# Setism

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## *INHERENCY AND CIRCUMSTANTIALITY*

There are varying types of beliefs which are held by rational agents, which will be discussed in this essay. Two of these main types of belief are 'inherent' and 'circumstantial', which describe the two ends of the spectrum of belief. At the inherent end, we have things which are not subject to change, regardless of what iteration of reality we are in - an example would be the laws of physics. At the other end, we have the circumstantial beliefs, which are specific to our current world. Examples of these things may include our current culture - there is nothing inherent about the invention of a specific series of novels. However, it can be argued that the concept of the novel is less circumstantial than that of the creation of an individual story, since the scope for the invention of the novel (and its defining attributes as a form of storytelling) is much broader. We can zoom out further, and say that the concept of writing symbols or pictures down for preservation of knowledge is a more inherent concept, and even further still, the very idea of communication through non-verbal means. These are more basic, yet critical concepts than the ones that came before them, and are required for each subsequent stage. You cannot have a novel without first understanding how to write things down with symbols, and you cannot have writing without sufficient motor function and manipulation of your environment.

The more inherent an idea is, the more likely it will be that it will be created by an independent civilisation - but this does not mean that this idea is any more *true*. Some ideas can be inherent, yet empirically false. Take, for example, the belief in

supernatural acts, specifically ones that violate the laws of physics. We have seen people claiming they can perform these acts many times, but all of them have been proven false, so far. This can lead us to believe, with reasonable statistical certainty, that the idea of supernatural objects is empirically false. To us, right now, the belief in things like ghosts is entirely unwarranted, but still somewhat culturally inherent. The idea of the supernatural in some way or another seems to be prevalent in the development of civilisation, sometimes stemming from rituals where ancient tribes fail to distinguish correlation from causation. Take the example of a tribe of people who perform an action out of desperation for the weather to be better. If, by chance, they receive good weather, then they may repeat this action, in the hopes that it will continue to affect the growth of their crops. This behaviour has also been observed in pigeons and mice, through the use of the Skinner Box experiment. The idea of ritualistic behaviour, among other factors, is pervasive throughout the animal kingdom, including us, and thus can be considered as 'inherent'. Yet again, this inherency has nothing to do with its empirical validity, it is still unsubstantiated. Things can be inherent and empirically invalid. It means there are things which are psychologically, perhaps even biologically pervasive in the nature of animals on this planet.

The first main criticism of Setism is that that we do not know enough about the way the world works in order to rule out the possibility of what we regard as supernatural phenomena. This is true, but development in the way that we understand the world will likely mean that science will have some sort of answer at some point. However, before that happens, we have to accept the null hypothesis (as we have to do with any kind of assertion) to begin with and work from there. You cannot assert that something exists, and then ask others to prove that it does not. As I will show later, pattern recognition alongside good extrapolation and assumption form the basis of all human thinking. This is both a blessing and a curse, it allows us to make very quick rationalisations of our surroundings, but we often get

things wrong if we work on a purely 'automatic' level. Think of the difference between the automatic and manual modes of a camera - a lot of the time, the automatic mode can capture the general image in a reasonably clear way, but tends to suffer when clarity is needed. A manual mode allows us to slow down and adjust, and overcome our psychological biases by acknowledging them. Furthermore, explanation of the brain as being a tool to minimise prediction error is very helpful when attempting to determine psychological issues like cognitive dissonance.

Setism may also be criticised as being anthropocentric, with its basing of experience and reality firmly tied to our experiences as biological humans. However, this is an issue which most epistemological and ethical theories fail to mention, even in the slightest manner. Kantian ethics might not work for a species which relies on systems that involve forcing a certain number of individuals to do a certain task - worker ants are an example of this. They could do otherwise, yet if all of the workers failed to do what they do, their society would not be able to function. Perhaps we would think of Kantian ethics differently if certain people were born with specific genetics that made them suited to one function and one function only.

The initial accusation of anthropocentrism is difficult to counter using anything other than simple 'whataboutism'. Yes, this is a highly anthropocentric system - however, the only reason this is is because we currently have a very small variation in our sample size that we have accrued. In the grand scheme of things, the differences between mice and humans are not all that great, we share a common ancestor, we have much of the same physiology, we have experienced the same set of evolutional turmoil in the same geographical locations.

As for the 'whataboutism', the main argument that I currently have against the claim of anthropocentrism is that no other ethic even factors in the possibility that there might be other cultures out there, developing their own belief systems. If

we are truly to be well-resourced if we are to encounter other life, then surely an epistemological system which would mesh incredibly well with anyone else who happened to come up with this same system? Of course, that is a hypothetical which almost needs not be entertained, due to its statistical likelihood. If we do not know something exists, or in our knowledge has an extremely low possibility of existing, then acting like it does is a 'costly hypothesis', in the words of Sartre. We act as a civilisation as if we are not being watched and monitored by some outside force, alien beings much higher up on the Kardashev scale would potentially not see us as worth interacting with, like one of the many bacteria you might not consciously acknowledge.

## *Belief*

Regardless of the possibility of alien life existing, there is the possibility that you are still confused as to where to place certain beliefs in this ethical system. To simplify this, we can think of beliefs as having two assigned attributes, with a scale of empiricism going in one direction and a scale of circumstantiality going the other direction.[1]

So, what should we do with our beliefs? Well, we should use this to steer us towards both the innate and the empirical, and to attempt to find more universal truths wherever we can. In order to do this, we need to shirk the simplistic route of accepting ideas without empirical evidence. Of course, the idea of empirical evidence is somewhat contentious in and of itself, and I shall address this point now.

## *Consistency*

The idea of Setism revolves around the fact that the human

[1] A CHART OF THIS IS LOCATED ON PAGE ???

perception of reality, although untrue to the nature of reality because of the way that information is processed, is self-consistent. Consciousness, in this form, arises because of the way that humans see things as consistent. Our ability to recognise objects and discern purposes in things we have not seen before is proof of our ability to conceptualise and classify the world. It is not possible for us to know every factor of a given situation, so recognition of our ability to fill in the gaps with prior knowledge is how we must go about solving ethical dilemmas, akin to Aristotelian virtue theory.

This idea of the origin of consciousness as our ability to observe and recall patterns I will call the recognition principle. We are shaped by the world and biologically evolved to see patterns in things, and while I understand that appealing to the 'biologically natural' nature of pattern recognition is not the best way to go about things, it does assist us in explaining qualia, and characteristics of objects without merely 'doubling the number of things'.

The first of several quick thought experiments I will discuss concerns a stream of information, and the way in which sensory input is fed into our minds. If we are confronted with something that is entirely alien, what would we latch on to? If it occupies physical space, but its purpose is entirely unknown to us, then we would use our senses to determine what it was. Of course, we could not make any significant judgement as to what it did until it was demonstrated to us. But this thought experiment leads us to the next one. Imagine you are looking at a corner of your room. Then, imagine a doorway opening in that place, and now, the specific perspective that you looked at your room with is now the texture of the door, and the flat wall behind it. This is analogous to living in an Escherian world, where perspective defines physical reality. Now, in this scenario, your senses have not necessarily misled you, but your perception of the world has. You have failed to recognise the pattern of this doorway - but, of course you have, you have never seen anything like that happen before.

If your conceptualisation of the world is false, but your senses have not misled you, this means that the two are separate concepts. This distinction between the two allows us to determine the nature of consciousness. If we were simply being bombarded with sensory information, this would not necessarily inform us of anything. We require the lens of the brain to look at the world through, in order to gain any reasonable information about the world. If we cannot recognise patterns, then consciousness has not been achieved.

An old man who has lost the use of some of his senses is not necessarily 'less conscious' than you or I, but someone who forgets objects and purposes could be considered as such. This should not inform any ethical debate, however. 'Less conscious' is also not meant as a derogatory term, or related to intelligence, but simply as a term to quantify how much we can use our faculties of recognition in order to act in ethically challenging scenarios.

One of the most important patterns we recognise is that of ourselves, because the continuum of self is the reason why we do not imagine ourselves as a new person all of the time. We can remember our past, our actions, our relationships to other people and objects, and how we will likely behave in the future, or in certain situations. If knowledge of this is lost, then the continuum of self is disrupted. This is related to the problem of the Ship of Theseus, which the continuum of self solves by saying that since there was a continuum between one and the other, that they are one and the same. At no point is there a significant jump in the proportion of new material to old material, so to a person who has been on the ship the entire time, the ship is the same ship, all the way though.

The reason why I add the qualifier 'someone who has been on the ship the entire time' is because the specific way in which the question is answered is determined by the relationship between the agent and the ship. To someone who has seen the ship only at the start and at the end, it would seem like a different ship, for obvious reasons. They would have seen it leave

the shore as one thing, and see it come back as another. There would have been no continuum of knowledge of the ship. To illustrate this example in a more practical way, if, one day, your best friend was hit on the head and instantly became a total amnesiac, would they still be your friend? Since there is nothing left of the self except the body it functioned in, then can you really say that it is still the same person? You probably wouldn't refer to them as the same anymore, especially if they were not reminded of their old identity and could never go back to the way they were. Even if you had been with them the entire time during the impact to their head, the change in the continuum of self would have been so abrupt that you would not still be able to reasonably call them the same person.

One thing to note is that I do not see it as reasonable to make arbitrary distinctions between lengths of time where you can still know an agent or an object, and lengths of time where sufficient change has occurred to break the continuum. You cannot say that if you were to simply not see your friend for an evening while they went to a movie, that you would have broken your perceived continuum of their life, and that you would not be able to recognise them, unless they were profoundly affected by the film in some way.

However, during all of these mental changes, the body of the person is still roughly the same - and the question now becomes: how do we distinguish between the mind and the body?

The way in which we can do this is to introduce the idea of sets, with which we can attack the mind-body problem. In order to prove anything about the problem, then we have to work with no assumptions. If we assume that the set of the 'mind-body' can be split down into the mind and the body, then we assume they are different things. If we say they cannot be split, then we are insinuating that they are one thing. So, instead we must approach this from the question 'is the mind-body set meaningful?' If it is not, then they are the same thing, as a set with only one thing in it is meaningless, as it is tautological. If a

set only contains one item, then it is merely equivalent to that one item. Sets that only contain one object are useful, they can define characteristics by virtue of being the only one in that set. However, due to the idea of a 'universal set', nothing can be alone in an entirely separate set.

## *SETS AS A DEFINITION OF REALITY*

The third, and possibly most important concept within recognition is that of the pet cat. Now, if I were to place a cat in front of you, you will probably recognise it as a cat. Some other people in the same scenario might recognise the breed of cat, or the brand of collar. There might be a few people who recognise the cat as their own, and correctly identify it as such. They might know the phone number on the name tag. So, we can determine that there is a scale between complete knowledge of the cat (this includes temporally specific knowledge as well as future behavioural knowledge) and complete ignorance[2] of the cat. Complete knowledge in an empirical sense would mean understanding each and every sub-atomic component of the cat, and complete ignorance of the cat would mean that we have no pattern recognition of the cat from our sensory input. We could still be seeing the cat, yet know nothing about it. There is nothing inherent about the cat which lends itself to be understood inherently. Perhaps our human biology would be able to identify it from birth, with no prior experience, but this is not a principle which can be extended to other species, be they terrestrial or otherwise.

Some intelligent alien species might be able to recognise the cat as having four limbs and a head, and possibly eyes. They have broken the cat down into its constituent parts by not understanding the purpose of the cat as a whole. Each limb, each

[2] THE WORD 'IGNORANCE' IS NOT USED AS A NEGATIVE TERM, BUT AS AN ANTONYM TO 'UNDERSTANDING'.

organ may have its own function, but the superset of the cat (which is merely the collection of the parts) is more than the sum of said parts. This is the most important thing about sets. The set containing parts has to be different from the sum of the parts, otherwise the set can be said to be meaningless. If we pair up the cat with all the other cats in the surrounding area, in the superset of cats in a neighbourhood, this set is meaningful. If you make a set which contains the aforementioned cat and also a deceased cat, somewhere over the other side of the world. This set is very little more than the sum of its parts.

Of course, in a causal universe, the way in which one cat acts can affect the life the other through chaos theory, and even in death, the cat may be said to still have much of the same set of attributes as it did when it was alive. Of course, the cat itself no longer has the ability to recognise patterns, since its sensory input no longer works. Despite the fact that objects that exist in the same universe, it is reasonable to say that things which act on each other with minute consequences over long distances (a windstorm on Neptune affecting a windstorm on Earth) are not terribly related, and therefore cannot be placed into meaningful sets.

Going back to the example of the cat, if we break the cat down into its constituent parts, with each part having a different function than the sum, then there are many ways we can do this. One way would be to break the cat into the components which make it function - organs, limbs, etc. - and then further down into the components which make those components work - muscle fibres, cells. Eventually, you would be left with the individual molecules which makes up the walls of those cells, and then the subatomic particles which make up those. Each of these levels is functionally different from the one above.

So, how do we go upwards from our example? Going downwards is a fairly simple matter, breaking apart things into their constituent parts is comparatively easy when contrasted with trying to find universal sets. What is the superset of a cat? One answer might be ‘all cats that are owned by that person’, or

‘all cats in the neighbourhood’. These sets are meaningfully different sets, as you could say that all of the cats owned by one person have been trained in a certain way, and all cats in the neighbourhood have interacted with each other at some point. This idea of sets can be thought of as a series of detailed, interweaving Venn diagrams, which describe all of the meaningful (and, if you wish it to, meaningless) sets in the universe.

It can be argued that all cats of a certain breed form a superset, and that all cats of all breeds will form the total set of ‘cats’, which then feeds into the evolutionary tree, which will eventually reach the subset of all life, which will then reach the universal set. So, what is this universal set? This is simply the set which contains everything in the entire current iteration of the universe, and from that, a deterministic view to the future (which will be discussed later), and using the idea of information. The concept of information in this context is something which is inextricably linked to objects. The idea is that with enough empirical analysis of any kind, it would be possible to reconstruct an original document from all of the ashes, after it had been burnt. However, we do not yet know how far this information is recoverable, or how much of it would even be useful.

This universal set also has its own individual scale of understanding, from complete knowledge to complete ignorance. People can improve their understanding of the universe by learning more about it, or at the very least striving to understand it. This is analogous to Aristotelian ethics in that it says that virtuous actions are learned through repetition of action. The idea that people who have a better understanding of the universe have a better judgement of moral actions is fair, since we understand that music critics have their opinions largely because of the sizeable quantity of music that they have listened to. Since ethics and morality are largely opinion-based subjects, it is fair to assume people who have knowledge of or

have physically experienced more of the universe will have better ideas on how to act in said universe.

However, just like a music critic of a certain genre cannot criticise music of other genres with as much expertise, we cannot say that we have complete universal understanding, merely by acting in the universe. If we make a decision in a certain scenario, then we have learned something about how to act in the set of that specific scenario. We have to use pattern recognition to infer what we should do in every other scenario, even if the same thing seems like it happens again and again (for example, having to decide to return your shopping trolley to the correct location after every shopping trip) there are an incredibly large number of scenarios, and attempting to determine how they will each pan out is something that can only be achieved if we assume things.

## *A Definitional Challenge*

So far, we have come across sets which are quite easily defined by characteristics which have little in the way of abstract qualities like 'good' and 'bad'. If we were to try and place a human in the set of things which are 'good', then we might run into some challenge. What makes a person 'good'? What makes anything 'good'?

I would be inclined to come at the idea of sets from a relativist's point of view, with every set being what people would consider a certain attribute. In this case, there is no objective idea of sets, because some sets will have meaning to some observers, and some none to others. However, some of this confusion can be cleared up if we return to the analogy of the pet cat. If a person were to have five pet cats, then they would be able to identify that set as their five cats, and that would be a meaningful set. However, a second person would not know this - but this is because there is miscommunication in the world. Miscommunication in this sense stems from the fact that the

second person does not know the whole situation, which, in this case, is who owns the five cats. The second person could potentially come to know that these five cats are owned by the first person, and then, upon learning this, the set of five cats becomes meaningful. However, does this insinuate that there was no meaningful set beforehand?

Surely, if we are to have a consistency of sets from agent to agent, then we have to factor in the idea that the second person has the capability to come to know that the five cats are owned by the first person? This does not seem to eliminate the question as a whole, though, it merely moves the goal posts. The question becomes 'how do we have the capability to know things?' This is more of a biologically grounded question, as the total sum of the things we can know is seemingly limited to empirical evidence and logical deduction from that empirical evidence.

One could argue that a person who suffers from congenital blindness from birth does not have the ability to experience sight. Thus, they would not be able to define all things that are the colour purple into a set. However, they have two things which can enable them to be able to define these sets. For one, they have the brain 'hardware' to be able to see if their congenital blindness was removed, and they also have the ability to understand colour if it is described to them. This is much analogous to the second person looking at the cats - they do not know who the cats belong to, it is not an evidently apparent thing. However, we accept that we have the capability to do so, and thus, the set of things that are purple is a valid set.

This means we also have to open ourselves up to the possibility that there are attributes of the universe which we do not have access to with our senses and our current understanding of physics. This is not to say that there is some phenomenological differences which our brains would not be able to adapt to, for that is wrong. If there was an extra part of brain matter invented which could replicate the the phenomenological experience of a bat, then we could implant it into ourselves and allow ourselves to see things as a bat would.

This is only possible if the continuum of self is not broken, if we simply replace the human physiology with that of a bat instantly, then it has been broken, and the person can no longer be called the same.

## *Ultimate Proximity*

As I have said before, your proximity to a continuously changing object determines whether or not you will see it as continuous. In the example of the Ship of Theseus, someone who only sees the ship leave and then return will not see the ship as being continuous. Again, this does not mean that the continuum of self is broken - there are people on the ship who have witnessed the slow change from one form to the other. But if this is the case, then there is some debate as to whether or not the continuum of self can ever be broken. As every living person has very close (ultimate) proximity to themselves in terms of how they perceive change, then even through blunt trauma they will be able to recognise themselves.

There are a few objections to this, one is that some people do forget who they are, but this is more of a forgetting of a few key concepts - name, date of birth - rather than total retrograde amnesia, which is very rare. In the case of someone who has forgotten everything about themselves but has still kept the same body, then this is still not a violation of the continuum of self. The idea of 'self' in this context means both the mind and the body together, and in this case, even death does not seem to be an end of the continuum because your body does not change immediately.

One could argue that it is almost impossible to break the continuum, since it would require both a death and a complete replacing of memories. A theoretical event which does fulfil both of these categories is teleportation - the kind that atomically disassembles you and then reconstructs you some distance away. In this scenario, the continuum is broken, despite there being

extremely little difference in the actual physical natures of the input and output. Your memories and physical body would be the same, but you would not be the same person.

## *SETISM AND ETHICS*

Since assumption is a huge part of pattern recognition we need to be good at doing it. We do not live our lives in fear that the next pavement slab that we walk on will collapse and plunge us into a cavern, and we assume that the sun will rise each morning, because it has done for such a long time. These are not rigorous proofs, and they do not need to be, since the effort involved in testing each pavement slab or keeping track of the movements of the sun and earth would be a waste of time for us all to do. For most of us, those who are not structural engineers or solar astrophysicists, we do not have to worry about these sorts of things. We merely assume our way through life.

In order to get better at assuming, we have to go through more scenarios, and improve the quality of our judgement. If we take ethics to be analogous to the driving of a car, then if the completely inexperienced driver somehow pulls off a well-executed manoeuvre, we will not attribute the same level of skill at driving as someone who can reliably do said manoeuvre. They may have just achieved the same thing, but by accident. Since there is no reliable way of telling the two outcomes apart by looking at just the outcomes, we have to look for which set of rules is the most likely to produce good outcomes. The inexperienced driver may not be able reproduce the result for another hundred goes, whereas the experienced one may be able to do it again on cue.

In order to find a way of acting that is analogous to the experienced driver, then we must find a moral standpoint which appears to come from the least circumstantial place possible - this would ideally be a moral code which is inherent in the universe. If this existed, and was apparent to us, then there

would be no point in debating ethics, there would be a set of rules or guidelines instead. As it stands, there is not an inherent code of ethics in the world, or in the universe as a whole, so we must attempt to either find it, or something which is as close to it as possible. Ethical thinking should be both guided by those who have experienced the most situations, and have also proven that they have the capability to act well in new ones, as well as their ethical thinking being grounded in as close as they can get to inherency. However, it is not worth saying that 'experience is equivalent to wisdom' since many people fail to learn from their actions. It is those who have experienced situations before who have the capability to act well. Of course, they have the capability to act badly too, through societal customs and poor reinforcement, people can perform lazy or morally wrong actions as routinely as they like, simply because it is the easiest thing to do for them. In this case, having more information about situations does not necessarily lead to reform in character.

On the other hand, there is an idea in which ethical situations become a lot easier to understand fully when you have all of the information. In the case of a Gettier problem[3], having full knowledge of the situation is very helpful in informing us how to act. In the case of Smith and Jones applying for a job, Smith has been lied to in being told that Jones is guaranteed to get the job, and infers that Jones is going to get the job. Furthermore, the description of 'a man who has ten coins in his pocket' is not analogous to 'the man who is called Jones'. The statement must be broken down into its parts and then analysed. This is more accentuated in the second example.

In the second Gettier example, the phrase 'Jones owns a Ford, or Brown is in Barcelona' seems to be unjustified. The process of disjunction introduction does not prove a logically disconnected belief by attaching it to a certain one. If we take the two statements apart, then Smith is correct in the first one, but his belief that Brown really is in Barcelona is not justified based

[3] IS JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF KNOWLEDGE?, EDMUND GETTIER, 1963

on any empirical evidence, and it is not provable logically. In Smith's case, he does not know whether Brown is really in Barcelona himself, so he could not infer any logical truth from it. Logical pathways must be inferable both ways; an empirically justified P may lead to a logically inferable Q, but this does not mean that Q leads back to P.

A more general Getter-type example is also able to be deconstructed. In the example of the sheep in the field, a man says that there is a sheep in a field, when it is actually a dog disguised as one. However, also unknown to the man, over the hill (but still in the same field) there is a sheep. His reasoning is correct, and he appears to have a justified belief which is correct. However, what the man means by the word 'field' is different to the actual field as it appears in reality. What he means by the word 'field' is the field that he can see, or that which he knows the current state of (at least the current state of objects as large as sheep). The man is still deceived by his senses, if he was able to see over the crest of the hill, then this would not be an issue. If we were to know every facet of a logical dilemma such as the Gettier problem, there would be no issue. The logical trouble of the those styles of problems relies on miscommunication of information in some way. It is true to say that we have fewer justifiable beliefs than we think - and this idea will lead back round to the first point of this essay, which is that of inherency.

Our circumstantial beliefs in the world are guided by what we experience around us, and while that is a good way of collecting information in an everyday sense, but in scenarios where knowing a piece of information vastly changes your chosen logical decision, then it seems that taking things for granted (like the man looking for a sheep did) leads us to the conclusion that we have to find out more about ethical scenarios, or at the very least, act with great care in incorporating variables that we do not know.

Full knowledge of every variable would make the idea of complex ethical consequences brought about by chaos theory look easily solvable. Of course, the idea of giving over control of

the ‘best’ idea of morality to those who understand the most about a given situation seems a little odd. This is akin to Virtue Ethics, which is unclear on how to provide a single answer for any given situation. However, until we have a system for finding causes and effects in our largely (but not entirely) deterministic world, then we have to rely on systems of normative ethics to get us through our lives. A disadvantage of non-normative ethics is that there would be nothing preventing ‘experienced’ people acting as they want, provided they know a situation well. There is no accountability for their actions if they are the so-called moral authority in a given situation. One could say that we already do this through laws and judgements that factor in if a person feels as if they were forced to act. Sometimes, we think we have the right idea in a situation, and sometimes that idea turns out to be wrong in hindsight. How far do we go in allowing a leniency of judgement when it comes to hard decisions to make? This is more of a legal question than an ethical one, but still worth considering in the face of abstract problems like the Trolley Problem. The discrepancy between saying you would pull the lever and actually going ahead and doing it is quite large.

## *Does any of it matter?*

One of the most important things we can know about our perception of the world is that it is not complete. We do not consciously feel every single particle of air, we filter out visual noise and replace it with pattern recognition, we are not able to discern the smell of one individual molecule. If we are to agree that reality as we know it is not true to the nature of reality, but consistent, then epistemology becomes something of a sport. It is something arbitrary that we generally consistently agree on.

IGNORANCE - The word ignorance is used because the word ‘un-knowledge’ is very clunky. It is not used in an explicitly negative way, aside from the normal meaning of the word. In some cases, knowledge is impossible to gain, or at least not feasible for a human to gain. Not knowing the name of every pet in the world is not a bad thing.

*in order to define the probable, one must possess the true.*

two unrelated sets cannot combine to give a related set
two related things can be combined to give