the better job in the circumstances is the one to use. Doing that does not debunk the other explanation; it does not even make it or its explanatory entities less real, just as the reality of waves of light does not render particles of light (photons) unreal.

6.4.3: accuracy of expectations of outcome that matters

In the end, what matters (has value) is the outcome - the accuracy of the expectations we have of what will follow the choices we make - not what the "actual" reason for the outcome is. All accurate explanations are equally real; the objects that inhere in them are all abstract to some degree or other and all real. It is futile to attempt to single out one effective explanation as the right one; they are all equally correct, right, true, factual models, as long as they precisely explain and predict. It is how well (quickly and easily, as well as accurately) an explanation predicts that determines its success, value, overall desirability, and rightness.

6.4.4: granted: a predictive, employable naturalistic explanation better than a capricious volitional one

I grant that a deterministic, readily intelligible and employable naturalistic explanation is preferable to one gutted by resort to capricious wills, but is a naturalistic explanation necessarily more comprehensive, precise, reliable, or easier and quicker to predict with, and a volitional explanation necessarily indeterministic or vague?

6.4.4.1: how psychology explains

Psychology, especially clinical psychology, draws heavily on volitional accounts - accounts of subjects' experience and its influences on their choices - to explain human behaviour, does it not?

7: end

Now we come to end, which has a number of relevant senses.

7.1: purpose

First there is the end that is achieved by some means or other. It is the purpose or goal of an action, what we do things for.

7.2: death (the worst end, which it is our most unending end to end)

The end that we most dread and go to great lengths to ignore and make light of is, if you will excuse me for mentioning it,

death. The question of whether it is the end of us - the end of our experiencing what it is like to be who we are - is one for which answers seem to be both passionately affirmed and wildly divergent. Our desire to know what it will be like for us, if there is any more of that at all, seems so intense that we will settle on an answer and cling to it, despite glaring lack of evidence, rather than live with the distress of uncertainty about it.

7.3: resolution (the ultimate end, the end that matters in the end, the answer to everything)

It is the promise of an ultimate end, an end that resolves all problems and questions, that keeps me from complete despair. If there is such an end, then that is what matters in the end. It is the answer to everything. I have considerable confidence that such an end is available. And it is an end that never ends. But it is not an end that I have predicted from a naturalistic explanation. All the alternative predictions I know of, the ones that follow from alternative explanations, are nowhere near as good. Now you might think that such a pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die vision is almost guaranteed to distort my intellect. But would you want to miss out on such a resolution for yourself just because you dismissed it on account of its being too good to be true and as a result failed to make the choice that would have secured it for you?

8: the end (purpose) of explanation

Once again, why explain? Not just for the fun of it, but to give us an idea of what to expect, so we can change things (that is, have an effect), partly because that is satisfying in itself (it is fundamental to dignity) but also, given that not all our past experiences have been pleasant, because we would like to bring about the occurrence of pleasant experiences and the nonoccurrence of unpleasant experiences. All this changing things and bringing about, or effecting, is voluntary, in other words it is by conscious choice of will.

8.1: value and fact

Now pleasant and unpleasant experiences are what value is all about. Value only makes sense because of them. Without consciousness, there is no value; nothing would matter because there would be nothing for it to matter to. Values are facts and facts have value (or rather the believing of facts - knowledge - has value). If it were not for value, (believing) facts would have no value!

8.2: emotion

Emotion is part of experience and just as much empirical evidence as anything else. After all, that is what matters in the end, is it not? What is it all about if not how you feel?

9: the end (finish)

9.1: all explanations (theories, hypotheses) must be assessed on their merits

All explanations (or theories or hypotheses) must be assessed on their merits. Just because some of the entities an explanation postulates (its ontology) are bizarre is not enough reason to throw the explanation out of court. Often, I suspect, both proponents and opponents impute many more characteristics to the proposed entities than the theory requires in order for it to do its explaining, especially if it is a thinking, acting being (a subject). Detractors then focus on these superfluous characteristics and rightly rebut them, and attempts to defend them then preoccupy the more passionately partisan, and hence more prominent, advocates.

9.2: science as the pursuit of facts, not just about "nature"

Science in its broadest sense (both the term and the practice) can be applied to any purportedly correct explanation or factual narrative. I mean, to borrow from German, Wissenschaft as a whole, the pursuit of knowledge or facts about anything: not just Naturwissenschaft - natural or pure science, but also Geisteswissenschaft - the science of the conscious, or, roughly and rather presumptuously, the humanities.

9.3: sum up

To sum up:

9.3.1: what moves me

I do not claim any authority; I claim only feelings of confidence and concern. They are what move me to say what I am saying - along with, I acknowledge, a remnant of wanting to be seen to have been right. I also concede many unaddressed prejudices. But that does not forbid me from making myself heard, or rule out the possibility that I am right, does it? My concern is that either I am convinced of things that hardly anyone else seems to be convinced of, which arguably puts my sanity in question, or most people seem not to be convinced of things that are true, putting themselves in danger of making decisions that will have disastrous consequences for them; and that greatly saddens me.

9.3.2: scientific facts and religious facts

I hope I have at least begun to convince you, if it is true and you are not already convinced, that so-called religious beliefs are not by nature less confirmable, empirical, "objective", reliable, or "provable" than so-called scientific beliefs, and that the consequences of not believing them - if they are true - are not inherently less serious. There are religious facts (for example, there is life after death or there is not life after death - whichever is the case) as well as scientific facts (for example, there is dark matter or there is not dark matter - whichever is the case), you can be just as mistaken about something religious as you can about something scientific, and you can discover you had an incorrect religious belief just as you can discover you had an incorrect scientific belief. And cannot the belief that there are no uncaused, unexplained, independent agents, for example, be just as "religious" as the belief that there is at least one such agent? Is the belief that there is an uncaused, unexplained, independent "nature" religious?

9.3.3: naturalism second bet

Naturalism seems to me to be the second best horse to bet on. But betting on it - as opposed to what I am betting on - does away with a whole lot of predictive power, so that many decisions end up being stabs in the dark. It also does away with a vast amount of hope. For all that I am still occasionally terrified I am wrong.

9.3.4: correct prediction what matters in the end

In the end though, what matters in the end is what you or I will experience in the end. And whether we start our explanatory, predictive chain with intentional minds obeying certain laws of mental nature or with unconscious matter obeying certain laws of material nature - or with both - is beside the point as long as our predictions are correct.