

From Extrinsic Teleology to Existential Autonomy

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The systematic invalidation of supernatural causality via cognitive science and epistemic naturalism compels a fundamental ontological reorientation, displacing divinely imposed purpose in favor of an intrinsic agency rooted in the ambiguous freedom of the subject.

The Cognitive

Dissolution of Supernaturalism

The evaluation of miraculous phenomena necessitates a rigorous application of methodological naturalism, functioning as a primary epistemological filter that prioritizes the nomological consistency of the physical universe over anecdotal anomalies. As Hume (1748) established in his treatment of testimony, the probability that a witness is deceived, delusional, or cognitively compromised statistically exceeds the probability that a fundamental law of nature has been suspended. Consequently, the persistence of supernatural claims—such as divine intervention or physical resurrection—cannot be regarded as evidence of metaphysical intrusion, but rather as the output of specific, identifiable errors in human information processing.

The biological roots of these errors are located in the evolutionary architecture of the human mind, specifically within the mechanisms governing threat detection and causal attribution. Barrett (2000) identifies the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD) as an adaptive cognitive module that predisposes the subject to perceive intentional agency in ambiguous environments. In an ancestral context, the cost of a false positive (mistaking a shadow for a predator) was negligible compared to the fatal cost of a false negative; however, in a modern epistemic context, this mechanism generates a systematic bias toward animism and theism. Confronted with stochastic or inexplicable phenomena, the cognitive apparatus defaults to a “god of the gaps” fallacy, resolving epistemic tension by invoking a supernatural agent rather than tolerating uncertainty or investigating complex natural causes.

This innate susceptibility to supernaturalism is reinforced by what Shermer (2011) delineates as “patternicity”—the tendency of the brain to impose meaningful structure onto random data. This cognitive friction manifests as a refusal to accept coincidence or physical indifference; the subject subconsciously filters for confirmatory evidence that supports a teleological narrative while discarding disconfirming data. Therefore, the perception of a “miracle” is indistinguishable from a Type I statistical error, where a null hypothesis (natural causality) is incorrectly rejected in favor of a false positive (divine action). The attribution of supernatural causality is an internal projection of the subject’s desire for order, possessing no referential validity regarding the external ontology of the universe.

The systematic dismantling of the epistemic warrant for supernaturalism compels a profound ontological reorientation. Once the “miracle” is exposed as a neurobiological artifact, the illusion of extrinsic teleology—purpose imposed by a higher power—collapses. This privation of divine intent forces the subject into the state of “ambiguity” described by De Beauvoir (1947), where the individual must confront the raw facticity of existence without the comfort of absolute, preordained values. In this disenchanting reality, the silence of the universe is not a deficit to be filled with theological invention, but the foundational condition for intrinsic agency. The subject is thereby condemned to freedom, required to construct meaning through autonomous action within a strictly material world, rather than discovering a purpose purportedly written into the cosmos.

The Collapse of the Serious

World

The systematic invalidation of supernatural causality through epistemic naturalism precipitates a catastrophic failure of what De Beauvoir (1947) termed the “serious world.” In this mode of existence, the subject subordinates their freedom to external, absolute values—such as divine will or ancestral tradition—treating them as unconditioned entities that exist independently of human subjectivity. The serious man attempts to escape the anxiety of freedom by congealing values into “things,” thereby denying his own agency in sustaining them. However, when the cognitive mechanisms underlying religious belief are exposed as evolutionary byproducts rather than metaphysical insights, the objective status of these values dissolves. The realization that religious adherence provides only “tangential social utility” rather than distinct truth claims undermines the foundational logic of the serious attitude, revealing that the external authority was always a projection of the subject’s own abdicated liberty.

This dissolution forces a confrontation with the fundamental ambiguity of the human condition. As De Beauvoir (1947) elucidates, the human subject is characterized by a tension between facticity—the status of being a physical object subject to natural laws—and transcendence, the capacity of consciousness to project into the future and negate the given state of affairs. In the serious world, this tension is suppressed by the illusion of a preordained destiny or a divine blueprint that synthesizes these poles into a coherent whole. The removal of the divine guarantor strips away this synthesis, leaving the subject to recognize that they are not a fixed essence but a continuous process of becoming. The collapse of the serious world is therefore not merely an epistemological correction but an ontological crisis, as the individual can no longer seek refuge in a “ready-made” universe where justification is bestowed from without.

The rejection of extrinsic teleology necessitates a reevaluation of the relationship between utility and truth. As Dennett (2006) argues, the persistence of religious structures is often attributable to their function as social bonding mechanisms rather than their referential accuracy. By identifying these structures as offering only tangential social benefit, the autonomous subject decouples the comfort of community from the rigor of ontology. This separation is critical for the transition to existential autonomy; it marks the point where the subject refuses to sacrifice intellectual integrity for psychological security. The serious man’s error lies in conflating the comforting stability of the absolute with the reality of the human situation. Once this conflation is severed, the vacuum left by the absence of absolute value is revealed not as a deficit, but as the necessary space for the exercise of genuine freedom.

Consequently, the ontological focus shifts from the discovery of meaning to the constitution of value. Without a transcendent lawgiver to validate human action, the locus of justification retreats entirely into the immanence of the subject. The axiom “I exist, therefore I am” functions as the terminal point of regression, establishing existence itself as the primary value from which all others are derived. In this framework, the demand for external validation is recognized as a form of bad faith—a denial of the responsibility to invent one’s own path. The collapse of the serious world compels the subject to embrace the “ethics of ambiguity,” where the lack of a pre-written script requires the individual to constantly reassert their freedom through concrete action, accepting that meaning is a finite, human creation rather than an infinite, divine command.

Facticity and the

Reconstruction of Value

The dissolution of supernatural causality via epistemic naturalism necessitates a fundamental ontological pivot: the abandonment of received meaning in favor of the recognition of facticity. Once the cognitive science of religion exposes theistic narratives as evolutionary byproducts rather than metaphysical truths, the individual is stripped of

the “serious” status described by De Beauvoir (1947), wherein values are treated as ready-made entities existing independently of human subjectivity. The collapse of extrinsic teleology implies that the universe possesses no inherent moral architecture, leaving the subject to confront the sheer “thereness” of material existence. This state of facticity—the brute reality of being without a pre-existing justification—serves not as a deficit, but as the prerequisite for genuine autonomy.

The reconstruction of value begins with the acceptance of the Sartrean axiom that existence precedes essence. As Sartre (1946) articulated, the absence of a divine creator signifies that there is no determinative human nature prior to the individual’s emergence in the physical world; the subject exists first as a biological entity and defines their essence subsequently through action. This reversal dismantling the “serious man” who, in an act of bad faith, subordinates his freedom to unconditional values (God, the State, Tradition) to avoid the anxiety of choice (De Beauvoir, 1947). The “serious” individual attempts to escape the ambiguity of the human condition by turning themselves into an object, denying their transcendence in favor of a static, externally valid identity. By contrast, the reconstruction of value requires the subject to acknowledge that they are the sole author of significance, generating meaning through the active willing of their own freedom and the freedom of others.

This transition from passive obedience to active creation is supported by the cognitive demystification of purpose. Research indicates that the sensation of “destiny” or “divine intent” is a byproduct of the Hyperactive Agency Detection Device (HADD), which over-attributes intentionality to stochastic processes (Barrett, 2000). Recognizing that the demand for objective meaning is a neurobiological artifact allows the subject to bypass the despair of nihilism. Instead of seeking a “true” meaning hidden in the cosmos, the individual engages in the project of constructing value within the constraints of their situation. This aligns with the “ethics of ambiguity,” where De Beauvoir (1947) posits that the validity of an ethical act is derived not from its conformity to an external law, but from the authenticity of the engagement itself.

Ultimately, the acceptance of existential minimalism resolves the crisis of meaning by relocating the locus of authority. If the universe is physically invariant and morally silent, as suggested by Monod (1971), then the act of living is not a performance for a divine spectator but a self-justifying phenomenon. The subject moves from a teleological framework—where actions are means to a transcendent end—to an existentialist framework where the act of choosing is the end in itself. In this paradigm, value is not discovered; it is invented. The acknowledgment that “I exist, therefore I am” functions as the terminal point of inquiry, liberating the subject to navigate the ambiguity of existence without the requirement for supernatural validation.