

Life, The Bridge, and Coming Together

By Jeff Huggins

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The Great Divide

I've read quite a few things recently that suggest to me that the philosophical and scientific quests to understand morality are still much more separate and *un-*integrated than they should be and need to be. Of course, there *is* progress, but it often seems to be fairly slow and spotty. Meanwhile, the world is not in great shape, and the clock keeps ticking.

Although there are many exceptions—probably an increasing number—it's not uncommon for many scientists to pay *so* much attention to one narrow dynamic of a matter that they lose sight of the big picture of that matter (e.g., of the matter of human morality), fall into fallacies, or accept unexamined assumptions. In many ways, the various sciences involved in understanding human morality are making great progress, but, in some important ways, the learning does not seem to get well integrated into the larger picture, nor does it make its way accurately into public understanding.

And, although there are many exceptions—probably an increasing number—much of philosophy still ignores, sets aside, or “gets wrong” central aspects of scientific understanding, and very relevant ones at that.

Rather than discussing examples—and in any case, the history and present status of the situation *aren't* really my focus—in this quick paper, my present aim is just to mention the “bridge” and connective matter that provide the foundation for an integrated and coherent understanding of morality and connect, and relate, the “science” of the matter with the “philosophy” of the matter.

I refer readers to my other materials for additional context, explanation, and detail, after reading the present paper of course.

Life

Let's begin by stating or suggesting this: *Life* is the "stuff", essence, foundation, and enabler of "worth".

(That much will *not* come as any news or surprise to most philosophers, of course, nor to many other people. More on that below.)

The existence and continuance of life from generation to generation is a—I would say *the*—central matter in life's dynamics *and* to the scientific understanding of those dynamics. Put another way, things such as evolution, "adaptations", and "fitness" (in the biological sense of the term) all have a *very great deal* to tell us about life and, among other things, about morality itself.

Of course, this point—or at least *some* aspects of it—won't strike a growing number of philosophers as surprising. But, a few things are very worth mentioning: First, many scientists and philosophers understand this point but, nevertheless, seem to overlook some of its most important implications or take them as "givens", and don't explicitly and concretely consider them in their views.

Second, regarding the human dynamics that frequently play out between professions, members of each profession often confuse "the baby with the bathwater" when it comes to the aims or methods of the *other* profession. For example, I've recently seen a number of critiques (made by philosophers) of evolutionary psychology that, in critiquing particular assumptions or theories of specific evolutionary psychologists, or in critiquing old views expressed by some evolutionary psychologists, *also* lump together "baby and bathwater" and, in effect, seem to critique the very "idea" and "aim" of evolutionary psychology itself. Going that far is problematic, of course, because the foundational notion of evolutionary psychology is simply that we can better understand certain deep aspects of human psychology by understanding that we humans are outcomes of evolutionary processes. (Most evolutionary psychologists don't ignore the interactions among genetic factors, environmental factors, and cultural factors, as science itself tries to understand these things.) So, throwing out the *baby*—i.e., the notion that we humans are outcomes of evolution, and that such knowledge can help us understand ourselves—*along with* the *bathwater*—e.g., some particular poor assumptions or weak reasoning in particular cases—leads one to disregard or greatly diminish a *vital* notion and, ultimately, leads into a dead end or black hole. In other words, any moral philosopher who tosses out the central "baby" of evolutionary psychology itself with some of the "bathwater" of some of the

particular executions of evolutionary psychology robs himself (or herself) of a central part of the puzzle.

Third—and related to my first point—efforts that sometimes look *so* closely at individual trees that they *overlook* key patterns of the forest, *and* work that disregards the science (and *baby*) entirely, both *miss* what the foundational understanding can tell us at the *meta* level about life and about the *what, how, and why* of morality.

Some of my other materials discuss, in much more detail, the “bridge” that exists between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ (and between ‘fact’ and ‘value’) having to do with the matter of the existence and continuance of life from generation to generation. The deep foundations of the scientific component of the bridge are found in an understanding of life itself, evolution, “adaptations”, and “fitness”. In other words, they are to be found in the *baby* that is, it seems, often thrown out with the bathwater when some philosophers lump the two together.

Alas, the bridge between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ is hard to see in the fog of battle.

Examination and Affirmation

The “worth” that life naturally (i.e., of its nature) places on itself—on average, directionally speaking, and often imperfectly—can be *consciously affirmed* by *excellent human reasoning acting upon the best combination of empirical evidence we humans can muster*. Or, put more accurately: Excellent human reasoning, acting in conjunction with the best combination of empirical evidence available to us humans, robustly supports an *affirmative* response to the question of life—that is, to the “to be, or not to be” question. One way of putting the matter is as follows:

- As part of the bargain of life, we each face the “to be, or not to be” question that Hamlet stated so well. We each *inherit* the question as *part of life*. (Camus called this the “question of suicide” and pointed out its *central* role in philosophy.) For present purposes, I’ll call this question the “self question”.
- A vital question that’s *analogous to*—and intimately interrelated with—the “self question” faces, in effect, members of an interdependent social group. This vital question is the “to be, or not to be” question posed with respect to the existence and continuing survival of an interdependent

social group by the group itself—or more accurately, by *interdependent members* of the group, given that groups consist of members. For present purposes, call this question the “life question”. (For example, imagine a group of ten people on a lifeboat in the ocean; or a group of isolated castaways on a small island; or three astronauts sharing a spaceship; or 6.8 billion humans on Spaceship Earth.) We humans inherit the *life question* just as we inherit the *self question*. These are questions we can ignore (perhaps at our peril) but can’t get rid of or erase. Although the *self question* is obviously vital and relevant to each of us as *individuals*, what I’ve called the *life question* is *also* vital and relevant to us *as members of an interdependent social species*. Indeed, when it comes to considerations of *morality*—which, by its essence, has to do with *interactions among individuals* that have important consequences *beyond* individuals—the *life question* is even more relevant (in some important senses) than the *self question*. It’s also a very real and “sticky” question.

- In essence, at the *meta* level, there are three possible responses to the *life question*: An *affirmative* response; a *negative* response (essentially a self-defeating response); and an *ignore-ant* or *avoidant* response.
- In light of the *life question* and all considerations, the situation and the three available responses can be carefully examined, as Socrates might well have suggested. Such examination, of course, should likely admit that we (humans) should not assume or expect that an authority independent of ourselves—for example, a supernatural authority—will answer the question for us, “justify” our human existence *to us and for us*, convince us that we should *not* exist, or tuck us into our beds at night. Thus, in order to consider and compare the three possible responses, we humans are left to make use of *the best combination of human thinking and human-discovered evidence we can muster*.
- Of the three possible responses to the *life question*, one of them can be supported as the most excellently reasoned, most coherent, most reasonable, and best (in these senses) response: that is, the *affirmative* response. Put another way, the best combination of human thinking and human-discovered evidence we can muster can—and does—support a *choice of the affirmative response as being the most excellently reasoned, most coherent, most reasonable, and best (in these senses) response*.

(Several of my other materials explain this in a number of ways and in more detail.)

The Bridge

Note, then, what ground we've covered so far:

We've gleaned the identity of the "stuff", essence, foundation, and enabler of "worth". And we can see what life itself effectively values at a foundational level. (Of course, this is all discussed in more detail in my other materials.)

Yes, in many cases and senses, and to some degree anyhow, we can do this based on our own "common sense" and "intuition". But—and *very importantly*—we can also glean this from a grounded scientific understanding of life itself.

We've examined the essence of what we've found, and we can examine it in much greater degrees of detail and from many standpoints. The stream of life values a continuance of itself from generation to generation—on average, directionally, and often roughly, of course. (Note 1)

If you like, this can be seen as a "fact of the forest" and a vital aspect of "what *is*" and of "the way things *are*".

And, we've seen that this "fact of the forest", this vital aspect of "what *is*", this key element of "the way things *are*", can be examined and *affirmed* via a combination of excellent thinking (reasoning) and the best empirical evidence we humans can muster.

(Not only that, but our human ability to "think" itself is an outcome of evolution: Thinking itself is enabled by our brains and related systems, which are adaptations or combinations of adaptations. Thus, it would be very interesting to hear a definition of any brand of "thinking" —or of "reason"—that would have us humans believe that the most well-reasoned response to the *life question* is any response *other than* the affirmative one.)

And, as should be apparent by now, when I say that a combination of excellent thinking and empirical evidence supports an affirmative response to the *life question* and can affirm the essential "fact of the forest" mentioned above, I don't merely mean that the net result of the enterprise addresses the matter of morality in the descriptive and explanatory senses: In *addition* to addressing those dimensions of the matter, the enterprise *also* supports the *normative ought*.

Too, along the way, we've maintained the assumption and expectation that we humans can't expect an authority independent from ourselves—i.e., a supernatural authority—to tell us “yea” or “nay”, to point out North from South, or to “justify” our own human existence *to us and for us*. Indeed, it is—in part anyhow—*because* of this that we have to figure these things out for ourselves.

Thus, regarding the central matter of the continuance of life itself from generation to generation, there is a vital “bridge” in this sense between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. The bridge has to do with, identifies, and reflects the central connective matter, the area of overlap, the common thread, the path, and the intersection between the “science” and the “philosophy” of human morality.

(In identifying and explaining this bridge, I'm *not* saying, of course, that any-old ‘ought’ can be derived from any-old ‘is’, or that the two are somehow identical. Instead, the bridge has to do with a particular central, and vital, matter to human morality. Yet, it is a *very* consequential bridge, and a very important one to understand.)

Of course—and in the interest of clarity—there are several important and helpful contextual points that also play roles in the matter, which are these (briefly stated):

- Our human understanding of the universe is probabilistic in nature. In other words, it's likely that we humans won't be able to know anything about the universe itself with absolute “100% certainty”. Instead, our evolving understanding will give us higher confidence in some things than in others.
- For scientific and (secular) philosophical purposes, as mentioned above, we don't assume or expect that a supernatural authority exists or that such an authority will give us “the answers”.
- Humans are part of the universe itself, not separate from it or immune to its fundamental dynamics.

(My other materials—many of which are listed below—provide much more detail, context, explanation, argument, and science on these and related matters.)

Coming Together

All in all, my hope and “plea” are that the philosophical and scientific quests to understand human morality can work *much more closely together* in order to further a view that is integrated, coherent, grounded in science, excellently reasoned, and etc., and that (at the same time) reflects the science *and* addresses the relevant and valid aspects of key philosophical questions.

Such a view is possible, and (I claim) I’ve developed its *meta* essence and *meta* structure as well as identified the foundational “bridge” that reflects the common theme and connection between the science of the matter and the philosophy of the matter.

With that said, for present purposes, I refer readers to my other materials.

(But, please don’t miss the illustrative quotes, the suggested movies, the lyrics, the “thank you”, and the note at the end.)

Materials

For additional context and explanation, please see the following items—most of them short—that were originally posted on PHILOS-L or CHORA and that I’ve also included on my website, www.ObliterationsOfReason.com . They’re all included on the “Additional Material From The Author” page of the site:

- “The Bridge: A-QED” (CHORA, June 27)
- WHY and WHY and WHY (CHORA, July 1)
- Darwin, Camus, and Hamlet went into a bar, AND . . . (CHORA, June 13)
- Science and Philosophy (Regarding Morality), Context, The Bridge, and etc. (CHORA, July 6)
- Moral Beings, Is-Ought, Fact-Value, and Other (Big) Stuff (CHORA, July 4)
- Speaking of Hands, and Adaptations, and . . . (CHORA, June 28)
- “Robot Revelations”: An Opportunity (PHILOS-L, June 22)
- To Scientifically Informed Philosophers and Philosophically Minded Scientists (PHILOS-L, June 9)

For additional detail and explanation, please refer to other materials on my website, www.ObligationsOfReason.com . I'd suggest the following materials, all also included on the "Additional Material From The Author" page of the site:

- On Morality: Key Considerations and a Bridge
- What good am I?
- On Morality
- Regarding 'Directional Dynamics' and 'Normative Facts'
- The Morality of Sustainability: *A DIY Exploration*
- A Framework and Paradigm Of Morality

Illustrative Quotes and Movies

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

Kwame Anthony Appiah, "Experiments in Ethics"

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"

A social instinct is implanted in all men by nature . . .

Aristotle, "Politics"

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

Albert Einstein

Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.

Albert Einstein

Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.

Francis Bacon

Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground – the unborn of the future Nation.

The Constitution of the Iroquois Nations

A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.

Aldo Leopold

You cannot be considered an ethical company if you do not follow sustainability principles. Nor can you apply sustainability concepts if you do not have a strong foundation of ethical principles. The two are intrinsically intertwined ...

Perry Minnis, Global Director, Ethics & Compliance, Alcoa

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

Bertrand Russell

Character is destiny.

Heraclitus

Suggested Movies

- Children of Men
- The Seventh Seal
- Stranger Than Fiction
- The Odyssey (Hallmark version)
- The Lion King
- Les Miserables (version with Liam Neeson)

Thank You

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Be Well,

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www.ObligationsOfReason.com

We Are the World

By Michael Jackson and Lionel Richie

(exerpts)

There comes a time when we heed a certain call,
when the world must come together as one.
There are people dying,
and it's time to lend a hand to life,
the greatest gift of all.

We can't go on pretending day by day
that someone, somewhere will soon make a change.
We are all a part of God's great big family
and the truth, you know, love is all we need.

We are the world, we are the children.
We are the ones who make a brighter day,
so let's start giving.

There's a choice we're making,
we're saving our own lives.
It's true we'll make a better day,
just you and me.

Note 1: I'm *not* suggesting, of course, that this effective directional "aim", and the corresponding evolved mechanisms and tendencies, are without blemish, work perfectly, or even near perfectly, are farsighted, are simple, are completely understood, or should not be subject to examination, reflection, improvement, and polishing. Nor am I suggesting anything inconsistent with the science of the matter. I cover this subject, of course, in much greater detail in my other materials.