On Morality:

Key Considerations and a Bridge

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Welcome, and thanks for your interest!

The purpose of this paper is mainly to convey some central considerations that inform and shape my view of morality. The present paper *isn't* intended to convey the "argument" itself. I've found that it can be very helpful for audiences to understand *key considerations* (factors, facts, etc.) and then have a chance to think about—*and explore on their own*—how these considerations *interact*. In other words, it's often helpful for audiences to consider key factors and explore "how the dots connect" among the factors on their own—before I explain how *I* see the dots connected.

That said, some of my other materials cover and illustrate the argument itself, of course, although most readers will benefit by reading the present paper first. I suggest that interested audiences, after finishing this, read the following items, which can all be found on my website:

- What good am I?

- On Morality

- The Morality of Sustainability: *A DIY Exploration*

- Regarding 'Directional Dynamics' and 'Normative Facts'

- A Framework and Paradigm Of Morality

These and additional items are listed near the end of the paper.

Also, at the end, I've included an assortment of quotes. The quotes at the top of the list are mentioned (referred to) in the text. The quotes near the bottom of the list help convey the importance of the matter.

For present purposes, I've included a list of key *considerations*, a number of *notes* regarding the considerations, a few other helpful (hopefully) comments, and some relevant quotes. Although I've used my own sense of organization to order the following considerations, my ordering here is *not* intended to convey any sense of relative "importance", and the ordering doesn't really matter to the argument or resulting view.

Finally, of course, different audiences use different terminologies, in some cases, and have different ways of understanding certain terms. And, different audiences have different appetites for detail and, often, different pre-existing paradigms and assumptions. So, I've had to make some choices and tradeoffs in deciding how to convey the considerations. I have a much higher degree of confidence in the resulting *view* (of morality), in the supporting *arguments*, and in the importance of the *considerations* listed below, than I have in my own ability to *convey* the considerations clearly, in the smoothest way possible. Indeed, when it comes to the challenges of communication, I'd welcome help from anyone who can communicate the matter more clearly in general or to specific audiences.

With that context, here are the considerations . . .

Some Key Considerations

1. The "effective" foundational function of human social-moral faculties—in a biological sense, and including the abilities and behaviors they enable—has been, and is, to facilitate the movement of human life from one generation to the next, and to the next, in such a way that the train has kept going—so far at least. (Notes 1, 2, and 3) The *reason* that we have these faculties today is that they've been relatively successful at doing so. As evolutionary scientists note, they are *adaptations*. Using other terminology, their "reason for being" is that they facilitate the copying of the genes that correspond to them from one generation to the next. And of course, genes survive within humans, need humans to get around, and can't get copied (normally) without humans.

2. The foundational biological "currency" of life is "fitness". In other words, it's the ability to continue life and to move life from generation to generation in the face of pressures that work *against* doing so. In the case of humans, effectively, it's the ability to move a human life-stream from generation to generation. As mentioned above, we have our social-moral faculties today because, on average, they've made a substantial net positive contribution to our fitness, rather than a negative contribution. (Notes 2, 3, and 4)

3. Life itself is a *prerequisite* for happiness, fairness, justice, love, and so forth. Put another way, one must be *alive* in order to be happy (or sad), seek happiness, love, experience justice and fairness, and etc.

4. In keeping with assumptions and expectations inherent in science and in many schools of philosophy, and for present purposes, we cannot assume, or rely upon, the existence of a convincing conscious authority independent from ourselves, the human species. In other words, we don't assume the existence of a supernatural authority or expect any such authority to answer questions for us, justify answers, justify our own existence *to* us and *for* us, or tuck us in at night. Thus, we are left to form our understanding and views, do our reasoning, and make our choices, based upon the best combination of *human-discovered* empirical evidence and *human* thinking we can muster. Based upon a combination of these ingredients, we must form our views and make our choices— philosophically, scientifically, and practically speaking. (Notes 5, 6, and 7)

5. Each individual human, upon gaining self-awareness and at least a minimal ability to examine life, faces the "to be, or not to be" question that Hamlet stated so well. It's a question inherent in the bargain of life. Albert Camus also identified this question—and its central relevance—in the opening paragraph of the first essay in his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*. For present purposes, call this the *self-question*. Similarly, in parallel, each group of substantially interdependent humans can be seen to face—*and indeed faces*—essentially the same question as a *group*. For example, imagine a group of individuals sharing a lifeboat in the middle of an ocean. Or, imagine a small society of humans on an isolated island. Or, imagine a group of five humans on a spaceship traveling through space—or a group of billions of humans sharing a journey through space on Spaceship Earth.   For present purposes, let's call the "to be, or not to be" question faced by an interdependent group, the *life-question*. (Put another way, the *life-question* is the parallel to the *self-*

question, but considered in relation to the fate of an interdependent group of people, rather than to that of an individual.) As with the *self-question*, the *life-question* is a central philosophical question—*as well as a very real and actionable one, with real implications*. (Notes 8 and 9)

6. In essence, at the *meta* level, there are three possible responses to the life-question:

   - An *affirmative* (life-affirming) response

   - A *negative* (life-negating), self-defeating response

   - An *avoidant* response—i.e., an attempt to avoid *consciously* facing and responding to the question. In other words, the avoidant response is essentially an attempt to *ignore* the question. Of course, one can avoid *consciously* facing and addressing the question, but one's choices and actions respond to the question one way or another. (See the quote from Camus, below.)

7. We humans are effectively left to use the best combination of human-discovered evidence and human thinking we can muster in order to *choose* the *most well-reasoned*, *most compelling*, *most reasonable*, *most coherent*, and *best (in these senses)* response to the life-question, from the available options. We *can* use *human reason* to differentiate and weigh the options—or, if we like, to differentiate and substantially *help* weigh them. (Note 10) Indeed, it's informative to note that our reasoning faculties themselves are adaptations: We have them *because* they've helped us survive, and they've been formed and shaped by the processes of evolution *as* survival tools. Of course, the human brain is an adaptation (involving a combination of adaptations). Thus, in an important sense, if we use our "thinking" or "reason" to support choosing the negative, self-defeating response to the life-question, we'll be using it/them to defeat their own "reason for being", function, and existence.

8. We humans are members of the same broad human family. As far as modern science can tell us, we are all descendents of a group of humans who most likely lived in Africa roughly 150,000 to 250,000 years ago. Although my work hasn't focused in detail on the matters of human equality, it embraces the ethical arguments and conclusions that we humans are equal (in important senses) and should be treated equally (in important senses).   (Note 11)

9. We humans are highly aware of the dimension of *time* as well as of the dynamics of many processes that occur as time progresses. Our awareness of time carries with it benefits—*and responsibilities*. (Note 12)

10. We humans are part of the natural universe, live within it, and have important interdependencies with the non-living environment and the biological community of life. Also, we are *aware* of many of those interdependencies, to some degree. We are certainly aware of our interdependence as a "whole". (Note 13)

11. The human *quest* for happiness and human *state/feeling* of happiness both play very important roles in life. The quest and state are both outcomes (products) of the evolutionary process. In a number of ways, the quest for happiness serves as a motivating mechanism that motivates us—roughly and on average—to do the things that result in the movement of life from generation to generation. The state/feeling of happiness serves, among other things, as a moderating mechanism, an aspect of health, and something that allows us to "keep on keepin' on". That said, a person must be *alive* in order to seek or experience happiness, at least as far as observation and science can tell us. To an important degree, the quest for, and state of, happiness *serve* the foundational function of moving life from generation to generation. Beyond that, additional degrees of happiness serve as experiential "icing on the cake" of life. (Of course, I'm not suggesting that there is a solid dividing line between these different roles and degrees of happiness.) (Note 14)

12. There are, of course, important differences between *means* and *ends*. For example, consider *fairness*. Fairness is a very important consideration and dynamic in human social interaction and morality, yet it's not the foundational "end", foundational function, or pinnacle aim of morality. Although fairness is an important consideration and aim, when considering fairness in the context of human activities, one normally must ask, fairness *to what end*? For example, a group of people can either choose to drink poison together, *fairly*, or achieve sustainability together, *fairly*— and there is, of course, a very important difference. And, the faculties that *enable* our human fairness-related dynamics are themselves adaptations.

13. If the human stream of life ends—that is, if a human generation fails to pass life forward to a next generation—such ending will defeat the effective foundational function of our social-moral faculties; will defeat the role that they serve and that (through selection) shaped them; will

defeat our affirmative response to the life-question; will bring to an end our human abilities to experience life, seek happiness, be happy, act fairly, and so forth; and (as far as we can tell) will bring to an end the relevance of the word 'morality' along with the very relevance of human social-moral dynamics and considerations.

14. *Is* and *ought* are not identical, of course. Indeed, they're very different. Yet they exist and "live" in the same universe. And they're related in important ways. (There is a difference, of course, between two things being *different* from each other and their being wholly *unrelated* to each other and "*unbridgeable*".)

Briefly for present purposes, a very important relationship—*a robust bridge involving a central matter*—exists between what "is" and what we mean when we say "ought". This bridge exists in descriptive, explanatory, *and* justificatory senses—using the term 'justificatory' here to refer to solidly-reasoned normative justification. In other words, the bridge involves a solid relationship between what *is* and a central normative *ought*. *The "matter" of the bridge involves the movement of life from one generation to the next.*

One way to begin to see and understand the bridge is to consider the following: Remember the first two points (Points 1 and 2) in the present list of considerations. Consider what they say. Of course, they represent the science of the matter, or, to put it another way, the patterns that we can readily glean from the science of the matter. Although we can write one of their central themes a number of ways, for present purposes, we'll use these: The effective foundational function of human social-moral faculties has been, and is, to facilitate the movement of human life from one generation to the next, and to the next. The reason we have these faculties today is that they've been relatively successful at doing so. As with other adaptations, their "reason for being" is to facilitate their own movement—including the movement of life that carries them—from generation to generation. They contribute to the "currency" of life—i.e., *fitness*. To put the matter another way, our social-moral faculties are most foundationally "about" the movement of life from generation to generation.

These statements, reflecting the *science* of the matter and what we can *glean* and *understand* from that science, come from our understanding of what *is*. They are, in other words, from the "land of *is*". They are "*is*

statements". For the most part—(more on this in other materials)—science gives them to us in descriptive and explanatory senses. If we view the "terrain" of the matter in terms of patterns of the "forest" rather than in terms of the precise and numerous differences between individual trees within the forest, we can think of these statements as "facts of the forest" of life.

But as we know, *ought* and *is* are *not* identical: Just because something *is* a certain way, or *has been* that way, doesn't necessarily mean that it *ought* to be that way. Just because something works a certain way doesn't mean that it *ought* to work that way. So, we must ask ourselves: Given our understanding that the effective foundational function of our social-moral faculties (including the abilities and behaviors they enable and that wouldn't be possible for us without them) has been, and is, to facilitate the movement of life from generation to generation; and given that we have them *because* they've performed this function; and given that this is their "reason for being"; and so forth; *should* this be the case going forward? In other words, *ought* this to be the case going forward?

Remembering that our focus here is on the most *foundational* function of the matter—in other words, for example, we aren't ignoring or excluding the quest for degrees of happiness that go *beyond* contributing to this foundation—we are, in other words, asking this: *Ought it to be the case that* the most foundational function of our social-moral faculties (and the abilities and behaviors they enable) should continue to be to facilitate life and its movement from generation to generation? Or in other words, to facilitate the continuation of human survival from one generation to the next?

To pose this question in a way that focuses on the *ought*, end, or aim itself—realizing that our functional faculties and the behavioral dynamics they enable are tools and means, of course—we may ask the rather clear question: *Ought* we humans to try to facilitate and accomplish the continuation of human survival from one generation to the next? Or, another way, are we humans using the best combination of human thinking and empirical evidence we can muster when we conclude that we *ought* to do so, and is such a conclusion warranted from the standpoint of *all considerations that we can bring to bear on the matter*?

If we respond to these questions with a "yes", the bridge is formed on the same basis upon which we derive our "yes" answer—complemented

perhaps by the descriptive and explanatory aspects of the science of the matter, to the degree that any particular audience might see those aspects as having at least some suggestive/indirect relevance. (Some audiences may see them as having little or no relevance, but all of these factors are interrelated in various ways, of course: It's often our human-defined dissection of matters that seems to block relevance, not the actual dynamics of the universe.)

With this context, my point and argument are that, given all the considerations already listed, excellent human thinking (reasoning, etc.) can indeed differentiate among the three possible responses to the life-question and can indeed support the *affirmative* response as being considerably more well-reasoned, more consistent with reason, and so forth, than the other two possible responses. Then, our affirmative response to the life-question—based in reason (as well as other ingredients, if you like)—ultimately provides the "yes" answer that contributes the normative-justificatory dimension to the bridge.

(Several simple premises that provide and explain the link between the affirmative response to the life-question and the bridge are contained in my paper "On Morality" and also discussed in several of my other materials. All told, the entire enterprise involves the combination of the affirmative response to the life-question, many of the other considerations listed above, and the several premises that relate the affirmative response more clearly to the rest of the matter. The considerations they reflect are also part of the do-it-yourself exploration in my paper, "The Morality of Sustainability: *A DIY Exploration*". Granted, this may sound complicated, but it's really not, once understood. The complexity here arises from how I'm choosing to explain it, for present purposes. Sorry.)

It also helps to note, I believe, that when we use a combination of human-found empirical evidence and human thinking/reasoning to establish and secure the affirmative response to the life-question, the only sense in which that enterprise falls short of full "justification" (as the term sometimes seems to imply) is the sense of the word 'justification' that could *only* be secured via some sort of justifying message from a credible supernatural authority of some sort. (This realization may already be apparent to many readers, although "seeing" it often requires some explanation and examples.)

I think it's also correct to say this: *If* this particular bridge is *not* the (or a) bridge that exists between *is* and *ought*—between the *science* of the matter and the *normative reasoning* and *normative dimension* of the matter—then it's most likely true that *no* bridge exists. That outcome, of course, would have immense implications. It would mean that, at the core of the matter, science and philosophy would be forever divorced and (in important senses) irresolvable. In that case, any central path of connection (with respect to normative matters) would have to be based solely, or at least primarily, on some sort of ungrounded "contract" defining—without factual basis—where to agree and where to disagree. "Let's vote on it!"

And this, of course, would leave the two separate disciplines in unnecessary and "poor" situations: Science could say "Hey, we humans evolved cooperative abilities, and here's why …"—but could *not* validly say "Hey, we think humans *should* cooperate more, and *should* find better ways to cooperate!" Meanwhile, many moral philosophers would be left with a perpetual dependence on things such as a largely ungrounded and unexplained version of "intuition". As E. O. Wilson has observed, "[E]thical philosophers intuit the deontological canons of morality by consulting the emotive centers of their own hypothalamic-limbic systems." In short, the coming-together and "stereoscopy" that Kwame Anthony Appiah discusses in his book, *Experiments in Ethics*, would be neutered and blocked.

This unfortunate situation would be a bit like that of two parents arguing with each other, on the bank of a lake, over who will jump in to save their drowning child—while the child goes under for the second time.

At risk of some redundancy, then, although the bridge can be described and illustrated in a number of ways, for present purposes, I'll briefly mention the two essential parts of the reasoning that establishes it: The first part of the enterprise involves the string of cause-and-effect relationships that relate, from a scientific standpoint, what *is* with what we mean by *ought*, largely in descriptive and explanatory ways. The second part of the enterprise—the part that establishes the normative *ought*—involves our choice of the affirmative response to the life-question, combined with considerations in the list above and, for clarity's sake, with several premises contained in my paper "On Morality". Remember, our choice of the affirmative response to the life-question is established via our human reasoning and is a more well-reasoned choice (and so forth, as discussed in Point 7 above) than would be any of the alternative choices.

> This second part of the enterprise, then, establishes the justificatory dimension of the bridge. (Notes 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, and 22)

As mentioned earlier, the list above includes key *considerations* that shape the matter of morality and form many of the bases for my conclusions and supporting arguments. The list *doesn't* describe the argument itself—except, of course, with respect to portions of the *is-ought* matter. As mentioned, other materials provide more detail and explanation as well as a more complete list of premises and factors.

That said, one central summarizing statement can be put as follows: (Notes 20 and 21)

> **Morality is most foundationally "about" the sustainable and healthy survival of the human species, along with ample biological diversity, along with the sustainable health of our home, Earth, all accomplished in a way that respects human equality (in important senses) and embraces a living and somewhat fragile planet.**

In using the whole term 'morality' along with the term 'about' in this statement, I intend to mean morality (or rather the most *foundational* role of morality) in a holistic sense—that is, in a sense that reflects a grounded and well-reasoned *combination* of the descriptive, explanatory, *and* normative dimensions of the matter. In other words, in this statement, I'm *not* trying to make a limited "is" statement along the lines of, "The foundational effective function of our social-moral faculties has been, and is, to facilitate the movement of life from one generation to the next generation". Instead, I *am* intending that the statement include the normative *ought* of the matter—in other words, that it include within its meaning the point that we are standing on excellent reasoning when we conclude that we *ought* to strive to achieve the aim contained in the statement.

(That said, as a reminder, the statement's central focus is on the most *foundational* aspect of morality's role—in the normal sense of the word 'foundational' and also reflecting the idea of "necessary, but not necessarily sufficient".)

Also, and importantly, the statement is intended to be understood in the context of the considerations listed, scientific understanding, and points explained more fully in my other materials.

The considerations, argument (much of which isn't included herein), and conclusions are intended to paint a bridged "net-result" picture that reflects a *combination* of the science and reasoning/philosophy of the matter, that is, of morality. The view is intended to be "stereoscopic", a term that Kwame Anthony Appiah used in his great book, *Experiments in Ethics*. It's intended to capture and reflect the overlap, common theme, and core intersection between the science and philosophy of the matter. It's intended to help "re-marry" the science and philosophy of the matter, as I discussed at the beginning of my 2006 book, *The Obligations Of Reason: Exploring the existence, nature, dynamics and implications of the Natural Moral System* (self-published with *iUniverse*). Indeed, the connective channel between the science and reasoning/philosophy of the matter involves the same substance that establishes a bridge between *is* and *ought*—involving the movement of life from generation to generation. This is, of course, just as one should expect.

The nature of the view necessarily reflects the fact that the view captures and reflects the overlap and central common theme between the science and philosophy of the matter. Put another way, the view is *grounded* in science and *also* reflects the very real—and thus also scientifically sound—notion that Reinhold Niebuhr stated in his own way in his Serenity Prayer—i.e., that some things probably can't be changed, but that humans have the flexibility and ability to change some other things, some of which perhaps should be changed, and that a key part of wisdom involves knowing the difference.

As with any view—especially involving large, multifaceted, and often controversial subjects—it's important to understand what the view *means* and what it *doesn't mean*. My other materials provide more detailed explanations and hopefully shed light on important aspects of the view. That said, there will understandably and undoubtedly be questions, and I'll be happy to address them.

In contemplating the list of considerations above, the *number* of considerations is *not* the important point, of course. Indeed, there are other (mostly related) factors, and there's also a somewhat arbitrary choice of how much—or little—to consolidate factors or, instead, add detail. Such choices often depend less on the view itself and more on the particular audience, their pre-existing context, and their needs.

For example, many of the considerations listed above can readily be grouped: In some ways, points 1, 2, and 3 cover one highly-related theme; points 4, 5, 6, and 7 cover another related set of ideas; points 8, 9, and 10 cover a third; and point 13 adds a different sort of point. So, those 11 points could be condensed and written as *four* lengthier points, or perhaps even distilled as four simplified "macro" points. In any case, the view itself is one thing—and the task (and challenges) of communication, another.

It may also help many readers to consider—*and enjoy!*—some great movies that illustrate central aspects of these considerations and of the resulting view. I recommend: *Children of Men*; *The Seventh Seal*; *Stranger Than Fiction*; *The Lion King*; *Les Miserables* (the Liam Neeson version); and *The Odyssey* (the Hallmark version).

The present view is highly relevant, timely, and practical for many reasons. I won't go into them in detail here, although I'll offer a few quick observations. The "world" is not in great shape these days, and we humans face many challenges involving important questions of morality/ethics. As Cicero once wrote, "… and it has to be concluded that the greatest source of harm to man is man." (See also the quotes at the end of the paper.)

We've created a huge and growing gap between our scientific understanding and power and the "wisdom" we have to live our lives and to manage our societies and their use of that power. As the Dalai Lama has said (and many others have offered similar observations), "It is all too evident that our moral thinking simply has not been able to keep pace with the speed of scientific advancement." Martin Luther King Jr. put it this way: "We have guided missiles and misguided men."

Meanwhile, the public's understanding of morality is highly fragmented. And, schools of thought in moral philosophy are wide-ranging: Many schools of thought are largely divorced from scientific understanding; many focus primarily on one dimension or dynamic of morality, to the exclusion of others; and some, while they are not far off track, do not make *key* matters *explicit*, and thus lose many of the important insights and benefits that come with doing so. Too, in too many cases, there is a large separateness between science and philosophy, and this separateness has resulted in missing some of the key insights and clarity that can be gained from a combined view.

And most important, the view sheds light on many important issues and questions, and it offers informed understanding and guidance that can be used—and should be used—in our shaping of responses and solutions.

As mentioned, the present note, with its focus on identifying some key considerations, doesn't present the argument itself or paint and explain the conclusions. Please refer to my other materials for more on those fronts. Most of them can be found on my website— www.ObligationsOfReason.com —or please feel free to contact me if you have questions or would like more information. (Of course, the more recent materials are more up-to-date than the older materials.)

Some of the materials include:

- On Morality   (FEB 2009)

- What good am I?   (APR 2009)

- The Morality of Sustainability: *A DIY Exploration*   (FEB 2009)

- Regarding 'Directional Dynamics' and 'Normative Facts' (OCT 2007)

- Portions of the Supporting Argument In Additional Forms (JULY 2007)

- A Framework and Paradigm Of Morality   (MAY 2007)

- The Nature of the Relationship Between *Is* and *Ought*   (APR 2007)

- The Nature of Morality (FEB 2007)

- The Obligations Of Reason: Exploring the existence, nature, dynamics and implications of the Natural Moral System (Book: 2006)

- Illustrative Quotes   (MAR 2009*)

- Some Roots and Relations, Noted   (MAR 2009*)

- A Few Paradigm/Frame Shifts   (MAR 2009*)

- Responsibility   (MAR 2009*)

- On Morality: A View and Argument (recent abstract, in part) (MAR 2009*)

* Not currently on my website (as of June 1, 2009), but available on request depending on intended use.

Thank you for your interest and attention. Please do let me know if you have any questions.

Be Well,

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Notes

Note 1 — Of course, evolution by selection acting upon variation works most foundationally at the genetic level but also (as scientists are trying to better understand) probably at other levels as well: Successful adaptations are those that are effective at getting copies of the genes that give rise to them into next generations of the beings that host them. That said, human genes, the corresponding adaptations, human individuals, human life in general, and the human *life-stream*, are mutually interdependent. Human genes need living human individuals—"survival machines", as Richard Dawkins put it—to carry and nourish them and allow them to get copied. At the same time, human individuals can't come about without genes, which play the central role in constructing them. And, humans need *each other* in order to reproduce, develop from newborns into viable adults, and navigate many of life's challenges sufficiently to pass life forward from generation to generation.

Note 2 — Of course, this point, and the preceding point, relate to the very definition and ultimate function of an "adaptation". As additional illustrative context, and among many examples, at the recent conference of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society (HBES), well-respected anthropologist and evolutionary ecologist Hillard Kaplan identified the two components of the value

of life (from a biological standpoint) as reproductive value and the economic equivalent of reproductive value, i.e., the value you can contribute to your descendants. He also referred to the three-generational system of wealth flows, meaning that parents *and* grandparents play roles that influence the fitness (in a biological sense) of children. And, in his presentation to the HBES, evolutionary psychologist Willem Frankenhuis naturally used fitness as the quality to be optimized in a range of modeling scenarios he ran to try to better understand human "sampling" of the environment during windows of organism development. Quotes from science writer David Quammen and evolutionary psychologist David Buss, included below, also illustrate key aspects of the matters represented in points 1 and 2.

Note 3 — Of course, science helps us understand what the world, including us, "is" (as well as we can) and how the world works (as well as we can). And of course, *part* of how the world works is that we humans have at least some flexibility to influence our own thinking and actions—or so it seems, at least. In other words, a full understanding of how the world works must include the point that Reinhold Niebuhr offers in his Serenity Prayer, i.e., that there are some things that we humans probably can't change, and some that we can.

A helpful way to better understand some aspects of the present enterprise is to consider the following illustration: Imagine that you're walking in the middle of a huge desert, needing to travel 30 miles to the nearest town, without any means of transportation other than your sore feet. Your situation doesn't look good. But, you happen to come across an old bicycle, in need of some modest maintenance and simple repairs. In its *present* state, the old bicycle isn't functional, but you happen to have the means of repair in your backpack—i.e., a small can of oil, a screw driver, a small tire-patching kit, and a portable pump that you used last time you went camping. Also assume, of course, that you've seen a bicycle work, know what one is, and know how to ride.

Now consider: There are, in essence, three ways (at least) that you can "see", understand, and respond to the bicycle: *First*, it's possible that you might fail to recognize the old thing as a bicycle at all. In this case, this heap of aluminum and rubber will seem irrelevant to you. You'll have to continue walking, and may eventually die of exhaustion or dehydration. *Second*, you may *recognize* the bicycle *as* a bicycle, but (for some odd reason) you may nevertheless insist on "seeing" it in its present *un*-functional state and choose (for some odd reason) *not* to administer simple maintenance and repairs. In this case, as in the first, you will conclude that the bike is irrelevant to you, and you'll continue walking. *Third*, you may recognize the bicycle as a bicycle and wisely choose to administer

the maintenance and repairs, returning the bicycle to its full functionality. In this case, you'll see the bike as *very* relevant to you. And, you'll probably be enjoying a cold Coke or Pepsi in town within the day.

Also consider another point, whose relevance will become more clear as we proceed: As Plato tells us, Socrates said something like "the unexamined life is not worth living". He *didn't* say that *any* life, or *all* life, is not worth living. In fact, his statement implies that the "examined" life *is* worth living. Nor did he say that we can't or shouldn't examine life. Although I'm not an expert on the historic Socrates, judging from his statement, I think it's reasonable to expect that, if he had come across a bicycle in the desert, he would have recognized it as a bicycle (if he were living today, that is), repaired it, and gotten back to the town square safely.

Note 4 — Of course, our hands, hearts, eyes, brains, feet, and etc. are *all* adaptations or collections of adaptations. So, why is it helpful to recognize that our social-moral faculties are adaptations too, as scientists do? Why is it helpful to recognize, consider, and reflect this key point, along with other factors, in our understanding of *morality*? Well, there are a number of important reasons, and I discuss them in some of my other materials. For present purposes, I'll just point out that morality has to do with our interactions with others, of course, and encompasses considerations of responsibility: If a person murders another person by stabbing him, we don't try to judge the murderer's *hands* and hold *them* accountable. Rather, we consider that the *person* of the murderer has done something harmful, immoral, and illegal. Just because hands and social-moral faculties are both (or all) adaptations doesn't mean that they're identical, of course, or that they play the same precise proximate roles in the dynamics of life. A great way to consider part of the matter is to listen to the great Dylan Thomas poem, *The Hand that Signed the Paper*.

Note 5 — My arguments and conclusions are considered and offered in a secular context, assuming either that we can't assume the existence of a supernatural authority or rely on such an authority for guidance or involvement, and/or that no supernatural authority exists.

Note 6 — I use the term "thinking" here as a shorthand. My intent is to include all means of human thinking/intuition/reasoning/feeling/"gut"/etc. that we use to consider, deliberate, and "figure out" matters.

Note 7 — For helpful illustrations, refer to the quotes from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, and Jean-Paul Sartre, listed below.

Note 8 — For helpful illustrations, refer to the quotes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and Albert Camus, listed below.

Note 9 — Although the *life-question* may seem less direct, less personal, and (to some) less tangible or real than the *self-question*, the *life-question* is indeed very real and is, in some ways, "stickier" than the *self-question*. For example, an individual person can decide whether to commit suicide or whether to try, to the best of her/his ability, to "keep on keepin' on"; but it is (and would be) much, much harder for an individual to convince *others* to commit *collective* suicide or to strive more intelligently to achieve *sustainability*. It's a bit like the difference between driving a motorcycle single-handedly and trying to steer a large ship with a hundred people holding the rudder together. But, neither the *self-question* nor the *life-question* is any more—*or any less*—"real" than the other. Indeed, if anything, because the matter of morality has to do with our interactions with, and responsibilities to, others, in our social species, the *life-question* is, in many senses anyhow, *more* relevant to considerations of morality than is the *self-question*.

Note 10 — Human thinking (thinking, "reasoning", "rationality", "logic", "reason", and so forth) can differentiate between—and *differentially weigh*—the three options we have for responding to the life-question. One response is considerably more well-reasoned, reasonable, and warranted than the other two possible responses. I explain why in other written materials. Also, I recently finished a video that, among other things, explains the matter. One of the several considerations is the fact mentioned in the final sentences of Point 7 of the list.

Also, please refer to the quotes from Aristotle and Cicero, listed near the end of this paper, for more context. And, my other written materials provide much more context and explanation regarding the use of thinking/reason/etc. with respect to these matters.

Note 11 — Please refer to my other written materials for more on this.

Note 12 — Our human awareness of time (as imperfect as it is) plays a vitally important role when considering the morality of *sustainability*. I recently completed a video that explains, among other things, this connection, including the "obvious" aspects and one very important—but less obvious—aspect of the matter. I also refer readers to my other written materials for more on where our awareness of time fits into the argument.

Note 13 — I'm not an expert on our human interdependencies with the environment and with other members of the biological community of life. Of course, we (as a species, and as a scientific community) still have much learning to do on this front.

Because of my focus, here, on what *human* morality is most foundationally "about", I only address *part* of the considerations involved in understanding the moral relevance (in a more holistic sense of the phrase) of other (non-human) life: Here, the moral relevance of non-human life involves our human interdependencies with other life and considers the fact that *we* need the life community to be healthy and sustainable *for our own sake*. This is, of course, only part of the equation. Life itself has moral relevance. Indeed, by understanding the *central* relationship between the underlying ingredients of morality (e.g., social faculties of social organisms) and the continuation of life from generation to generation, and by understanding that we humans are related (through our evolutionary history) to other forms of life, we can better understand the inherent moral relevance of non-human life, *for its own sake*.

If one argues that a living being must be *aware* and *self-reflective* to be considered to have morally-relevant worth, this presents an interesting question: If anything, shouldn't we humans—who *are* aware—be aware and respectful of the worth of *other* life (that enjoys less self-awareness, perhaps) and of the fact that many other forms of life do, undoubtedly, have feelings and thoughts of various sorts? In other words, because we humans are "aware" beings, and self-reflective (to a degree), aren't we erring in the *wrong* direction if we choose to exclude the moral relevance of non-human life, all things considered?

That said, this topic hasn't been my focus, and I defer to the great work of others when it comes to these matters.

Note 14 — It's important to note that my view—including the statement you'll find at the end of the list of considerations—does not in any way exclude the roles and importance of happiness. I *love* to be happy, when I can! My focus here has been on the most "foundational" aspect of what morality is "about"— i.e., that enterprise of morality that is a *necessary but not necessarily sufficient* part of the matter.

I enjoy, and often refer people to, this quote from the Dalai Lama's 1999 book, *Ethics for the New Millennium*: "And because, as we have seen, our interests are inextricably linked, we are compelled to accept ethics as the indispensable interface between my desire to be happy and yours." One very interesting thing

about this quote is this: If one interprets the word 'interests' in an informed and holistic sense, and if one replaces the phrase "desire to be happy" with a more tiered, holistic, and informed understanding as contained in the present view (that is, one that considers the foundational matter, the roles of happiness in relation to the foundational matter, and the higher degrees of happiness that are "icing on the cake" and thus represent a different sort or degree of value), one arrives at a much more accurate statement.

That said, I'm not critiquing the Dalai Lama's statement, which is a great statement in its context and undoubtedly considers the importance of survival and etc., *implicitly*. But, for scientific and philosophical purposes, and for a good number of very practical purposes, being *explicit* is vital. Personal happiness, personal fitness, collective total happiness, collective total fitness, and sustainability, are not identical things. They're interrelated to varying degrees, of course, but the enterprise of morality can't be about any/all of them *equally, in the same senses*. They each play *different* roles, and with *different* weights, in the matter.

Note 15 — This point (that is, Point 14 in the list of considerations) is not really a *basic* consideration: In other words, it's based upon, and follows from, the other more primary considerations and basic reasoning based upon those considerations. I include it in the list, for present purposes, because the difference between 'is' and 'ought' is vitally important to consider and address, of course.

Note 16 — The is-ought matter—including how it's addressed—is discussed at length in a number of my materials. The more recent materials do a more complete job, and I've included additional explanation in a video I recently completed. Please refer to the list of my written materials, included earlier in the paper.

Note 17 — It's very helpful, I think, to consider this question: If *is* and *ought* can be "bridged" with respect to the central matter of the continuation of life from one generation to the next, then how does this "bridge" reflect itself in everyday life? Or, to pose a similar question a different way: When regular people intuitively sense *oughts*—or behave based on *oughts* they perceive—are they usually or always doing so in a way that's totally *without* merit in reason, or, at least, without a defensible basis in reason (even applied after-the-fact) or, perhaps, in a way that is purely devoid of "sense"?

From my perspective, here's a good way to understand the answer, roughly speaking of course: Consider the first part of the enterprise as outlined in the final paragraph of Point 14—that is, the string of cause-and-effect relationships that relate, from a scientific standpoint, what *is* with what we mean by *ought*. How do these relationships get reflected, and play themselves out, in the real world of life itself? Well, of course, that's *just* what the science *explains*, albeit imprecisely. In other words, when a regular person intuits or concludes an *ought*, an "I should", a "he should", or etc., he or she is exercising and applying his or her human-ness, a product of our evolutionary history. The science *explains why* we have *oughts* and how we *came* to have them. Regular people are just being regular humans.

So then, what about the *second* part of the enterprise as outlined in Point 14—i.e., the part involving our choice of the affirmative response to the life-question and related considerations? This is the part of the enterprise that establishes the justificatory dimension of the "bridge". Well, of course, it is our evolved *nature* to *want* to live, usually and on average. Indeed, lacking any supernatural authority that tells us *not* to live, people normally choose to keep living. And again, science *explains why*.

So, in some senses, we arrive at an interesting realization: In observing and formalizing the fact that the gap between "is" and "ought" can be "bridged" with respect to the present matter, I'm really making explicit, explaining, formalizing, and defending a dynamic that's already naturally reflected in everyday life. And this, I think, shouldn't really surprise.

But then, one might ask, what *benefit* is there in making the matter explicit, supporting it formally, and defending it with reason? The answer to this question, of course, is (I hope) obvious.

Note 18 — For present purposes, in the interest of brevity, I haven't listed herein the premises that link our affirmative response to the life-question to some of the particulars in the summary statement. That said, even without the premises listed, that link should be clear to many readers. In any case, a more complete list of the premises involved—along with explanation—is included in my paper "On Morality", which can be found on my website. For the best understanding, audiences should read (in addition to the present paper) the several items identified on page 1. (Taken together, the number of pages involved is less than in many, if not most, standard books of philosophy and science.)

Note 19 — Many readers may also benefit from reading my paper, "Regarding 'Directional Dynamics' and 'Normative Facts'", which can be found on my website. The paper sheds light on the nature of some of the underlying dynamics related to the is-ought matter. And, it's relatively short!

Note 20 — It's interesting, I think, to consider the parallel between Heraclitus' oft-repeated point that "character is destiny" and the core theme of the statement of what morality is most foundationally "about". In exploring the comparison, consider the central theme of the summary statement in abbreviated form: Morality is most foundationally "about" the sustainable survival of the human species (accomplished in a way that also satisfies the other important considerations).

Note 21 — Although I haven't focused on understanding all of the implications of the "bridge" between *is* and *ought* described herein, I'd like to offer an hypothesis that's very worth exploring, in my view: Consider the enterprise that the bridge involves—that is, the continuation of life from one generation to the next. (For present purposes, I'm stating the matter as it would exist before we consider our human awareness of time, and related reasoning, to establish the aim of *sustainability*.) Then ask, What's the relevance of this bridge, if any, to the relationships, if any, between particular *is's* and possible particular *oughts*? In other words, can the bridge—or does the bridge—have any relevance to the question of whether some particular *oughts* might be supported by, or derivable from, what "is", in part at least?

Here's my thought, although it's just an hypothesis, and awkwardly stated at that: To the degree that a proposal or collection of proposals from "the land of what *is*" will genuinely and effectively serve the *ought* or "aim" represented by the bridge, and to the degree that it respects the full slate of considerations in the summary statement of the view (understood in context), such proposal(s) can derive *ought*-strength from the bridge.

Of course, in some senses, I think, this is merely saying that something (some action) that serves, contributes to, and respects the whole aim inherent in the summary statement of what morality is most foundationally "about", is a moral (rather than immoral) thing. And this shouldn't surprise us. After all, the way we understand, treat, and apply the "bridge" must be consistent with the way we understand, treat, and apply the overall view, understood in context.

That said, my "gut" suggests to me that there might be some benefit, sometimes, analytically anyhow, in being able to see and understand some particular matters

in terms of the bridge. Or, perhaps, with some matters, it might help to consider them in light of the overall summary statement (understood in context) and, *in addition*, in terms of how the contours and particulars of the particular problem relate to the bridge itself.

In this context, one might view the matter this way: If a proposal from "the land of what *is*" arrives at the entrance to the bridge with all of its papers in order, showing that it will genuinely serve the enterprise of the bridge and satisfy all considerations in the summary statement, then it may be given permission to cross the bridge and enter "the land of *ought*". Of course, the matter is a bit more complex than this, as one must consider (other foundational things equal) the impact of the proposal on degrees of happiness that serve as "icing on the cake".

(I warned you that this hypothesis would be awkwardly stated! Sorry!)

Note 22 — Of course, one could argue for a different use of the term 'morality' itself. And, one could argue for a different use of the term 'ought'. For example, one could argue that 'morality' refers solely to, or should refer solely to, specific sets of written moral rules and traditional norms held by specific cultures or other human groupings; and that the corresponding 'ought' refers solely to the idea that people in those cultures and groupings "ought" to adhere to those written rules and traditional norms.

My main interest, of course, is *not* in the terminologies themselves. Instead, it's in "how the world works", "what's real", and in the whole question of "what is good and what is right?".

As Shakespeare wrote in *Romeo and Juliet*:

What's in a name? that which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet

So, if one would choose to define the terms 'morality' and 'ought' in more narrow or traditional senses, and to not use them in the more general senses, then we could simply devise a *new* set of terms to refer to the matters that name, reflect, and govern the appropriate and important quest to achieve human sustainability in keeping with the considerations discussed herein.

Quotes Mentioned Above

Impersonal, blind to the future, it [natural selection] has no goals, only results. Its sole standards of valuation are survival and reproductive success. From scattershot variations, culled and accreted, it produces pragmatic forms of order. . . . its products and byproducts are adaptation, complexity, and diversity.

-   **David Quammen**, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution*

Current mechanisms of mind are the end products of a selective process, a sieve through which features passed because they contributed, either directly or indirectly, to reproductive success. All living humans are evolutionary success stories. They each have inherited the mechanisms of mind and body that led to their ancestors' achievements in producing descendants. If any one of their ancestors had failed along the way to survive, mate, reproduce, and solve a host of tributary adaptive problems, they would not have become ancestors. As their descendants, people hold in their possession magical keys—the adaptive mechanisms that led to their ancestors' success.

-   **David M. Buss**, *The Evolution of Happiness* (*American Psychologist*, January 2000)

Men at some time are masters of their fates.
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

-   **William Shakespeare**, *Julius Caesar* (Cassius speaking to Brutus). This idea is often paraphrased as, "It is not in the stars to hold our destiny, but in ourselves".

Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count on no one but himself; that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this earth.

-   **Jean-Paul Sartre**

To be, or not to be, that is the question –

-   **William Shakespeare**, *Hamlet*

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.

-   **Albert Camus**, from the opening paragraph of the first essay of his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*

… for it is a mark of the trained mind never to expect more precision in the treatment of any subject than the nature of that subject permits …

-   **Aristotle**, *Nicomachean Ethics*

Other schools of philosophy maintain that some things are certain, and others uncertain. We adopt a special view of our own. What we say is that some things are probable, and others improbable. I cannot see what there is to prevent me from accepting what seems to be probable, and rejecting what does not. Such an approach avoids the presumption of dogmatism, and keeps clear of irrationality, which is the negation of all accurate thinking. …

For in spite of our negative attitude towards the certainty of knowledge we are very far from being just intellectual drifters who flounder about without any idea what we are looking for. To be quite without any sort of principles to base our discussions and our lives upon would totally rule out any intellectual life, or indeed any life at all.

-   **Cicero**, *On Duties II*, as contained in *On The Good Life*, translated by Michael Grant

Perfection of means and confusion of goals seem, in my opinion, to characterize our age.

- **Albert Einstein**

We have guided missiles and misguided men.

- **Martin Luther King Jr.**

It is all too evident that our moral thinking simply has not been able to keep pace with the speed of scientific advancement.

- **Tenzin Gyatso**, **The Dalai Lama**

That would be a good idea.

- **Mahatma Gandhi**, in response to being asked what he thought of modern civilization

If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.

- **Thomas Jefferson**

We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

- **John F. Kennedy**

In ethics as in optics, we need stereoscopy to see the world in all its dimensions.

- **Kwame Anthony Appiah**, *Experiments in Ethics*

I am convinced that we must commit ourselves to the view that a universal ethics is possible, and that we ought to seek to understand it and define it. It is a staggering idea, and one that on casual thought seems preposterous. Yet there is no way out.

- **Michael S. Gazzaniga**, Director for the SAGE Center for the Study of Mind at the University of California, Santa Barbara; President of the Cognitive Neuroscience Institute; Member of the President's Council on Bioethics; Former President of the American Psychological Society; and former Director of the Center for Cognitive Neuroscience at Dartmouth College. Quoted from his book, *The Ethical Brain*

The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable—namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, or nearly as well developed, as in man.

- **Charles Darwin**, *The Descent of Man*

To understand the physical basis of human nature, down to its evolutionary roots and genetic biases, is to provide needed tools for the diagnosis and management of some of the worst crises afflicting humanity.

- **E. O. Wilson**, from his article "Integrated Science and the Coming Century of the Environment"

Some people would rather die than think; and many do.

- **Bertrand Russell**

The significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.

- **Albert Einstein**

What good am I if I know and don't do,
If I see and don't say, if I look right through you,
If I turn a deaf ear to the thunderin' sky,
What good am I?

- **Bob Dylan**, *What Good Am I?*

Character is destiny.

- **Heraclitus**