

To Scientifically Informed Philosophers and Philosophically Minded Scientists

By Jeff Huggins

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Good morning.

As some of you know, I've been developing an understanding of morality that is, I believe, scientifically grounded and philosophically robust and that "bridges" the science and philosophy of the matter at a meta level. The view identifies, makes explicit, and explores the common theme that runs through the science and philosophy of the matter, forms their central intersection, and provides a solid relational bridge between "is" and "ought", between "fact" and "value". It considers and addresses the matter in descriptive, explanatory, and justificatory senses. It forms the basis for, and provides, "stereoscopy"—to use the word Kwame Anthony Appiah used in his wonderful "Experiments in Ethics".

In my view, the view—when understood—provides that feeling of "consilience" that E. O. Wilson identified and, to put it another way, that feeling one has when a crossword puzzle is solved, to use the analogy identified by Susan Haack.

Among other things, the view sheds a great deal of light on the morality of sustainability—a timely topic, of course. It also sheds light on "paradoxes". It informs, and addresses, the ongoing debate between consequentialism and non-consequentialism. It's highly relevant to all sorts of modern questions, such as whether it makes sense to use "real" discount rates, to discount the real needs of humans who will (most likely) be real humans in the future, as we present-day people evaluate big decisions in the present. And, it sheds light on, and helps address, trolley problems!

At this point, I'd like to INVITE moral philosophers—as well as scientists who have an evolution-based approach to understanding morality in descriptive and explanatory senses—to consider the view and supporting arguments. They can be found in a combination of the following materials on my website, www.ObligationsOfReason.com :

(In other words, the materials tie together. Although a couple of them present most of the matter, they refer to each other and are most effective taken together. That said, the page-count of the combined materials is still less than that of many, and perhaps most, books on the subject.)

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

These and older materials can be found on the “Additional Materials From The Author” page of the website. Of course, all of these materials are free, and I’m hopeful that interested parties in the field will consider them.

As we know, it would be hard to overstate the importance of the subject itself—i.e., of morality. That given, the importance of “bridging” the science and reasoned philosophy of the matter is high, to put it mildly. Moral understanding should, of course, play a key role in informing humankind as we all deal with the world’s real, immense, and growing problems. Yet, as we know, historic rifts between much of the philosophy of the matter and the science of the matter have hampered the development of coherent views that reflect both science and philosophy and that address “ought” in the descriptive, explanatory, AND justificatory dimensions.

The historic gap between the two fields has constrained both from contributing to informed and wise solutions to pressing moral dilemmas (and other problems involving substantial moral considerations) as much as would otherwise be possible.

For those interested in more context, I’ve included some additional items below my sign-off, including a few recent quotes regarding the is-ought matter and the gulf between philosophy and science (from the popular press, a scientific journal, and a well-respected philosopher), a small collection of quotes relevant to the bridging of science and philosophy, and a list of movies that illustrate, in different ways, central themes of my view.

Thanks in advance for your consideration. Please feel free to contact me, off-list of course, if you have any questions or would like more information. I've also produced an "informal" video to explain the matter, but at nearly four hours in length (on two DVDs), it's probably best used as a follow-up item for anyone who has read the written materials and would like "more".

Be Well,

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AS ADDITIONAL CONTEXT . . .

Consider this passage from a featured article in The New York Times regarding the work of primatologist Frans de Waal, titled "Scientist Finds the Beginnings of Morality in Primate Behavior", by science reporter Nicholas Wade (March 20, 2007):

Philosophers have another reason biologists cannot, in their view, reach to the heart of morality, and that is that biological analyses cannot cross the gap between "is" and "ought," between the description of some behavior and the issue of why it is right or wrong. "You can identify some value we hold, and tell an evolutionary story about why we hold it, but there is always that radically different question of whether we ought to hold it," said Sharon Street, a moral philosopher at New York University. "That's not to discount the importance of what biologists are doing, but it does show why centuries of moral philosophy are incredibly relevant, too."

As additional context, consider this passage from a summary by the highly-respected scientific journal Nature, titled "Evolution and the brain", which appeared in the 14 June 2007 issue:

Moral philosophers often put great store by their rejection of the 'naturalistic fallacy', the belief that because something is a particular way, it ought to be that way. Now we learn that untutored beliefs about 'what ought to be' do, in fact,

reflect an 'is': the state of the human mind as an evolved entity. Accepting this represents a challenge that few as yet have really grappled with.

Also, consider the following helpful comment from Peter Railton:

[The] 'is'/'ought' gap, and the naturalistic fallacy are perhaps better seen as warnings than as outright barriers, reminding us of ways in which the project can fail, and indeed often has failed. But they should not warn us off the project altogether, since the need to ask how morality fits with our best empirical understanding of ourselves and our place in nature and history arises from within normative moral thought itself.

Here are some additional quotes that shed light on the enterprise, of course:

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*

[E]thical philosophers intuit the deontological canons of morality by consulting the emotive centers of their own hypothalamic-limbic systems.

E. O. Wilson

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, and Former President of the American Psychological Society. Quoted from his book, *The Ethical Brain*

And finally, here's a list of engaging movies that illustrate important aspects of my view, in their own dramatic ways:

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

Thanks again for your consideration!