

Some Roots and Relations, Noted

By Jeff Huggins March, 2009

Greetings, and thanks in advance for your consideration.

What becomes clear to one audience may not be so clear—at least initially—to another. The degrees to which some of my other materials make certain relationships accessible and clear may vary depending on an audience's background, familiarity with relevant subjects, and time spent considering the matter and reading the materials.

So, the purpose of this note is to point out—briefly, but in some senses more mechanistically than in some of the other materials—a few of the important relationships that are identified and discussed to different degrees in those materials.

This note focuses on several points—*not* the whole matter. And, it's helpful to realize that the ordering of the points below doesn't matter. I present them in the following order for our present purposes of communication.

Also and finally, with respect to *some* of these matters, it will help to read the more detailed discussions in my other materials (some of them following later in this packet) before and/or after reading the following. The material herein is meant to add some clarity regarding a few matters that may not “leap out” to some audiences as they read through the other materials—but it's not independent of, or in all cases understandable in the absence of, the other materials.

[Note: I considered whether to place this piece here, before *On Morality*, or later, after *On Morality*. There are pros and cons to both approaches. I apologize for awkward sequencing and for any initial inconvenience the present ordering may cause. **I suggest this: *If, after reading the materials earlier in the packet, you would like a much more explicit, and clearer, understanding of the main conclusions, premises, and argument in sequenced fashion, then you should read *On Morality* first (the next item in this packet) and then return to this paper for further clarification. On the other hand, if you feel that you already***

have a good sense of where things are headed, based on the Abstract, DIY Exploration, and illustrative quotes, then you might find it most efficient to read this first, and then read *On Morality*. The present paper, and *On Morality*, complement each other and, in the end, are most helpful to understand taken together. Again, sorry for the inconvenience.]

First, A Quick Glance at Some Premises

It seems appropriate to begin by briefly mentioning some of the premises that you'll see listed in my paper, *On Morality*. (See the discussion on pages 7 to 12 of *On Morality* and, in particular, the premises themselves on pages 9 to 12.)

Although, as will become evident, all of the premises play various and differing roles in the overall argument, some of the premises play important roles in the "justificatory dimension" of the argument. By that I mean, they add the normative weight or "force" to the "ought" aspect of the conclusions. (This will become clearer as you read the other materials.) Premises 6 through 13, and also 5 to a degree, contribute to the justificatory dimension—especially premises 6, 7, 8, and 11.

(You'll read those premises, and better understand the conclusions and argument themselves, as you read *On Morality*. At that point, you can refer back here if things aren't completely clear.)

As you consider the matter and read *On Morality*, it's also important to note that the "limits" to justification are discussed on pages 23-24, and the entire topic of justification is discussed on pages 25 to 30.

Referring back to the note earlier in this packet, *The Morality of Sustainability: A DIY Exploration*—which is also contained on pages 18-21 of *On Morality*—items 11 and 14 in the *DIY Exploration* are included to point to a central part of the role that the premises mentioned above play in the justificatory dimension of the matter.

(As a quick reminder, item 11 asks what people are getting at when they say that it doesn't make sense to "bite the hand that feeds you", and what they mean by saying "he pulled the rug out from under me". Item 14 asks the reader to consider Bertrand Russell's observation, "Some people would rather die than think; and many do.")

The roles of the premises mentioned above, and of the related parts of the *DIY Exploration*, in the overall argument, conclusions, and view, are intimately related to—and indeed energized by—the topics mentioned in the following section and discussed further in the two sections after that. That said, the whole matter should *not* be seen and understood as being dependent upon any particular ordering of points, wording of premises, or any such things. In the end, the substance of the matter is not dependent on how we humans choose to word premises or order arguments, of course.

Next, Two Key Considerations to Recognize and Understand

It is of course important to note the “life-question” and corresponding discussion on page 1 of *On Morality: A View and Argument (Abstract)*. Of course, items 5, 9, and 10 in the *DIY Exploration* also relate to the life-question and to our options for responding to it, with item 5 beginning by noting Hamlet’s question and by mentioning Camus’ passage.

Page 2 of *On Morality: A View and Argument (Abstract)*, points out a vital related matter: that we humans (or at least we philosophers) can’t assume or expect that an authority independent from—and outside of—humanity will “justify” our human existence *for* us and *to* us, or even give us any of the other answers we seek; and that thus, we humans must utilize a combination of our own human thinking and our own discovered empirical evidence to help us make choices that we see as most sensible, reasonable, and justifiable to ourselves (together).

Of course, items 8, 9, and 10 in the *DIY Exploration* involve this point.

And, both of these matters are discussed, to various degrees, in the following materials.

The Justificatory Dimension: Connecting Dots

A central energy and force of the “justificatory” (in the sense of normative) dimension of the argument and conclusions results from connecting the dots among the points mentioned so far. In other words, a combination of the existence of the life-question, an affirmative response to the life-question, and the basic points represented by the relevant premises provides normative weight to the “ought” dimension of the argument and conclusions.

(This will become clearer as you read *On Morality*, the next paper in this packet.)

Items 9, 10, and 7 (the latter being the illustrative movie, *Children of Men*) of the *DIY Exploration* highlight the same dynamic.

Of course, the central essence of the matter can be seen as follows: It is the *choice* to adopt an *affirmative response* to the life-question (i.e., to the self-question and to the life-question) that gives relevance and force to the wisdom of “don’t bite the hand that feeds you” and “don’t have the rug pulled out from underneath you”, and other related ideas.

At risk of redundancy or of stating the already-clear, I should make several observations:

- We humans don’t invent or create the self-question and life-question ourselves. Instead, we inherit them—and are effectively faced with them—as part of the bargains of being born and of existence.
- An affirmative response to the life-question is not merely a matter of haphazard whim. The affirmative response is considerably more sensible and well-reasoned than the negative response or the avoidant response. This point can be supported in several robust ways that should be obvious but that I won’t cover within the present scope of this note. That said, I’ll briefly mention two points: First, a negative response to the life-question would lead to all sorts of topsy-turvy conclusions that would be inconsistent with many (if not all) of the moral ideals and “principles” that we see universally, or with near universality, in major schools of philosophical thought. Put another way, adopting a negative response to the life-question makes it very difficult, and perhaps “impossible”, to arrive at a *coherent* theory of moral philosophy that’s also consistent with what most people understand as key moral ideals: An affirmative response to the life-question leads (when combined with other good reasoning) to coherence; while a negative response to the life-question leads to incoherence and internal contradiction, rationally speaking. And, second, an affirmative response to the life-question is consistent with what most of us actually *do* every day, which is to get up each morning and persevere in life, as hard as that sometimes is to do.
- Some audiences will probably feel that other factors in the big picture also contribute in one way or another to the justificatory strength of the matter. Many may simply acknowledge or assume that life is a desire, i.e., that people generally want life or want the things that lead to a propelling of

life from one generation to the next. Others may simply choose to acknowledge “life” as being the basis of “value”. Others may note the parallelism (to be discussed in following materials) between past, present, and future as related to the life-quest and will see this parallelism as providing some degree of confidence regarding justification. In any case, all of these factors, as well as others, are interrelated with each other in different ways and in varying degrees. So, the question isn’t so much what is—and what is not—related to the justificatory dimension of the matter. Instead, it’s a question of what factors are most *directly* related to the justificatory dimension and what is the best way to *state* those factors.

- Finally, it’s the substance of the *matter itself* that counts, not the words or the sequencing of human premises. It helps to keep this in mind as you form an overall view and understanding.

Without going further into the matter in this section, now, I’ll just offer a question that is helpful to consider at some point, which is this: Are we humans going to allow our well-reasoned affirmative response to the life-question to inform our aims and to give reasoned motivating energy and force to our judgments and actions? If *yes*, we should be able to explain—with reasoning—why. (This is, of course, some of my task in the present package and in other materials.) On the other hand, if *no*, we should *also* be able to explain—with reasoning—*why not*.

Is-Ought / Fact-Value

Of course, in considering these matters, one must face and address the considerations—some of them relevant and valid, and some not—regarding the differences and relationships between “is” and “ought”, between “fact” and “value”.

For the most part, I’ll leave this topic to my note *On Morality* and, especially, to pages 25-30 in *On Morality*, and in particular pages 28-29. Also, the material in my note *Regarding ‘Directional Dynamics’ and ‘Normative Facts’* is directly relevant as well as complementary to the discussion in *On Morality* but at a different level of consideration.

Suffice it here to say that, as part of all considerations in the full big-picture of the matter, two sets of facts and reasonings play important roles in addressing the

matter of “is”/“ought”, “fact”/“value”: One involves the justificatory considerations presented here and more fully elsewhere. The other involves our modern empirical understanding (ever improving) of the cause-and-effect chain of relationships linking what “is” to what we humans mean when we say ‘ought’. These matters are discussed elsewhere in the packet and, in much greater detail, in materials that aren’t presently in the packet.

That said, I’d like to take a moment here to mention a few considerations and to clarify:

The well-reasoned and sturdy bridge, or pathway, between “is” and “ought” has to do with the notion and aim of ongoing survival from generation to generation. That is, it has to do with the continuation of life itself.

I’m *not* arguing, of course, that any “is” can become an “ought” or a corresponding “ought”, nor that it can somehow, magically, transmorph into an “ought”.

The bridge has to do with the continuation of life itself. (This said, a recognition of this bridge is immensely important and has many implications.)

(As an aside, some ideals that we have, as humans, may, to some degree, be able to “piggyback” on their relationship with the aim of the continuation of life to, in effect, allow a derivation of corresponding oughts, at least to some degree. Although I haven’t focused on that question to any great degree, I think it’s probably correct to say that such relationships must utilize the foundational is-ought bridge related to life itself. As far as I can tell, there aren’t other, unique, independent, sturdy bridges between “is” and “ought”, at least in senses of those words relevant to the present discussion. To the degree that there is an ability to piggyback in this way, the degree of doing so robustly would be related to the degree to which an ideal supports the ongoing continuation of life and meets other essential, and closely related, dynamics of morality successfully.)

Of course, the notion that there is a relational bridge between “is” and “ought” having to do with the aim of the continuation of life itself, and having substantial normative weight, may seem obvious to some (e.g., those who naturally associate the very notion of “value” with life) but nevertheless strike others as “impossible” (e.g., those who believe that it is simply unthinkable that there could be any strong relationship between an “is” and a corresponding “ought” of any sort). That said, it’s helpful, and important, even for those who may see such a bridge as obvious, to understand the structure, foundations, and nature of the

bridge itself. Doing so helps us understand the whole contour, fabric, and dynamics of the big picture of morality.

Putting Other Things in Order

Some of the other premises (you'll see the list in *On Morality*) have mainly to do with the relative roles and interrelationships among other matters that play important moral roles, in whole or in part. I'll leave discussion of these to my other materials and to my book.

"Just words" – Semantic Sense

Sometimes we humans say, or we can get the feeling that, these are all "just words", in the sense of "merely words". In this semantic sense only, this observation is correct, applicable here, and has important implications, which I've tried to mention: In other words, the words in these materials, the number of premises, the wording of premises, the ordering of arguments, and so forth, are *not* what's important: The *substance* of the *matter itself* is what's important, of course. The essential dynamics that I'm trying to convey (that is, of my view) apply to healthy English-speaking individuals, to individuals who speak any other language, and to individuals who can't speak, read, or even hear words at all. Nor does this matter only apply to philosophers or scientists exploring human social-moral dynamics.

Indeed, after one understands the view of morality I'm presenting, the whole thing can be seen as a singular "big picture", and the need for premises, sequenced arguments, examples, and the like can be done away with, for purposes of internal understanding.

"Just words" – In the Sense of *Irrelevant*?

That said, if one uses the phrase "just words" in a sense of meaning "irrelevant", that would be an immensely inaccurate assessment of the matter being discussed here. The relevance of morality, of course, is immense. And, the relevance of the degree to which we have an accurate, robust, meaningful, etc. view of morality is

also immense. I discuss the topics of relevance and importance in some of the other materials, and especially in the book.

Circular?

Because of the nature of the matter and of the argument, some audiences might wonder at first whether the arguments are “circular”. That’s an understandable initial question, especially because of the way we use some phrases and the oft-hidden assumptions that some phrases and paradigms contain.

For present purposes, I’ll briefly address the question. My other materials should make the matter clearer, and I can also address the question in more detail, in the future, if helpful. (An entire essay could be written on the subject, of course.)

In short, the argument is not “circular” in any negative sense of such assessment, i.e., in any sense that would dissolve, or reveal a flaw in, the reasoning: Nothing is being *assumed* that is later claimed to be *proved*. The essential sequence of the argument is straightforward, and the argument is not based on mere assumption. The step in the argument that might cause some initial discomfort to some people is the one that acknowledges the self-question and life-question that life poses and that realizes that we humans can, and indeed must, address the question by making a *reasoned choice* or, at least, some choice. (If we try to avoid the matter or make a self-defeating choice, those would be not-well-reasoned choices.) But, there are no unfounded assumptions or assumptions that are later claimed as proven. Instead, there is a realization that we *do* face a question, and there is the reasoned argument in favor of a *reasoned choice*. (Refer to the other materials for more on that.)

The subconscious notion that might generate an initial feeling of circularity within some members of the audience probably has to do with one of two things, although these two things may in themselves be related: One may be a lingering ingredient in one’s notion of “justification” that can, ultimately, only be provided by an independent authority outside of, or beyond, humanity itself. The other may be a combination of an historical personal conviction that it’s “impossible” to bridge any “is” with any “ought”, combined with a sense that all arguments lead *equally* to an “infinite repetition” of good questions, meaning that one can never get to, or even near, the bottom of things to a degree that allows one to differentiate between arguments.

Of course, just as we assume, *if* a person is seeking, expecting, and requiring independent (of humanity) authoritative justification of the sort that could only come from some sort of independent supernatural authority — whether explicitly or as part of an unexamined assumption — such a quest will, we think, not find an answer. In other words, such a view puts *itself* into a circular, or at least unending, quest for “the answer”. That said, however, my sense is that some people with such assumptions or views might, at least at first, think that the present argument is the one that feels circular. (This is, of course, in some cases, a more natural initial response rather than acknowledging that the quest for any answer that would, in effect, require justification by an independent authority is likely to be an unending and inconclusive one.)

“Self Justification”?

In discussing the question of “self-justification”, it’s helpful to consider the following: Our initial negative reaction to the term ‘self-justification’, as well as the very real problematic implications often associated with “self-justification”, are for the most part related to the idea of *individual persons* doing *whatever they want* for *whatever reason they can justify to themselves*.

This, in other words, is a sort of individualistic, context-less, often unreasonable notion that sometimes results in immoral behaviors.

The present argument and view do *not* involve any of those negative aspects of individualistic “self-justification”. (By saying this, I don’t mean that individuals aren’t important, of course, or that they don’t have rights. Instead, I’m merely focusing on the term as it relates to the present matter.)

The sense of the phrase ‘self-justification’ that applies to the present argument is no more or less than that which directly follows from the notion that we humans (as a species) mustn’t assume or expect “justification” to come from an authority independent of, and beyond, humankind, our thinking, and the empirical evidence that we ourselves attend to. Because this sense of “self-justification” applies on a species level, and has to do with life’s continuation, it does *not*, and should not, disable morality. Instead, it should inform and enliven sensible morality. Put another way, very much unlike the problem that an individualistic and context-less “self-justification” can often ignore or diffuse social-moral considerations, the present “self-justification” on a species level carries the opposite, sensible, and positive implications.

Indeed, a sense that one must find an independent (beyond humanity) authority to justify our existence, and morality, *for* us and *to* us, in an ongoing never-ending quest, can in effect cause us to neglect, intellectually cloud, and emotionally neuter reasonable and informed understandings of morality that we have at our own fingertips—or that we *can* have at our own fingertips if we so choose.

By expecting and demanding some sort of absolute independent “justification” that we can’t assume exists, and that possibly doesn’t exist; and by enabling and allowing audiences to think that the failure to find such justification should cause one to conclude that any and all arguments are equally valid and equally “justified”; one would be creating an immensely harmful false impression. In fact, it could readily be argued that the resulting false impression is the most harmful impression that modern humankind has ever adopted to such an unexamined degree and in such large numbers.

Grounding and Traction

The present view has a substantial, and very high, degree of grounding and also has substantial real-life “traction”. Within the present scope, I won’t go into a detailed discussion of these matters. That said, the ultimate “traction” can be understood by realizing that the view is defined by (among a few other realizations) two key matters: The notion that ongoing life is the foundational aim (with other aims also important, of course, as means or as icing on the cake); and the grounding of the matter in, and recognition of, the most basic dynamics of “human nature” and matters of scientific understanding. Put another way, the “solution space” within which moral dilemmas face us in the real world, and within which we must find responses and solutions, is the same available solution space that is acknowledged by, and represented by, the present view.

Burden of “Proof”?

It’s important to note, I think, that this view suggests an interesting point, which is this:

Because morality itself involves (in many cases) responsibilities and action; and because the world is obviously in need of more moral informed-ness and effective solutions; and because of the nature of the argument and conclusions; we have the following: I think it’s reasonable (and perhaps even obligatory for

me) to argue that the “burden of proof” regarding the present conclusions and argument should fall on those who would argue *against* the argument and conclusions.

This suggestion seems very reasonable for at least three reasons, among others: First, the present view is a quintessentially life-affirming view, and usually life-affirmation is given the benefit of the doubt, if any, and the burden falls on others to assert less life-affirming arguments or, indeed, life-negating ones, if any. Second, the present view describes a robust relationship between morality and the aim of sustainability, which is a substantial and pressing issue we face in the world today. And third, the argument and view begin with some big-picture realizations and assertions and, thus, challenge in some senses some interpretations of some of our existing philosophical paradigms and tools that might, according to some interpretations, challenge the view. Thus, of course, it wouldn't be sufficient to use some interpretations of those very same tools or historic authorities to claim to disprove the view. A reasoned evaluation and discussion of the matter should start from a clean slate, historically speaking, and address my reasoning with reasoning.

The Real Choice

One additional point is perhaps the most important one: Because of the grounded nature of this view, and because of the “solution space” briefly mentioned above, and because of the view's focus on life itself, the present view is not merely “theoretical” in the sense that nothing much might happen, or nothing much might be lost, if it's not evaluated and ultimately recognized. Although it, of course, calls for evaluation, this view is not of things that can be ignored or dealt with more wisely without its help. Instead, the real questions are these: How smoothly and wisely do we humans want to respond to the pressing problems that face us, and how smoothly and wisely (as opposed to jerkily, unwisely, and with great pains) do we want to transition to a healthy, moral, and sustainable future, if we can do so?