



Contrariwise

conceptual tensions in everyday life

Michael Picard, PhD

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conceptual tensions in contemporary life

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Preface

This is not a book, but a beginning. Thanks for buying into a prospect.

This book is being published serially. The essays to be collected here will be added every two weeks or so, coordinated with public participatory philosophy sessions scheduled for early 2015. The essays, which already exist in some form, will be revised and expanded for each session, and added here. The order and arrangement in the book may change.

Topics are indicated below. They give a rough idea of the future table of contents.

Harbour Centre Rm 2250â€“515 W. Hastings St., Vancouver

- **Religion/Spirituality** January 09, 2015
- **Power/Vulnerability** February 13, 2015
- **Individual/Collective** March 13, 2015
- **Existence/Essence** April 10, 2015
- **Space/Time** May 08, 2015
- **Love/Fear** June 12, 2015

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- **Head/Heart** January 23, 2015
- **Apathy/Responsibility** February 27, 2015
- **Alienation/Belonging** March 27, 2015
- **Wisdom/Folly** April 24, 2015

Each essay topic in the book is a pair of concepts, polar or oblique opposites, reflecting curious but familiar conceptual tensions.

I hope to add an Introduction as well, which will discuss the choice of oppositions as topics and justify the literary and philosophical methods at work.

This Preface will provide ongoing updates as the book emerges. Please stay tuned. Remember that you can provide ongoing feedback via www.LeanPub.com.

FREEDOM / NECESSITY

Necessity is an abstruse concept of tremendous philosophical importance. It has been denied and it has been insisted upon, either way to great consequence. It has been both a fecund source and blind scourge of metaphysics. To the everyday mind, death and taxes are its most salient forms, but necessity winds its way into worldviews in the form of laws, nature and essence. Necessity is a class of elevated truth, of truths that have to be true, and not mere accidental or contingent truths. Truth may be happenstance, the inscrutable results of chance, a random, arbitrary or willy-nilly affair. Or it may be immutable, implacable, unstoppable, dread necessity. To build a philosophy out of these immovable pillars has long been the architectural ambition of descendants of that stonemason, Socrates, at least those who have not been content to blow away, as a house of cards, the eternal structures left behind by their forebears. Apart from the most resolute levelers and skeptics, philosophy is traditionally presumed to be composed of necessary truths. Notoriously, there has been no consistency or consensus on which truths are the ones that never change.

Of Words and Things.

To be sure, necessity is not necessarily all of the same kind. Philosophers have long distinguished between necessity of words (*de dicto*) and necessity in the nature of things (*de re*). Verbal necessity is thin and vacuous, never straying beyond the obvious. 'Bachelors are unmarried men' – none will deny it, nor will any take an interest in it (except perhaps those unfamiliar with the terms, as people just learning English, who need verbal definitions to understand; the concepts they already possess, only the words are new). Such necessity is tautologous, meaning it is empty and without content. Rather it only contains part of itself. There is nothing to be done

with such *de dicto* or merely verbal necessities, and nothing to be known by them which was not already known in the concepts out of which their statement is composed. Sometimes the infinite riches of mathematics are portrayed as reducible to such vapid and hollow assertions; but that is a rather vindictive cunning, and often amounts to little more than condemning what one does not understand. To impugn philosophy with the creation of mere *de dicto* necessity is likewise to insinuate that it is itself empty and insipid, what is popularly derided as “just semantics”.

The Real Thing, in essence.

De re necessity, by contrast, is the necessity built into things, governing their behaviour by specifying its laws, making each thing what it is, constituting its very nature. In this last capacity, *de re* necessity serves as the metaphysical essence of a thing, its inherent nature, if not its nature as an individual, then at least as an exemplar of a certain type, kind or species. What a thing is, its essential nature, is ideally subject to formulation in a definition. Not – to be sure – a merely verbal definition, which at best successfully singles out a thing or type of thing, distinguishing it from everything else. Rather these real or essential definitions purport to articulate the inner necessity of a being, to spell out what it is to be that thing or of that type. So to have your definitions in order would be to possess a good part of the logical system of the world. Even today, vulgar thinking is not immune from the scholastic assumption that definitions of things are possible and yield basic knowledge of our world.

The metaphysical conceit of essential natures (inner necessities, which define what is possible and inevitable for a given entity) rings old-fashioned in today’s ears, even though its presuppositions often still linger in naïve philosophical ambition. We no longer think that to know a thing is to grasp its essence, not literally at least; the expression has been reduced to a figure of speech, a flourish or a trope. And yet essentialist thinking creeps into our speech and

thought in many ways, even in forms of philosophical wonder, in the questions we ask in our struggles to interpret reality as we encounter it. Whenever we muse about private destiny; whenever we attribute our action to instinct or to our character; whenever we pretend women and men are from different planets; whenever we insist to ourselves we will be there in our own afterlife; whenever we are tempted to believe in the special creation of human beings; whenever we say that all humanity is one, or that the human species is separate and above all the others; – whenever we make these or similar mental commitments, we are thinking in essentialist terms. We presume that there is a necessity at work, which gives the plain happening of our life an interpretive frame, and tells a story that has – to us – a compelling conclusion. Outmoded for centuries, the notion of essence yet invades and perverts everyday thinking; it is hard to throw off the habitual shackles of philosophical custom, even though it has been defunct for so long.

Substantial necessity as law

Essentialism is not the only form of *de re* necessity. Another sort concerns natural (think physical) law. Gravity cannot be defied. The arrow of time cannot be turned back. Inertia has no exceptions. Energy is conserved in all physical interactions. These forms of necessity are in the things (*de re*), not merely a matter of the meanings of words we use to express them. Necessity is substantial here, but not in the old sense of substantial forms (beings with essences). There is no essence, no essential nature, only Nature (capital N) and her inviolate ways.

The remarkable thing about these laws is that they are best expressed in mathematical equations. Still the abstract necessity of mathematics should not be confused with the concrete necessity of physical law. Much mathematics – no less necessary – has no descriptive relevance to physics or physical reality. Both are *de re* necessity (for robust realists at least), but the modalities of necessity are inherently distinct. (A point of terminology, the term “modal”

in philosophy connotes the modes or ways propositions can be true, specifically, necessarily, actually or merely possibly, and similar adverbial qualifiers of truth or being. So, e.g., modal logic is the logic of necessity and possibility, contingency and actuality. Among the modalities of necessity are: ethical, aesthetic, soteriological; epistemic, and so on.)

The Mistaken Cause.

Furthermore it is a mistake of immense proportions to equate the robust physical necessity with the so-called universal law of cause and effect. This philosophical pronouncement (it is not an explicit law of physics) states that every event has a cause (another event that precedes it and necessitates it, in other words, the occurrence of *the cause* is sufficient for the occurrence of the said event, which is therefore dubbed *the effect*). Whereas physical laws may be deep, sublime, even pleasantly mysterious, the law of cause and effect is simply confusion. But this confusion passes widely for understanding. Cause and effect are mostly misnomers. The laws of reality are regularities, necessary concomitants, but not forces productive of events, nor events produced by other events. Physical law as insurmountable constraints is substantial necessity, even if it not misrepresented as a causal glue between two events.

What is happening here is that a scheme applicable in perception and human action is transferred to nature, and the law of cause and effect expresses this absurd generalization. But modern philosophy and modern science arose as a rejection – not just of essences, essential natures, in a word, of essential causes – but equally as a rejection of the concepts of cause and effect. Cause and effect are not scientific concepts. We can dispense with them while yet recognizing the substantial necessity inherent in natural law, and we should, not only to improve our philosophical understanding of physical reality, but also to better comprehend ourselves, human freedom, and human choice.

To justify these extravagant claims, I cite that great mechanist and

philosopher Galileo, who dispensed in scientific explanation with all reference to forms, essences, and the functions or purposes they licensed. Yet he was just as much against efficient or moving causes, which, along with essence and purpose, are among the four forms of causes recognized by Aristotle and by prominent scholastics. (Of the four, efficient causes are closest to the spurious law of cause and effect just defined, since both deal with events and bringing things about.) Important instead to Galileo was the idea of law, in particular a geometric or mathematical regularity, an objective constraint, not one event bringing another event about. The scientific objective was to discern a law-like regularity that permitted calculation (later by way of the calculus) and therefore allowed prediction, and was therefore subject to empirical demonstration or disconfirmation. Mechanism for Galileo is not merely a system of pushes and pulls, but the solubility of the mathematical equations involved, which revealed as it were the natural grain of necessity running through created reality.

Hume's Wrecking Balls.

A second blow modern philosophy delivered to the conceit of "cause and effect" was the devastating critique of David Hume. Presuming that all knowledge arose through the senses, Hume asked how we sense necessary connections we suppose to exist in the world. We perceive the motion of the cue ball along the billiards table; we hear the distinctive click upon its contact with another motionless ball; the motionless ball now moves, and at a familiar rate in an expectable direction. We conclude we saw the cue ball cause the other to move. But was this cause a sound or a sight? Do the eyes not deliver only light, and colour and motion? A causal nexus has no brightness, hue or velocity; we never see its necessity *per se*. Rather, our conclusion is based on habit, on "animal faith", not on the senses. If all knowledge derives from the senses, and there is no sensation of causation, there is no knowledge of causation.

Hume's critique (badly overstated here) can be taken even further to

question all forms of natural necessity. An infinity of past sunrises is not logically inconsistent with there being no sunrise tomorrow. Even the necessity pertaining to the embodied regularities of the world is customary presumption if it is not rank metaphysical speculation. At best we have knowledge of the constant conjunction of events, which we may dub cause and effect, but constant conjunction is correlation, and not enough for genuine causation. Even the necessity of constant conjunction is not cause and effect (the first relation is symmetrical, unlike the cause-effect relation). A counterexample suffices to show this: the heart and the liver are constantly conjoined, since barring surgery any organism with one also has the other; but no one would say having a heart causes having a liver, or vice versa.). Hume's anti-induction arguments purports to show, that even if all experience shows two things constantly conjoined, we go too far to attribute necessity to that remarkable co-incidence. We cannot derive a necessary proposition from a set of factual/contingent premises. What we have here is a radical skeptical rejection of all *de re* necessity, not just essentialism or mechanical determinism,

This assault on the law of cause and effect might seem to leave the notion of moral responsibility and human freedom in a perilous state. On the one hand, if we reject as illusory the existence of a necessitating nexus between cause and effect, then how can we take human choices, desires and decisions (which are presumably events) to cause human actions (which are presumably other events)? If the cause-effect relationship is illusory, how can I be said to cause my own acts? And if I cannot be said to cause my own acts, or to bring them about, how can I be held responsible for them and for their consequences?

The decoy is dead.

Hume's position that we do not have a percept of causation turns out to be experimentally false. But the destructive implications of his critique remain. It turns out that the impression of causation

does exist, and can be elicited under precise conditions, even in the absence of an actual causal event. (The trick involves simulating or animating events like the billiard ball example; the impression of causation in animation is easy to fall for, but unquestionably an illusion.) The experiments that show it is a percept also confirm that it can be illusory, and is not to be implicitly trusted. It also turns out that one can experimentally induce illusions of control, when having thoughts of self at a moment just before an event can elicit a distinct impression of having caused or brought about an event, even when this is not the case. This happens accidentally to all of us from time to time, as when we make a gesture and a light goes on, and the impression of self-control arises distinctly, even though one is aware that the coincidence was freak. Our own sense of self-caused action is subject to illusion, and to that extent undermined.

I do not cause my actions to occur as one billiard ball causes another billiard ball to begin to move. The pattern of cause and effect is more a product of our manner of perception than a reflection or copy of any causal nexus in reality. But to dispense with this billiard ball notion of causation, far from threatening freedom, expands its horizons remarkably. It only confirms that my relation to my actions is far more complex than the physics of particles. Paradoxically, it is the broader positivist attack on all *de re* necessity that most deeply challenges freedom, rather than physical determinism. Freedom requires determinism, requires a notion of substantial necessity. Whereas the rejection of the cause-effect form of necessity expands freedom outside the narrow event, the rejection of all necessity makes metaphysical freedom nonsensical.

Why you must be free.

Freedom requires necessity. We need necessity in order to be free. But the necessity we need is the constraint of law, the regularity of reality, not the power of a cause to produce an effect. In order to be free, it is necessary that I should be able to do otherwise than I am. Options incompatible with my present course of action must

be possible before I commit myself and exclude them. My present action must be up to me in order that it be free; that is to say, I might have done otherwise. I could have avoided doing as I am doing; but for my choice to do it, it would not be getting done. For these statements to be true, no exception of natural or physical law is required. Nor are we committed to the existence of uncaused events if we happen to accept these subjunctive assertions as true. On the contrary, we are saying that the necessitating constraints on what is happening have not wholly determined this event, apart from my choice. But nor must we suppose that my choice is the cause of the event, or that event my action. No clunky mechanical cause need be traced between myself and my deeds for me to be responsible for them.

The notion of a necessitating constraint is a way of building context and meaning into explanations of human behaviour. We need for that to go beyond physical constraint, but even this goes a long way if physical necessity is not misrepresented as atomic billiards, and is recognized rather to pervade all levels of physical reality, from the subatomic through the molecular and cellular to the macroscopic and even at the level of populations and societies. Ethical principles and norms are other constraints on our behaviour; and while they by no means necessitate our action, they do make actions incumbent upon us, and give rise to duty. A notion of freedom within constraint, even of freedom as constraint, is consistent with some forms of *de re* necessity, not with others. It coheres with the idea of natural law as inviolable constraint, not with essential or causal determinism. Thus I conclude with my happy compatibilism, which admits genuine freedom through and within necessity, but eschews all essence and cause. That is how I wrap our twin topics, freedom and necessity, together.

ESSENCE / EXISTENCE

The distinction between existence and essence is anything but household. Although recondite in appearance, it has a philosophical significance which is not at all remote from everyday reality. It is a distinction with ancient roots, most classically in Aristotle, but it was re-problematized in the twentieth century by existentialists, and achieved near iconic status in the formula, due to Jean-Paul Sartre, that “existence precedes essence”. We may start by examining what this obscure dictum and ontological rally-cry could mean.

‘Existence’ captures *that* we exist, ‘essence’ connotes *what* we are. Put differently, ‘existence’ refers to the fact of human being, ‘essence’ to universal human nature. The fact of human existence varies across time and space in content and character; but human essence unites us insofar as it makes us the kind of being we all are regardless of our age or place of origin. Existence bespeaks the uniqueness of a person or a culture; essence bespeaks the sameness that makes us all one, or all one species, members of a single all-inclusive kind. Existence is beset with identity, individuality, difference, and a limited moment in history. Essence is timeless, tends to be ahistorical, detracts from differences, melds identities, and overlooks individuality.

The championed primacy of existence is a critique of all pre-conceived ideas of universal human nature, all hand-me-down doctrines that prescribe limits and impose a horizon on us by conceiving of humanity in terms of a fixed essence. Philosophy tends to address questions of how to live and the purpose of life by first settling on an account of human nature (and the human condition), and then deducing ethics and meaning from these. For instance, conservatives and liberals are sometimes distinguished based on whether one takes a low or a high estimate of individual human

value. However, instead of taking human nature as established by nature or fixed in advance by God, or as delimited in one or another cultural or philosophical tradition, we can look toward the future as the open field of possibilities and proving ground of human nature. We are required to make ourselves before we become what we are; we must define who we will be through our actions going forward. We can realize human being only through protracted effort and by way of our concrete relations; in short, we must fashion our own essence. Starting from the fact of life, from human being as phenomena, we must create meaning and identity in free struggle, and never blindly accept the blinders of past visionaries, however august. Existentialism is a call to an essential rejuvenation.

Open-ended essence, essence created whole-cloth by free action, was a philosophical revolution, though perhaps older than the existential movement itself (certainly to the extent that that is taken as a French phenomenon). But the idea of essence as “up to us” only arose after the idea that essence is variable, that it is moving or shifting, which is itself a revolutionary departure from the fixed, eternal, immutable universal essence, that is evoked nicely in capitals, Human Nature. To see essence as process, or process as essential, is to break forever with the timeless traditions of Greek antiquity, Christian imperialism, and even the enlightenment rationalists who inaugurated modernity. At first it was presumed that the pattern of transformation that most defined us was itself timeless, in effect the ancient “cycles of history” theory revived. If human nature were a process of becoming, or being born and maturing, perhaps it came in identifiable stages, similar across cultures. Then culture and identity would be the dimension of difference, stages and cycles would be the new universal, the laws of growth or progress. These laws sought to reinstate the universal, the timeless pattern of time unfolding; in a word, they spelled out a dynamic essence.

Laws of progress, patterns of growth, evolutionary stages: these are all ways to construe nature or essence in dynamic ways that

yet admit a kind of intelligibility, even rationality. They exemplify one sort of take on a historically shifting essence, thus departing from the Platonic, Aristotelian and Aristotelian-Christian tradition of fixed, immutable timeless essence. The history and context of origin of all things tells us what they are, not eternal intelligible entities immediately apprehended by Reason. Essence is resolved into history, made intelligible only in its context and in light of its origins. This historicism has profound metaphysical consequences, some of which instructed the existentialists of the previous century. But there is this great difference, namely the resistance to historical determination, the will to change the essence once postulated as variable. Philosophy is not a matter of comprehending the eternal patterns of change that underlie history and determine cultural change, but of transforming the given and transcending the received world. Essence becomes a category of the future, not a residue of the past.

Freedom has limits prescribed by our essence. If essence is timeless, freedom is static. If essence is shifting and a function of growth or maturity, the extent and character of freedom will vary with level of progress or evolutionary stage. But evolution turns out to be a more continuous, tree-like or web-like structure, without pre-formed levels and with no *a priori* taxonomy of stages. One species evolves continuously into another, so that there is no first instance of a species, even though there is a time before which that species did not exist. Evolution is not a ladder, we are not on a rung that existed before we got here, and the same applies to every organism. Darwin did more to destroy not only the timeless view of essence (form, species, natural kind) than anyone, but he also obliterated any view that evolution had a pre-existent template that we had only to fulfill. Species becomes individuals, as individual as branches or twigs on an evolutionary tree.

To what extent are we determined by our genetics, by individual endowment, by the cultural givens of our life? How free is the individual to break away from his pack, her times, his world, and

inhabit in imagination if not the future a new one of her own making? If existence is like the centre of a circle, essence is like the horizon, as it prescribes limits to one's view. The image of the shifting or expanding horizon, moved by one's own efforts, is an invitation to reinvent one's world. The degree of latitude we have depends on our altitude, as it were, and the lay of the land we wish to oversee. This geographical metaphor suggests that our capacity to freely change horizons may be severely limited. No doubt freedom is not transcendent, and essence is not wholly plastic. Despite the most wide-eyed optimists, we are no doubt limited in our capacity to realize a new humanity, invent a new ethics, or command our own fate.

I will end by considering a further dimension of this problem of essence versus existence. In the Aristotelean conception, there was no such thing as an individual essence. Essence was universal, meaningful only at the species level. Since he regarded human beings, like all corporeal substances, as composites of form and matter; and since this form (Greek: *eidos*) was the intelligible, universal essence; it followed that only matter was left to differentiate, to individuate, to make me me, and you you. Upon death, our matter would cease to exist, and we would be resolved into the shared universal form which preceded our individual existence and survives it. If we survive death at all, it is not as individuals, but subsisting along with all the other (deceased, alive and yet to be) in the nameless universal. That he located this timeless universal in the regular motions of the celestial sphere, emotively echoed the earlier naive belief that our soul at death went to live among the stars, is cosmic poetics.

I speak of universal essence in the context of Aristotle, but he was an elitist. Women and slaves, however human, did not wholly share the essence of the human soul. They didn't really count. But the philosophical identification of the soul as form proved too attractive to later Christian philosophers and dogmatists, so the individual soul, which had in all its particularity to be there to face divine

judgment in the great moral accounting at the end of time, had to be conceptualized as an individual essence. Your soul, a free and accountable agent, is your essence, now fully particularized, and no longer simply the universal nature shared with human beings. It is answerable for itself in the final days in utmost truthfulness and without hiding.

But particularity arises not only at the level of the individual person. It also arises at the collective level of culture. Cultures arise and pass away as do individual people. If there is an individual essence, and since individuals are so thoroughly ensconced in the culture of their making, why not grant cultural essentialism, a world-historic folk-spirit that personifies a nation or ethnicity? Cultural differences also individuate: are cultures not therefore selves, spirits or essential natures?

I can hardly type this without rebelling in repugnance. I support an existential rather than an essentialist view of ethnic differences, citing material particularity and variable concrete contingencies, not the reified types of racial thinking. The differences between male and female too, while partially grounded in biology, are reduced to absurdity if conceptualized as essential differences. For recall that, post-Darwin, biology is anti-essentialist, and even sex differences are matters of degree, a composite of continua, not the gulf separating disparate essences. It is not feasible to argue for this position here. I cite only the philosophic fact, highlighted by leading Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, that the dimensions of difference relevant to the multicultural debate are not arbitrary, but seriously constrained by parameters recognizable as human concerns. These constraints give us grounds to know one another as human despite vast and often challenging cultural differences. Knowledge of one another does not eliminate differences, but it may soften them, at least where pure conflicts of resources are not involved.

With this undefended peaceable attitude on differences, essential or

existential, I end my essay.