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## Desiderata 2018

The page is blank. It turns into a “text” because there is an “animal” capable of “seeing” more than just a blank page. The page is a metaphor for a life, and this “animal’s” capacity to generate a “text” is what makes all the difference ...

What follows seeks to unpack this difference in a way that enables the reader to grasp its transforming power as far more than the blind causality that, like leavening yeast, changes flour and water into a loaf of bread. This difference involves more, though, than just the individual because, as a communal project, it is grounded in dignity from which springs not the self- and social-destruction of mere self-promotion and material aggrandizement but the elevating joy of responsible creativity that improves us all. Make no mistake: The duty that accompanies dignity is no depressing weight that crushes the enjoyment of life but a call to do one’s best despite the inescapable and ineradicable limits that biology places upon us. It is precisely our imperceptible limits that make it possible for us to stretch the perceptible limits of the physical world. When we do so with a sense of *insight* and responsibility, we not only draw on the thrill of creativity but also commit ourselves to *what makes our efforts truly worthwhile*: the preservation of the material conditions of life as we creatively transform what are only merely apparent, perceptible limits of the material world.

It is not only the geniuses of the world who can exercise this *capacity*, which is not a developed *capability* somehow already possessed at birth. Every child knows the joy of *learning to* distinguish between the (anomalous) figure and its (banal) background as well as quickly understands what may (and may not) go into its mouth. The spectrum between anomaly and background as well as between may and may not is not merely a spectrum between benefit and harm. It is a spectrum that is understanding grounded in the permissible and impermissible, which is quickly raised to the level of “ought” and “ought not” that the child *must learn to impose upon itself*.

Nonetheless, there is nothing about the self-imposition of permissible and impermissible that prevents the creative discovery of the world and increasing potential of transformation that comes with each discovery. In other words, far more than merely discerning what “is” and how it can be transformed by *insight* into something else that only a rational animal can “see,” the “ought” as well as the “ought not” are species markers of all animals that possess rational *insight*. This difference between “ought” and “ought not” seeks to protect not only what is necessary for rational animals but also what is necessary for everything.

However, not all *insight* into imperceptible things is of equal value. The very capacity to “see things not there in the phenomena” that enables our creative transformation of the world for the benefit of all is also the capacity to “see things not there in the phenomena” that enables the destruction of nature and, for example, the generation of (wild) speculations as well as

conspiracy theories, which fragment humanity into the “us”/“them” of artificial classifications of clans, tribes, races, and nationalities, and which, in turn, appear (!) to *require* vigilant defense of narrow groups over against the “threat” of the “other.”

There are at least two litmus-tests for determining *valuable insight* into the particulars of experience: universals and limits. These litmus-tests must also be learned and are nothing reserved just for geniuses in possession of them from birth.

The first litmus-test is *universality* – not particularity! – although inseparable from the self-interests of particularity! There is a symbiotic relationship between particularity and universality: the one is inseparable from the other – as far as any rational animal can experience. Their inseparability is the very condition necessary for any rational animal to “see” the imperceptible universalities concealed by particularity.

However, universals themselves are imperceptible. It is particulars that are perceptible. In light of the in-your-face character of particular things, it is to our advantage to pay attention to them, but, when we do so to the neglect of universals, we undermine our very understanding and assumption of responsibility for our agency.

For example, the difference between a “flat-earther” and the “heliocentric solar system” is not because each perceives different, particular phenomena. The difference is that the flat-earther only sees the particulars (the sun is obviously moving and we on the earth are definitely *not moving* at 1,000 miles/hour on the surface of a rotating planet) whereas the heliocentric solar systems necessarily invokes imperceptible universals (mathematics) to provide an alternative model for what one cannot actually see (the sun is *not moving* and the earth is moving).

The flat-earther’s denial of the heliocentric solar system is analogous to the conviction that all of our problems can be solved by fostering merely self-interest. Both flat-earthers and followers of Ayn Rand privilege perceptible particulars over imperceptible universals. Succinctly, simply because we experience something (particular) is no guarantee that it is (universally) true.

Paul McCartney surely experienced something extraordinary on his psychedelic trip in which he says he “saw” God. However, what he experienced was a set of particular phenomena that he took to be “God” without (?) consideration of the consequences of taking this set of particular phenomena to be universally true. As with the flat-earther and the defender of self-interest, one can live one’s whole life with the convictions that the sun is moving, my particular interests somehow serve those of all others, and God is a set of phenomena accessed through extraordinary particulars.

However, unlike nocturnal dreams in which we have all of the clarity and distinctness of particular perceptions but no causal order, the waking world with its clarity and distinctness of particular perceptions is capable of understanding on the basis of an imperceptible, *universal*, causal order – even if we are incapable of proving that that is the case at all times and in all places precisely because the causal order itself is imperceptible and only indirectly appears through its effects.

The *universal* aspects of experience that characterize a rational animal consist of elements that the mind must *add to* phenomena that are not directly given with perceptible phenomena. These include conceptual schemes (concepts are never experienced in isolation), a “framework” of space and time because experienced phenomena presuppose the space and time “within which” they occur, and “laws.” Laws are a metaphor for the unchanging order “within which” events and agency must occur or else there is no such thing as predictable events or agency. There are two “lawful” domains that correspond to the inseparable, yet irreducible, causal systems that are necessary for us to experience phenomena as we do: the domain of physical laws and the domain of moral laws. Neither system of laws is either provable or disprovable because we experience these laws only indirectly through their effects. Nonetheless, they constitute the inescapable, systematic orders that make possible the natural sciences and morality, which are the two kinds of reason that, in degree, are the species markers of humanity: theoretical reason and practical reason.

In other words, reason is much more than the instrumental reason so much championed in our materialistic age. Instrumental reason is merely a sub-set of theoretical reason, and what it unquestionably presupposes in order to achieve its tasks borders on intellectual irresponsibility. Practical reason, in turn, is not to be confused for pragmatism. Like instrumental reason, pragmatism is a sub-set of theoretical reason in that it consists of the aims and rules necessary to achieve personal ends (for example, the exercising of a profession that pursues a particular form of instrumental reason). Practical reason, in contrast, is a rationality “higher” than all forms of theoretical reason (instrumental or pragmatic) because it is concerned with the universal order of “broad principles” that guide the discernment between “ought” and “ought not.”

Theoretical reason, while presupposing the universal, imperceptible order of conceptual schemes, space and time, and physical laws, is also concerned with socially generated, hence externally imposed, rules to govern behavior in specific social and institutional contexts. In contrast, practical reason is concerned with broader, more universal issues and asks: “‘Ought’ I to do such-and-such ...?<sup>1</sup>” Ought I to pursue this path of theoretical research that clearly has devastatingly destructive consequences for the very theoretical reason that must be employed to pursue it? Ought I to build this housing complex here where the environmental impact would be devastating for the flora, fauna, and others in the region? Ought there to be educational programs for the acquisition of professional skills that never consciously engage the moral dimension of the profession in question? In short, theoretical reason without practical reason

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<sup>1</sup> The difference between theoretical and practical reason is that between “hypothetical” and “categorical” imperatives. Theoretical reason is concerned with hypothetical imperatives: What is necessary (imperative) in order to understand a particular set of phenomena or to achieve a particular end? For example, in order to understand the solar system, it is necessary that I have appropriate training in astronomy and that I have the appropriate technology to do so. Usually, one does not do astronomy with a microscope. The very term “hypothetical” indicates the particularity of understanding and agency in question. Hypothetical is anchored in an “if:” If I want to study the solar system ...

In contrast, categorical imperatives are not driven by or derived from the particularity of any given situation. Categorical imperatives arise because the individual exercises a kind of causality that is inseparable from, but irreducible to, the physical causality of any particular situation. This extra-ordinary causality is called autonomous freedom or the ability to initiate sequences of events that nature cannot accomplish on its own. At the core of Immanuel Kant’s philosophical project, this categorical dimension of experience was discussed at least as early as Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494 CE), but it surfaces in history whenever and wherever it is exercised by a rational being (see Kant, *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* [AA VIII: 109-23]).

reduces responsibility down to satisfying merely social expectations and the fulfilment of particular self-interest while practical reason is the moral capacity that rises above particular and group self-interest to embrace a universal, lawful order of principles to establish what “ought” and “ought not” to be done. As far as we are able to discern thus far, humanity is the only species *capable of both theoretical and practical reason* anywhere to the degree that we are, and this recognition of the perceptibly empirical and imperceptibly rational elements that are necessary for theoretical and practical reason is called speciesism only by those who are misanthropic and want to discourage the very capacities that make it possible for us to be and to become human.

Denial of the imperceptible, universal order *concealed by particulars* is to deny any and all understanding and is equivalent to misanthropy if not suicide. In short, although particulars are in-your-face, understanding depends upon concealed universals that, as with the case of the solar system and self-interest, sometimes even requires that we deny our experience of particulars. Do we trust in the particulars of our experience or the universals of our understanding? A rational animal chooses the latter without neglecting particulars! However, understanding requires “work,” that is, the acquisition of symbol systems (languages, mathematics, iconic images, etc.) to indirectly represent the imperceptible, universal order that makes any and all experience of both nocturnal dreams and waking experience possible, in the first place.

Someone with commitment to the symbol system of Christianity may be tempted to hear the Platonic, Stoic, Neoplatonic elevation of *Logos* over the “copies and shadows” that are the phenomena of the world of particular perception with this emphasis on a universal, imperceptible, causal order concealed by particulars. However, there is another criterion when it comes to the discernment of what constitutes *valuable insight* into experience in addition to the litmus test of universality over particularity that reigns in unbridled speculations.

This second litmus-test for *valuable insight* is the criterion of limits. Paradoxically, the conditions that make it possible for us to approach particular phenomena as governed by (unlimited<sup>2</sup>) universals are conditions of profound limits, which we ignore at our own and the earth’s peril.

A rational animal is no god! The only absolute truth that s/he possesses is the (finite) truth that one is conscious – at least as long as one is still able to deny that one is conscious. In other words, the denial of consciousness presupposes that one is conscious. However, the material and intellectual conditions that make consciousness possible are anything but absolute and are riddled with limitations.

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<sup>2</sup> Universals are „found“ in and apply to a dimension of experience 180° opposite to the dimension of particular perceptions. Whereas the latter are perceptible, material, divisible, measurable, and incessantly changing, the former are imperceptible, immaterial, indivisible, immeasurable, and unchanging. We cannot touch, smell, taste, hear, or see concepts or numbers themselves (only at best, symbolic representations of them). Unlike particular objects, concepts and numbers are immaterial and, as a consequence, incapable of determination where one stops and the next starts. For the same reason, concepts and numbers themselves have no size. Is one’s concept of an elephant bigger or smaller than one’s concept of a mouse? Finally, concepts and numbers remain the same throughout all of the changes of particular perceptions. As a consequence, they are a necessary element in our being able to identify the differences among particular perceptions.

We can't put the physical world directly into our minds. We are incapable of proving the ultimate causes of anything. At best, we can generate an understanding of systems of secondary causes that appear to account for our experience. To be sure, the more these systems of secondary causality fit together into a universal totality, the more likely, it appears, that we have understood correctly.

Because we cannot perceive concepts and mathematics directly but only indirectly through symbol systems, we not only are incapable of determining where each individual element begins and ends, but also we are incapable of proving that they, along with causal explanations, actually "exist" – because existence requires spatial location whereas causes, concepts, and numbers are not spatially located anywhere.

In other words, the claim that "Enlightenment Reason" provides us with absolute, dispassionate truth is not only a distorted notion of the insightful claims for reason made in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, but it is also a distorted notion of "reason." Both the conditions necessary for there to be any "reason" whatsoever as well as the application of "reason" in any particular circumstance are profoundly limited.

We appear to be closest to determining the accuracy of theoretical and practical, rational understanding when we commit ourselves to universals, which, *although neither perceptible nor capable of proof/disproof*, are *discernable* by the establishment of the necessary conditions that are required for us to experience, understand, and exercise our agency in the world – as limited as we in fact do experience and understand. The strategy for the discernment of the necessary conditions for any and all possible experience and understanding can be called "*methodological skepticism*."

Methodological skepticism begins by embracing the limits of perception and understanding. As Socrates famously said, "We don't know what we think we know." Rather than scream louder that I am, in fact, perceiving the particulars that I am trying to understand, methodological skepticism asks: "What must be universally necessary for me to perceive, understand, and responsibly act with respect to the particulars, in the first place?" The answer to this question allows us to embrace the *limits to consciousness and its universal conditions of experience, understanding, and agency*, and it calls out unrestrained speculations that place humanity on the divine throne.

In other words, our second litmus-test for *valuable insight* says: When someone tells you that God wants you to do something in particular, the "Good News" is that s/he *may be right* because there is no way to determine absolutely whether s/he is wrong. The "Bad News" is that there's also no way to determine absolutely that s/he *is right*. In such a circumstance, the best advice is to step back slowly, tell her/him to slowly drop her/his (intellectual or physical) weapon, and call 911 for assistance with a psychopath. The second step is to find a Critical Idealist, who cannot tell you what you must do but who can help you discern for yourself what you are capable of doing.