

A Framework and Paradigm Of Morality

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Empty is the argument of the philosopher which does not relieve any human suffering.

– Epicurus

Introduction

It is often helpful to present ideas and considerations in different forms for different audiences. It's also helpful to *crystallize*—i.e., the communication of ideas and considerations, that is. To these ends, this paper can be thought of as a repackaging of some of the central points—albeit in skeletal form—in the two previous papers and in my book, *The Obligations Of Reason*.

That said, this paper doesn't include the context, details, examples, and descriptive scientific and philosophical discussions contained in the book itself, nor does it cover other themes covered by the book. It (this paper) mainly includes the skeletal, step-by-step, abbreviated reasoning—in stripped-down form—associated with one key theme of the book. The essence of the framework and “argument.” Nevertheless, it should be very helpful, I hope, for some audiences.

Our topic, as you probably know already if you are reading this, is the nature of morality.

Of course, many scientists, philosophers, theologians, and others have been studying human behavior, including human social-moral behavior, for quite some time. Most of the individual points and ideas in this paper are not new. That said, my goal has been to pull together a more full picture—to *help fit pieces of the puzzle together*—and to add ideas and (hopefully) advancements where I can. In this paper, although I will mention many of the original sources of earlier ideas as I go—and many are clear or obvious anyhow—more complete references are contained in my book.

After a quick discussion of the relevant “scope of applicability” of the material herein, the paper is structured into the following brief sections:

1. Evolution, Survival, and Human Social-Moral Capacities and “Sentiments”
2. Existence and Survival
3. Additional Comments On “Survival”

4. One Family and Equality
5. Living the Sandwich, and the Nature of Morality
6. Universals and Variations
7. A Semantic Consideration
8. The Nature of the Relationship Between *Is* and *Ought*
9. “Morality”
10. The Natural Moral System
11. Happiness, Fairness, Justice, and Other Practical Things
12. Interdependence
13. Influence of Historic Conditions and Culture
14. A Simple Example and Some Great Movies
15. No Discussion of Morality Complete Without . . .
16. Concluding Thoughts and More Great Quotes

Given the paper’s purpose, I’ve structured and written it more like an *outline* than a narrative essay. The narrative passages are brief, and some points are simply asserted, without explanation herein and without much, if any, connective tissue. That said, I hope the paper serves a purpose and is understandable and helpful to relevant audiences.

Scope of Applicability

The “scope of applicability” of the following discussion is the natural universe as science currently understands it (albeit incompletely and in varying degrees of precision and confidence) *and* as science strives to understand it better as time progresses. Put another way, the scope is the same scope that brings us—for better and/or worse—iPods, cell phones, TVs, automobiles, pharmaceuticals, heart transplants, and on and on, as well as evolution, $e=mc^2$, the Apollo moon landings, air conditioning, *Starbucks*, the Beatles, and the NBA. Of course, the natural universe also includes *humans*. (For some helpful definitions, see pages 40-46 in *The Obligations Of Reason*.)

Also, the “way of thinking” and degree of precision intended in this paper are best represented by those expressed by Aristotle and Cicero long ago, as follows:

In his *Ethics*, Aristotle wrote: “. . . 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 . . .”.

And in his *On Duties II*, Cicero wrote: “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.”

To ensure that this philosophy was not misinterpreted (for example, as complete moral randomness or relativism), Cicero followed with: “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.” (These Cicero quotes are from *On Duties II*, in *On The Good Life*, translated by Michael Grant, Penguin Books, page 123.)

Given the form of communication I’m trying to achieve with this particular paper, each numbered section begins with a statement of the key point of the section (which may contain several sentences but is in any case brief) and continues with some brief explanatory comments; some informative, helpful, and often fun quotes; and (in some cases) some suggested books or other helpful materials. Apart from the quotes and suggested materials, when it comes to the text itself in each section, the most important elements are the section’s title and the beginning statement. As noted earlier, the point of this paper is not to be comprehensive or detailed, and it’s not to replace details or other helpful material in the book or other papers, and it’s not to repeat the references already contained in the book. I refer readers to the book and other papers for those.

Regarding quotes included herein, the sources/references for the quotes are included in my book, *The Obligations Of Reason*. In the future, I will amend this paper to include references for the quotes organized according to their presentation here.

One last introductory note: In a few sections late in the discussion, after the most foundational aspects of the framework and “argument” have been covered, some sections largely refer readers to the book or to one of the other papers for relevant discussion and descriptions. In those particular cases, it would be nearly “impossible”—or at least highly redundant and somewhat lengthy—to repeat discussions here, on those particular subjects, already contained in the book and other papers. Thanks in advance for your understanding.

1. Evolution, Survival, and Human Social-Moral Capacities and “Sentiments”

Humans as we currently exist are products of evolution. Correspondingly, “human nature” is a result of evolution. And, human social-moral faculties, capacities, “sentiments,” abilities, and deep predispositions are results of evolution. If not for evolution, we probably wouldn’t *be*, and *morality would not even exist*—at least not as science thinks of it—other than in the sense of the most basic natural principles of the universe.

Evolution has provided us with “what we have to work with”—i.e., the organs, faculties, capacities, senses, abilities, and even imaginations that have anything to do with our lives as social beings and our social-moral dynamics.

Of course, as Charles Darwin pointed out, evolution occurs through the process of natural selection acting upon variation. (Darwin didn't know about *genes* or of the processes of genetic variation at the time.) And natural selection is, in essence and roughly speaking, a name for the fact that some organic beings are better at surviving and producing "next generations" than others. In turn, those "next generations" (i.e., children) must also be good at surviving and (on average) reproducing if the "species" is to achieve some sort of growth or sustainable survival.

This understanding is definitely not new, of course, but it's a foundational starting point for the rest of the discussion. Thanks to scientists and other thinkers during Darwin's time and since then—including Charles Darwin himself, Gregor Mendel, August Weismann, James Watson and Francis Crick, W. D. Hamilton, Robert Trivers, E. O. Wilson, Richard Dawkins, Robert Axelrod, Frans de Waal, and others—we have a much better understanding today about how all of "this" most probably works, and why.

Thus, the most foundational and basic "effective" function and role of our social-moral capacities, and related capacities, is no different from that of our hands, our hearts, and our heads—that is, to help us survive and succeed in giving rise to our "next generations." Doing so is the basic "reason for being" of morality itself from a natural-scientific standpoint.

By means of beauty all beautiful things become beautiful.

— Socrates (as quoted by Plato)

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

— Aristotle, *Politics*

Necessity is the mother and teacher of Nature. Necessity is Nature's theme and its inventor, and it is the eternal restraint and rule.

— Leonardo da Vinci

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*

The moral sense perhaps affords the best and highest distinction between man and the lower animals; but I need not say anything on this head, as I have so lately endeavoured to shew that the social instincts,—the prime principle of man’s moral constitution—with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the Golden Rule, ‘As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise;’ and this lies at the foundation of morality.

— 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 Books (others listed in *The Obligations Of Reason*):

On The Origin of Species, Charles Darwin

The Descent of Man, Charles Darwin

The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals, Charles Darwin

The Selfish Gene, Richard Dawkins

Nature Revealed, Selected Writings 1949-2006, Edward O. Wilson

Note 1: The emotions involved in the social-moral dynamics, predispositions and tendencies of human nature are sometimes referred to as our *moral emotions* or *moral sentiments*. In Charles Darwin’s *The Descent Of Man* (1871), the following terms are used in reference to human nature approximately the number of times shown in parentheses: *moral sense* or *senses* (over 15), *moral faculty* or *faculties* (over 15), *moral quality* or *qualities* (10), *moral disposition* or *dispositions* (2), *moral emotions* or *sentiments* or *feelings* (2), *moral tendency* or *tendencies* (4), *moral intuition* (1), *moral constitution* (1), *social instinct* or *instincts* (over 50), *social faculty* or *faculties* (6), and *social virtues* (4). The word *moral* is used in its various forms well over a hundred times.

Note 2: This point doesn’t say anything about how the universe came into being in the first place, nor does it say anything about (or depend on) the mechanism by which the very first spark of what we call *life* arose.

2. Existence and Survival

The natural universe and its dynamics effectively “acknowledge” and “reward” existence. And for forms of life, existence translates to *survival*.

Existence is the basis of life and of science. Importantly, of course, it is the “stuff” of the universe as we understand it, scientifically speaking: Existence includes the substance

and ways of the universe from the scientific perspective—the universe’s matter and “warp and woof.”

You must *exist* before you can read these words. You must *exist* in order to have or enjoy any other quality such as happiness, sadness, inner peace, or exhilaration. You must *exist* in order to be fair and just—and in order to love. And very importantly, you must first *exist* in order to reproduce or to care for and help “next generations.”

These points, and others, are *not* dependent on the same set of observations that lead to a high degree of confidence in point 1 regarding our evolutionary development and the development of our social-moral capacities. The points here are based on an even broader and more readily apparent set of observations, many of which are accessible to people every day. Existence is a—correction, *the*—foundation and precondition for other qualities and potentials.

For forms of life, existence translates to *survival*.

To be or not to be ...

— Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

We are firmly convinced, and we act on that conviction, that with nations, as with individuals, our interests soundly calculated will ever be found inseparable from our moral duties.

— Thomas Jefferson

The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life.

— Albert Einstein

It is important for the human race to spread out into space for the survival of the species. ... Life on Earth is at the ever-increasing risk of being wiped out by a disaster, such as sudden global warming, nuclear war, a genetically engineered virus or other dangers we have not yet thought of.

— Stephen Hawking, quoted in an API article by Sylvia Hui

3. Additional Comments On “Survival”

It is very helpful to realize that point 2 (above) is *not* identical to point 1 (earlier) and is, in many ways, broader and more “foundational”—as well as more obvious, of course. It’s also helpful to note that there is, nevertheless, a very important, vital, intimate, and *not* coincidental relationship between points 1 and 2. Darwin, Dawkins, and others have helped to point out and describe the mechanisms between the two.

When I use the term “survival” in most parts of the discussion—and especially in parts related to the mechanisms of evolution—I mean it in the context and sense of the survival and reproduction of generations into “next generations”, as described by Dawkins and others (and as also discussed in *The Obligations Of Reason*). Although individual lives are precious, important, and meaningful, when I speak of “survival” in this broad and ongoing sense, I’m not speaking, of course, of the ongoing survival of individual humans. Alas, sooner or later, each of us will die, at least as far as science can tell.

Two additional points are very much worth inserting here, although they could just as easily be put a number of other places in the discussion: Our evolved human brain-minds give us the abilities to consider “time”, to understand the idea of cause-and-effect, and to plan ahead (albeit imprecisely and often without much wisdom). Thus, we humans can now see that surviving and producing *one* “next generation” while undermining or risking following generations would be shortsighted, to say the least, and would not serve the “effective” function of morality in an ongoing sense. Survival for just *one more generation* is not a sufficient or moral goal. *Sustainable* survival is.

Similarly, our evolved human brain-minds have given us the ability to understand that we are all members of one big human family (see below), that we are interdependent (see below), that we are also interdependent with other living species and with healthy biodiversity, and that we are also dependent on the health of our only current home, planet Earth. Thus, we can see that the survival of the human species alone, by itself, in a vacuum, is *not* a practical, let alone ideal, goal. The “every-species-for-itself” approach is not wise or likely to succeed. Nor is the “abandon ship” approach, if the ship is planet Earth. Therefore, we should, of course, take care of each other, healthy biological diversity, and the planet. Anything less would be contrary to the “effective” function and role of morality itself. In the deepest sense, it would be immoral.

If the terms are understood in specific highly-relevant senses, the statement “morality is ultimately ‘about’ survival” can be seen as a modern-day species-wide parallel to Heraclitus’s wise observation, made over 2,400 years ago, that “character is destiny.”

Let us look at the world not as something we have inherited from our parents, but as something we have borrowed from our children.

— Kenyan saying (in wording similar to a Kashmiri proverb)

Some Books (others listed in *The Obligations Of Reason*):

The Selfish Gene, Richard Dawkins

4. One Family and Equality

All humans alive today are descendants of the same small group of early humans who lived in Africa long ago. We are all members of one big family.

For purposes of this paper, it isn't necessary to go into the details of our common human heritage from a scientific standpoint, other than to note that current scientific understanding is that all humans living today are descendants of a group of early humans who lived in Africa between 150,000 and 250,000 years ago (to state the range in relatively wide terms). And, of course, science and everyday observation tell us that we humans are a highly social species and live interdependent lives to one degree or another. (More on this later.)

That said, even in that context, what do we mean when we talk about human “equality”? People are not *identical* to each other, of course. However, we are all “equal” in a very important sense—that is, we are all *human*. My purpose in this paper isn't to explore and expound upon that topic, what it means, and what it suggests. Instead, I'll mention here that there are scientific, philosophical, religious, political, and pragmatic theories and arguments that support—and attempt to define—human equality. If diverse people cannot all agree on the *same* theory and argument in support of human equality, so be it. Each person or group can nevertheless pick a theory or argument that supports the idea of human equality to her/him/them. Our agreement-in-principle to view and treat fellow humans as equals in human-ness (and in other respects) can be based on different theories and arguments. Put another way, such an agreement can be an “incompletely theorized agreement”, meaning that people can agree to a certain principle or behavior even as they might have differing reasons or theories for doing so.

(That said, morality is a very practical subject, having to do with nearly every important aspect of human interaction, so the topic of “equality” can be approached and addressed from the standpoint of morality, of course. I won't take the time to approach the topic here, in order to focus on summarizing other aspects of the understanding of morality expressed herein. Instead, for present purposes, I will assume that the idea and ideal of human equality is reasonably understood and accepted by the current audience.)

In light of what we have very briefly discussed (in this and preceding sections) regarding sustainability, human equality, human social interdependence, human interdependence with other life and with biological diversity, and our human dependence on Earth's environment and overall health, let's quickly revisit the statement made earlier that “morality is ultimately ‘about’ survival.” Aside from the importance, as mentioned

earlier, of the definitions of the key terms themselves (i.e., “morality”, “ultimately”, and “survival”), what does this phrase mean and suggest in the new, more complete context?

Sacrificing brevity, and allowing for a reasonable amount of imprecision (remember Aristotle?), I suggest this: Morality is ultimately ‘about’ the healthy and sustainable survival of the human species along with healthy and plentiful biological diversity along with the sustainable health of our home planet Earth, all accomplished in a way that respects human equality and embraces a living, precious, and somewhat fragile planet. *Or something like that.*

Later in this paper, I’ll mention another very important concept, *happiness!* Happiness is discussed in some detail in *The Obligations Of Reason*, including its roles in life, its relationship to morality, and so forth.

When Socrates was asked which country he belonged to, he replied, ‘The world’; for he regarded himself as an inhabitant and citizen of every part of it.

— Cicero, *Discussions At Tusculum V*, from *On The Good Life*, translated by Michael Grant

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.

— Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*

It is in order that each of you may have through this free government which we have enjoyed, an open field and a fair chance for your industry, enterprise and intelligence; that you may all have equal privileges in the race of life, with all its desirable human aspirations. It is for this the struggle [the Civil War] should be maintained, that we may not lose our birthright—not only for one, but for two or three years. The nation is worth fighting for, to secure such an inestimable jewel.

— Abraham Lincoln, speaking to a group of Ohio soldiers returning from their Civil War duties

Some Books and Materials (others listed in *The Obligations Of Reason*):

Journey Of Man: The Story of the Human Species, Hosted by Dr. Spencer Wells (DVD),
PBS Home Video and Tigress Productions, 2003

Common Sense, and *Rights of Man*, Thomas Paine

The Declaration of Independence

The “*I have a dream*” speech, Martin Luther King Jr.

5. Living the Sandwich, and the Nature of Morality

Points 1 and 2 can be thought of as the bottom and top slices of bread of a big juicy sandwich, between which all social-moral dynamics take place, at least from a scientific standpoint. Point 1 represents the bottom slice—i.e., the bottom-up, evolutionary “half” of the equation. Point 2 represents the top slice—which can be thought of as the top-down, reality-based “half” of the equation. Or, to put it *loosely* and *illustratively* in mathematical terms, $SMD = K \times f(E, ES, a, b, c)$. In other words, Social-Moral Dynamic (SMD) is some function of E (our evolutionary equipment, capacities, and foundational tendencies), ES (our quest for existence-survival, in the sense discussed earlier), and other significant but lesser factors “a”, “b”, and “c”, all adjusted by some proportionality constant “K”. Of course, such an equation is only symbolic and illustrative. And a sandwich is . . . well . . . a *sandwich*. However, symbolism and sandwiches aside, points 1 and 2, listed earlier, play profound foundational and governing roles in understanding human social-moral dynamics.

As I wrote in an earlier paper, *The Nature of Morality*, on pages 7-8:

- The bottom-up, organic, “trial-and-error, what-works-survives” aspect of evolution (and life) in the natural world, *combined with* the top-down, reality-based, “existence-is-what-nature-acknowledges” argument, taken together, provide the superstructure for understanding morality. These bottom-up and top-down perspectives meet, complement, and complete each other. They are like two pieces of bread in a sandwich. They are both necessary to the overall understanding.

For example, an understanding of the bottom-up argument—i.e., the evolutionary process and its fruits—leading to an acknowledgment that human nature includes certain social-moral capacities, sentiments, predispositions, and tendencies, when taken by itself, can still leave several questions open: For what effective ultimate purpose did human social-moral nature develop? Is there a more fundamental, or “higher”, end or purpose (within the scope of science to discern)? Is there a valid and compelling argument that nature and evolution were “wrong” to evolve us in a way that acknowledges and rewards gene survival? Do our evolved social-moral capacities, sentiments, and tendencies—along with the dynamics they define—satisfy the key semantic and logical criteria we humans associate with morality and our traditional moral systems? All things considered, how should we value our next generation and long-term species survival relative to near-term happiness, relatively speaking?

On the other hand, an understanding of the top-down, “existence-is-what-nature-acknowledges” argument also leaves open questions when taken by itself (i.e., without the answers provided by an understanding of evolution): Even if existence *is* what nature acknowledges, has that fact been reflected in the evolutionary process, and how? Has it played a key role in shaping who we are, including our social-moral nature? Does it have anything to do with what we call *morality*? Has it given rise to *universal* moral capacities, sentiments, predispositions, and tendencies within the human species, or has the fact that nature rewards existence merely resulted in a completely random and unpredictable struggle for existence, devoid of universal patterns? Do the nature and shape of the human natural moral system (i.e., its characteristics, dynamics, and

principles) reasonably reflect and fit with the idea that nature acknowledges and rewards existence?

The bottom-up and top-down aspects of the picture complement and complete each other in a way that provides the basis for a whole and holistic understanding of morality from a natural and scientific standpoint.

One way to illustrate this point in a simplified manner is to imagine a swimmer and a swimming pool. The swimmer has the natural *equipment* (arms and hands, legs and feet, lungs, etc.) that is necessary for swimming as well as the associated swimming *skills*. The pool has the water and the boundaries/walls that define the swimming area and hold the water in—i.e., the elements that provide the possibility for swimming and whatever joys swimming might bring. Now consider: Without the natural equipment and skills, our swimmer can't swim. In fact, without his/her equipment and skills, our swimmer isn't really a swimmer—and he/she might not even be aware of the notion “swimming” or of that particular use for pools. On the other hand, without the pool, its walls, and the water it contains, even a well-equipped and capable swimmer will not have much use for his swimming equipment and skills—at least not in relation to swimming. In fact, without this pool (or any other pool or body of water), the potential swimming-related uses of his natural equipment (arms and hands, lungs, etc.) would not even be apparent to our would-be swimmer, and he would not have developed his swimming skills without pools and practice. Both swimmer and pool are needed for the swimmer to do his thing.

The internal dynamics of the sandwich shaped symbolically by these points (1 and 2) work a bit like an accordion or bungee chord or sponge. There is a little *give* here, and a little *take* there. Perhaps the person who most stretched and distorted these dynamics in recent history, on the largest scale, was Hitler—until of course the responses of others to his actions eventually caught up with him.

Various wise and observant people throughout history have described many aspects of the bungee chords, accordions, springs, tendons, sponges, rough edges, and slippery slopes of this sandwich. Many have thought of the bottom slice as if it (i.e., our human nature and social-moral capacities) arrived intact, fully formed, directly from God. Others have thought of the top slice as *happiness*. Some think this “sandwich” doesn't even exist or is nothing more than a product of human imagination. On the other hand, Aristotle attempted to define good stable balances associated with the human qualities we use as we try to navigate the sandwich's internal dynamics when he defined his Golden Mean concept.

Of course, it isn't within the scope of this paper to discuss the social-moral dynamics themselves. I refer readers to chapter 2 of *The Obligations Of Reason*, titled “Exploring and Understanding the Natural Moral System.” Aside from particular dynamics, a discussion of the *nature* of the natural moral system can be found on pages 135-139, continuing on pages 166-175. That said, it is perhaps hard to understand the *nature* of the system without understanding key dynamics, and *vice versa*. In any case, the most complete understanding (of what's in the book, that is) is best gained by reading the full

book, context and all. And, of course, there are a number of excellent books, some mentioned herein, that describe individual social-moral aspects of human nature, or several, and how they most likely came about.

Two additional points worth mentioning here: First, in exploring and understanding human social-moral dynamics and the natural moral system, it is helpful to keep in mind the relationship between “form” and function. The “form” of the natural moral system—i.e., its nature, characteristics, dynamics, and principles—corresponds to its “effective” function in nature—that is, to facilitate human survival into “next generations.” This correspondence, of course, is imprecise and sometimes rough. Nevertheless, the system as a whole, as well as individual dynamics, can best be understood in this context. (Imagine trying to understand an *airplane* while under the impression that it was built to pave roads or dig ditches. Imagine trying to understand a *cat* while under the impression that it was a deep-sea creature.)

Second, it could well be asked, How do the great observations and ideas of earlier philosophers, scientists, and artists regarding human social-moral dynamics (many of them quite accurate) relate to this understanding of morality? My response: The degrees to which the ideas and expressions of Aristotle, Cicero (see his *On Duties* essays, which he wrote to his son), Shakespeare, Emerson, and Bob Dylan—among others—are moving and helpful reflect the degrees to which those ideas “enlighten” and/or inform and/or inspire us toward productive behaviors, using our human capacities (i.e., point 1), within the context of the dynamics of our social species—and thus “bring out the best in us”—all toward the ends discussed herein (i.e., point 2).

Anyone who wants a certain result, but is quite happy with the absence of what would bring it about, has obviously no understanding of either causes or effects.

— Petrarch

Some Books (others listed in *The Obligations Of Reason*):

The Evolution Of Cooperation, Robert Axelrod

The Moral Animal: Why We Are The Way We Are: The New Science Of Evolutionary Psychology, Robert Wright

The Science Of Good & Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, And Follow The Golden Rule, Michael Shermer

The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation, Matt Ridley

The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature, Steven Pinker

6. Universals and Variations

Human morality involves both universals and variations. For the most part, the variations are much like “variations on a theme” built upon the underlying foundational universal dynamics (although variations are sometimes rough, and variations that are sometimes adopted by some cultures on some themes run counter to other foundational social-moral themes).

Before Charles Darwin, most people (including most scientists) thought that species were inherently distinct and immutable. The focus was more—*much more*—on differences between species (thought to be fundamental and timeless), and on essential defining commonalities *within* individual species (thought to represent the timeless *essence* of that species), rather than on relationships and commonalities among related species. The origin of species, the tree-and-branch model of understanding biological diversity, and the intimate interrelationships among species were not understood, of course, *and* the popular paradigms of the time didn’t lend themselves to “noticing” facts that pointed to what Darwin eventually saw.

These days, many people in the general public (though not as many scientists) think of morality in a very similar way. Too often, they see and *focus on* the *differences* between the apparent or claimed moral systems of different groups of people and, in so doing, often overlook the common origin, the foundational similarities, the human universals, and the underlying reasons that morality exists in the first place. To use two phrases that science writer David Quammen used in his great book *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin* to describe two very different models of *biological* relationship and diversity, and to apply those same phrases here to the subject of morality (i.e., to the relationships and differences among the observed moral systems of different cultures today), it can be said that many people today seem to embrace a “prairie-grass model” of moral differences rather than a more accurate and scientifically informed “branching-tree model” of moral relationship and variation. The huge paradigm shift that Darwin brought about with respect to biological relationship and variation has not yet resulted in a similar paradigm shift—that is, from “prairie grass” to “branching tree”—among the general public with respect to understanding the relationships and variations among human social-moral systems.

Recently, I went to see Princeton philosopher Dr. Kwame Anthony Appiah give a talk on “cosmopolitanism” not far from where I live in California. Although I’m sorry to say that I haven’t yet read his book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, his talk was great. My notes from that evening include the phrase (circled and underlined in the notes themselves), “cosmopolitanism = universality + difference”. So, it is most likely that Dr. Appiah pointed out this relationship in these words or, if not, at least said something very similar. If so, I agree with him and say “well put!” (My apologies to Dr. Appiah if my recollection is incorrect.)

In any case, human social-moral faculties, capacities, predispositions, tendencies, and dynamics include foundational universals as well as some “variations on the theme.”

And, this topic is discussed more fully in *The Obligations Of Reason*, though certainly not comprehensively.

Man 'possesses' many things which he has never acquired but has inherited from his ancestors. He is not born as a tabula rasa, he is merely born unconscious. But he brings with him systems that are organized and ready to function in a specifically human way, and these he owes to millions of years of human development. Just as the migratory and nest-building instincts of birds were never learnt or acquired individually, man brings with him at birth the ground-plan of his nature, and not only of his individual nature but of his collective nature. These inherited systems correspond to the human situations that have existed since primeval times: youth and old age, birth and death, sons and daughters, fathers and mothers, mating, and so on. Only the individual consciousness experiences these things for the first time, but not the bodily system and the unconscious. For them they are only the habitual functioning of instincts that were preformed long ago. 'You were in bygone times my wife or sister,' says Goethe, clothing in words the dim feelings of many.

— Carl Jung, from *Volume 4 of the Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, titled *Freud And Psychoanalysis*, para 728, page 315, Princeton University Press

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, former President of the American Psychological Society, from his book, *The Ethical Brain*

Some Books (others listed in *The Obligations Of Reason*):

Many of the previously listed books, plus . . .

The Reluctant Mr. Darwin, David Quammen

Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers, Kwame Anthony Appiah

Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong,

Marc Hauser

7. A Semantic Consideration

There is a semantic and logical linkage between a key criterion normally associated (either explicitly or implicitly) with our concepts of “morality” and “moral system” and the point expressed in point 2 (above) from a scientific perspective.

This linkage may be very important to some people and much less important to others. I refer readers to pages 48-62 in chapter 1, “Existence of the Natural Moral System”, in *The Obligations Of Reason*.

*For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
 Must give us pause. There's the respect
 That makes calamity of so long life;
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
 The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
 The pangs of dispriz'd love, the law's delay,
 The insolence of office, and the spurns
 That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
 When he himself might his quietus make
 With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
 But that the dread of something after death,
 The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
 No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have
 Than fly to others that we know not of?*

— Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

8. The Nature of the Relationship Between *Is* and *Ought*

Although there are, of course, very important differences between “is” and “ought”, there are also very important relationships between the two as well. They live in the same universe. There are bridges and paths between them. I believe that it is incorrect in some very important senses, within the scope of understanding considered herein (i.e., the same scope that brings us iPods, automobiles, evolution, and $e=mc^2$, among the things mentioned earlier and the *many* other things not mentioned), to say that it is impossible to derive any important “oughts” from our understanding of what “is.”

In a recent article in *The New York Times* titled “Scientist Finds the Beginnings of Morality in Primate Behavior” (March 20, 2007), *NYTimes* science reporter Nicholas Wade wrote:

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.”

A bit later in the article, referring to Dr. Frans de Waal, a leading primatologist, Mr. Wade wrote:

Dr. de Waal does not accept the philosophers' view that biologists cannot step from "is" to "ought." "I'm not sure how realistic the distinction is," he said. "Animals do have 'oughts.' If a juvenile is in a fight, the mother must get up and defend her. Or in food sharing, animals do put pressure on each other, which is the first kind of 'ought' situation."

Consider a statement, "you can't derive any important 'oughts' from 'is'." Aside from the degree or aspect of truth that has been built into this statement merely *by definition* (that is, by virtue of the way we may choose to define the words "is", "ought", "derive", and "important" such that the statement is true *by definition*); and acknowledging that the concepts "is" and "ought" are very different in many respects (and, for example, that it is very clear that just because President Kennedy was assassinated does *not* mean that he ought to have been assassinated); but assuming that we also want our general statements to accurately reflect *the real dynamics of the universe* (including our human social-moral dynamics as well as the dynamics of our human minds, which reside within the universe); how well then does this presumably general assertion correspond to these natural dynamics?

It seems to me that any statement that is meant to be general along the lines of "you can't derive 'ought' from 'is'" (or, "it is impossible to bridge 'is' and 'ought' because they are of two completely different types") sounds a lot like statements made by the many natural scientists (and others) in the early 19th century (and prior) who strongly believed in the "immutability of species" before Charles Darwin did his thing. Put another way, such statements sound very much like a form of "essentialism"—reflecting the underlying assumptions of the "prairie-grass model" as opposed to those of the "branching-tree model."

I refer readers to my earlier "paper"—titled *The Nature of the Relationship Between Is and Ought*—for more specifics on this subject.

And maddest of all, to see life as it is and not as it should be.

— The character of Miguel de Cervantes as depicted in the movie *Man of La Mancha*

Her greatness lay in doing what everybody could do but doesn't.

— Jennifer Granholm, first female governor of Michigan, speaking of Rosa Parks

Some Books and Materials (others listed in *The Obligations Of Reason*):

The Reluctant Mr. Darwin, David Quammen
Our Inner Ape, Frans de Waal
Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved,
 Frans de Waal, Stephen Macedo, and Josiah Ober
Unforgiven (movie), Clint Eastwood, David Peoples, Warner Bros.

9. “Morality”

There are, of course, many confusions as well as differences of view regarding the meaning of the word “morality”, but these confusions and differences need not prevent us from achieving a deeply-rooted, grounded, informed understanding of “morality” from a scientific-philosophical standpoint.

To many people, “morality” is related mainly to sexual matters. Many people think of “morality” (in a broader sense) as being largely random and “relativistic”—or even pointless. Some people feel that “morality” doesn’t exist in any real sense and is mainly a product of human imaginations and cultures. Many people associate “morality” mainly or only with religion. Others believe, often very strongly, that “morality” is a tool used by oppressors over the oppressed. In any case, the word “morality” often carries with it confusion, disagreement, and discomfort. That said, this confusion, this limited understanding, this *mis*understanding, of “morality” in a broader, deeper, informed sense, is partly responsible for many harmful behaviors as well as for our sometimes inability to see and address harmful behaviors.

Of course, the word “morality” does have its roots and relations: We sometimes speak of the “moral” of a story. Teams and other groups talk about their “morale.”

Many scientists, and others, use the word “morality” in its broad and deep sense. As already mentioned, Charles Darwin used the term “moral” and its variants over a hundred times in *The Descent of Man*. In his play *Troilus and Cressida*, William Shakespeare (who knew a bit about the English language!) has the Trojan character Hector say:

*Paris and Troilus, you have both said well;
 And on the cause and question now in hand
 Have glaz’d, but superficially; not much
 Unlike young men, whom Aristotle thought
 Unfit to hear moral philosophy.
 The reasons you allege do more conduce
 To the hot passion of distemp’red blood
 Than to make up a free determination
 ‘Twixt right and wrong; ...*

In the last 15 years, a number of excellent books have been written on the subject that use the word “moral” in its broad, deep, and scientific sense, including *The Moral Animal* (by Robert Wright) and the very recent *Moral Minds* (by Marc Hauser), to pick two books with the word in the title itself.

In any case, for our purposes here anyhow, an important point is that the word “moral” should not get in the way of understanding. We need not get distracted or fooled by words. The human capacities and dynamics that we want to understand and explain—and the discussion in this paper—exist and apply whether we use the word “morality” or another new word. In thinking about morality, we should keep our focus on “how things work” and the science of the matter. Although I think the word is fine and suitable if understood appropriately, if any members of the current audience, when considering the material herein, have concerns about the term “morality”, they should realize that we could easily invent a fresh and unencumbered word to represent the topic at hand.

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

— Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious ...

— The character Marry Poppins, from the movie of the same name

10. The Natural Moral System

As mentioned in the preceding section, it is not my intention that we get caught up with words or let the words get in the way of understanding. The phrase “natural moral system” is simply the phrase I’ve used to refer to and describe “the way it all works, including the interrelationships and dynamics, all within the context of where it came from and (importantly) what it’s for.”

The natural moral system is discussed, described (in part), and explained (in part) in *The Obligations Of Reason*. Reading the full book will provide the most complete understanding. Chapter 2 in particular, titled “Exploring and Understanding the Natural Moral System” (pages 83-216), focuses on describing important aspects of human social-moral dynamics. As mentioned earlier, aside from particular dynamics, a discussion of the *nature* of the natural moral system can be found on pages 135-139, continuing on pages 166-175.

The fact that nature has foundational characteristics and dynamics that allow it to give rise to morality is discussed in the book, and some of those characteristics are briefly identified on pages 6-7 in my earlier paper, *The Nature of Morality*.

The natural moral system (as well as an understanding of it) does *not* mean or suggest that humans should behave like our primate ancestors or like our modern-day primate relatives. It does *not* mean that we should move to the jungle, as the Kinks' song *Apeman* might suggest (great song though!). It does *not* mean that we should always—or even usually—be satisfied behaving like some humans behave, or like an “average” modern human might behave in certain instances, or even like we ourselves behaved last night or twenty years ago. (In fact, it often suggests quite the opposite.) Instead, an understanding of the natural moral system will help inform us and help us bring out the best in ourselves and, to a degree, in each other.

At the same time, this understanding does *not* mean that we must “deny” our human heritage, ignore who we are, and reject and “transcend” all aspects of human nature, all as prerequisites for doing better. Instead, it calls for us to understand ourselves, understand human social-moral nature, understand what it's for, understand our own human capacities and imperfections, *use our capacities more wisely, live together better, and help address some real problems.*

*Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie
Which we ascribe to heaven. The fated sky
Gives us free scope, only doth backward pull
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull.*

— Shakespeare, *All's Well that Ends Well*

A return to first principles in a republic is sometimes caused by the simple virtues of one man. His good example has such an influence that the good men strive to imitate him, and the wicked are ashamed to lead a life so contrary to his example.

— Machiavelli

In the present circumstances, no one can afford to assume that someone else will solve their problems. Every individual has a responsibility to help guide our global family in the right direction. Good wishes are not sufficient; we must become actively engaged.

— The Dalai Lama

Some Books (others listed in *The Obligations Of Reason*):

The Obligations Of Reason: Exploring the existence, nature, dynamics and implications of the Natural Moral System (2006), Jeff Huggins
The Evolution Of Cooperation (1984), Robert Axelrod
The Moral Animal: Why We Are The Way We Are: The New Science Of Evolutionary Psychology (1994), Robert Wright

The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation (1996),
 Matt Ridley
*The Science Of Good & Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, And Follow
 The Golden Rule* (2004), Michael Shermer
Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong (2006),
 Marc Hauser

11. Happiness, Fairness, Justice, and Other Practical Things

Happiness, fairness, justice, meaning, and so forth are very important aspects and/or dynamics and/or ideals of life, in different ways, and are all related to human social-moral dynamics—but they do not hold the same *foundational* role that existence/survival does.

Happiness is a big juicy carrot that we chase as well as a very attractive icing on the cake of existence. It plays an important role in our willingness, ability, and motivation to do things that, roughly speaking, help us survive and reproduce. Fairness and justice are important concepts, tools, and ideals, and they are also intimately related to (and reflective of) underlying evolved social-moral emotions. All are related (along with other things, such as meaning), and it's very helpful to understand the relationships among them. Of course, they deserve much more attention than space allows for here.

Many aspects of the relationships among our social nature, social-moral dynamics, survival, happiness, meaning, fairness, justice, and related matters are discussed in *The Obligations Of Reason*.

Some Books (others listed in *The Obligations Of Reason*):

Happiness: Lessons from a New Science, Richard Layard
Stumbling on Happiness, Daniel Gilbert
The Childhood Roots of Adult Happiness, Edward M. Hallowell
Emotional Intelligence, Daniel Goleman
The Evolution Of Cooperation, Robert Axelrod
*The Science Of Good & Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, And Follow
 The Golden Rule*, Michael Shermer

12. Interdependence

Morality involves relationships, interactions, and interdependence between and among individuals as well as the internal (i.e., *within* individuals) human capacities, faculties, emotions, thoughts, and tendencies relevant to social-moral dynamics. The study of

morality, of course, is a study of *interactions* and *interdependence*, not only a study of isolated beings or “identity.”

Morality is not a “just-how-*I*-want-to-imagine-it-to-be” phenomenon. Yes, an individual can imagine “morality” to be almost anything. He can even imagine it to be *nothing*. He can have his own personal moral system. He can try to convince others of his personal moral system—for example, “it’s really *OK* if I steal your money from the community bank, *trust me!*” And even if his own personal moral system contradicts the health, rights, and justified needs of others, he can still act according to it if he so chooses—at least to a degree, at least for *awhile*. But if he does so, what happens *next* will probably depend substantially on *other people*. Unless, of course, he lives on a deserted island.

In fact, if you bring two individuals together in some sort of living environment—including potential mates, not-unlimited resources, and other real-world characteristics—and even if both of those individuals believe that “morality” does not even exist, they will, nevertheless, most likely act roughly in accordance with the most foundational human social-moral dynamics or suffer each other’s responses (or the responses of others in the environment) if they don’t.

When we humans study chemicals and their reactions, we find it relatively easy to see the importance and governing dynamics of the *interrelationships* and *interactions*. We don’t really “empathize” much with individual molecules. Nor do we naturally see things from their standpoint. On the other hand, we can often see the beauty, logic, and nature of their *interactions*. But when thinking about human social matters, we are so close to the action ourselves—indeed, we are *in* the experience of being human—that even when we consider morality, we often think of it only, or at least mainly, from the *I-Me-Mine* standpoint, to borrow a phrase from a great Beatles song. However, morality is really an “*I-and-we*” thing. Many people have lost their own lives—or caused others to lose theirs!—at least in part from a failure to understand this distinction.

Of course, as already mentioned, we humans are also highly interdependent with other species of life and with the health of our environment.

This section could be called a Declaration of Interdependence, a phrase that has been used before and in other contexts.

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.

— The Dalai Lama, from his book *Ethics for the New Millennium*

Some Books (others listed in *The Obligations Of Reason*):

Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships, Daniel Goleman

The Evolution Of Cooperation, Robert Axelrod

Ethics For The New Millennium, Tenzin Gyatso (The Dalai Lama)

13. Influence of Historic Conditions and Culture

Although the foundational aspects of human social-moral nature are products and byproducts of our evolutionary development, cultural ideas and pressures, as well as historic decisions and events, do influence the social-moral climate and often have a large impact on the values, choices, and actions of living human individuals.

The material herein is *not* meant to suggest that cultural factors do not play an important role in morality or in individual choices and actions. My focus (here and elsewhere) has been on the underlying foundational aspects of human social-moral nature, their origins, their “reason for being” from a scientific standpoint, and the universals.

That said—and to mention a thought that is not new, of course—when considering the important role of culture in the human social-moral mix, it is helpful (I believe) to keep in mind a “branching-tree model” of thinking and to remember that, as far as science understands, all humans alive today descended from a small group of early humans who lived in Africa. The branching out of humans from that group occurred long ago relative to individual human lifetimes, but not so very long ago in the overall scheme of our evolutionary development as pre-mammals, mammals, primates, and ultimately humans.

Books and Materials:

Journey Of Man: The Story of the Human Species, Hosted by Dr. Spencer Wells (DVD),
PBS Home Video and Tigress Productions, 2003

1984, George Orwell

Defying Hitler, A Memoir, Sebastian Haffner

Blind Spot: Hitler's Secretary (DVD), Andre Heller and Othmar Schmiderer,
Sony Pictures Classics, 2003

The Matrix (movie), Warner Bros.

14. A Simple Example and Some Great Movies

The essence and dynamics of a rooted, grounded, and scientifically informed understanding of morality are apparent in a wide range of literature, art, and other human

expression. And, they can also be explored through helpful questions and thought experiments, as students of morality often do.

For example, please consider the following question in light of the preceding material:

Which of the following two leaders is more moral or less immoral?

- A) A person who is always honest, has been completely loyal to his wife, pays his taxes in full, treats all of his employees patiently and well, and accepts a modest compensation for his job leading a large hypothetical energy company, but who delays responsible action that would otherwise help address global climate change and who mainly makes associated changes only when they are mandated by law.

Or ...

- B) A hypothetical person who divorced his first wife, had an affair during his second marriage, takes every possible step to minimize his taxes, treats many of his employees gruffly, requires one of the highest compensations in his industry as the leader of a large hypothetical energy company, *and* even sticks his used bubblegum underneath your countertop, but who is deeply concerned about climate change and is taking *proactive* actions to ensure that his company does its part to address the issue?

Some Great Relevant Movies:

Children of Men, Universal Studios

Babel, Paramount Pictures

Dr. Strangelove, Columbia Pictures

The Lion King, Walt Disney Pictures

15. No Discussion of Morality Complete Without . . .

There is a difference between knowing the path and walking the path.

— The character Morpheus, in the movie *The Matrix*

16. Concluding Thoughts and More Great Quotes

Anyone who has read this paper does not need to be reminded that the subject of morality is relevant and important. That said, such readers may be interested in the following materials and great concluding quotes.

Please refer to my other materials on the subject:

The Obligations Of Reason: Exploring the existence, nature, dynamics and implications of the Natural Moral System (book available in hardcover and paperback)

The Nature of Morality (“paper” available on my website)

The Nature of the Relationship Between Is and Ought (“paper” available on my website)

Website: www.ObligationsOfReason.com

The implications of this understanding of morality (and of the associated details contained in the book and papers) are many. I discuss some of them in the book.

One final comment about the relevant “scope of applicability”: The scope within which the above understanding is relevant, practical, and (I believe) accurate is a large and important one, as outlined earlier. That said, there are some scopes of thought within which it may not be relevant and accurate. For example, if God exists, *and* if it is assumed that God does *not* want the human species to survive in its biological form and does *not* want us to strive too hard for species survival (or if this is considered to be a significant possibility), then, in that case, a conclusion that we ought to strive for sustainable species survival would not be correct and might even be presumptuous on our part. These matters are discussed briefly in my earlier paper, *The Nature of the Relationship Between Is and Ought*.

Thank you for your interest and consideration!

Regards,

Jeff Huggins

... and it has to be concluded that the greatest source of harm to man is man.

— Cicero, *On Duties II*, 44 BC

That would be a good idea.

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

We thought we were done with these things but we were wrong. We thought, because we had power, we had wisdom.

— Stephen Vincent Benet

The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.

— Omar Bradley, American World War II general

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

— Albert Einstein

The means by which we live have outdistanced the ends for which we live. Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men.

— Martin Luther King Jr.

We want the comforts of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

— William Sloane Coffin

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

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

— Albert Einstein

Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.

— Aldous Huxley

George Orwell's 1984 is the expression of a mood, and it is a warning. The mood it expresses is that of near despair about the future of man, and the warning is that unless the course of history changes, men all over the world will lose their most human qualities, will become soulless automatons, and will not even be aware of it.

— Erich Fromm

For the great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought.

— John F. Kennedy

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

— T. S. Eliot

Up to now you have done what many people do; as Virgil has it: "The mind remains unmoved; the tears pour down in vain."

— Petrarch

We won't find anywhere as nice as Earth unless we go to another star system.

— Stephen Hawking, quoted in an API article by Sylvia Hui