

# *On Morality*

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## **Welcome. And thanks for visiting!**

The purpose of this note is to cover several aspects of my understanding of morality, focusing primarily on central elements of one form of the supporting argument. In the interest of brevity, I cover only a few aspects of the topic here. Other materials are available elsewhere on my web site, and my book—*The Obligations Of Reason*—covers more context and detail in some areas, although there is much the book doesn't cover. In particular, the book doesn't cover some forms and aspects of the argument that *are* covered here and in some of my other papers.

To this end, I've organized this note as follows:

- Overview statement, and path of one form of the argument
- Brief comments regarding precision and probability
- The premises (in support of *Statements C*)
- Other elements of the case, briefly mentioned
- Heraclitus' "character is destiny"
- Some thought-exercises: *A DIY exploration of the relationship between morality and sustainability*
- A few illustrative quotes
- Several movie suggestions
- A few words on "justification" and limits
- Other materials
- A few additional comments regarding the justificatory dimension
- Notes to the premises
- Concluding remarks

My aim in this particular note is to convey *substance* in a fairly stripped-down fashion. You'll see that I haven't paid much attention, if any, to eloquence. I apologize in advance, and thank you again for coming!

It's also important to note that the same argument can be put in a number of forms and illustrated in a number of ways. And, it can be grounded in deep bedrock and illuminated and explained in additional ways (than those contained herein), including ways that relate it to foundational and inevitable questions such as that raised so eloquently by Shakespeare's Hamlet and highlighted by Camus.

### **Overview Statement, and Path of One Form of the Argument**

Arguments in support of the understanding of morality I hold can be made—and very soundly defended—in a number of forms. This note presents the skeletal structure, and some of the detail, of *one* of those forms. It also contains some illustrative quotes, movie suggestions, and thought-exercises to help readers understand and consider the matter.

Consider the following statement about morality. Call this *Statement A*:

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

*Statement A* fairly expresses the *foundational core* of the understanding of morality I hold and suggest. That said, it doesn't convey the full view. And, as with any overarching statement on such a large subject, it is certainly subject to misunderstanding. Nevertheless, *Statement A* is a fair statement of the view that can be supported as follows (among other ways) . . .

Consider the following statement, which, in essence, is the central and foundational *core* of *Statement A*. Call this statement, ***Statement B***:

**B. Morality is most foundationally “about” the sustainable survival of the human species . . .**

Finally, consider the following set of statements. Let’s call them *Statements C*. These three statements are mainly different ways of phrasing the assertion that establishes most—though not all—of the more simplified (in some senses) and expanded (in another sense) *Statement B*.

**C. Three versions of *Statements C*:**

- i. Morality is, first and foremost (i.e., most foundationally), “about” survival from one generation to the next, and so on.
- ii. Put another way, the “effective” function—i.e., the *effective reason-for-being*—of human morality itself is to facilitate the survival of humans in one generation long enough and well enough to produce a “next generation” (i.e., children) who in turn can succeed in surviving long enough and well enough to produce a “next generation” of their own, and so on.
- iii. **Put yet another way, we can reasonably conclude—at least tentatively, unless and until compelling evidence to the contrary is found—that we humans ought to survive as a species, or, more accurately, that we are justified in our view that we ought to try to survive as a species, based on all evidence available to us.**

These three ways to think of *Statement C*—that is, versions *i*, *ii*, and *iii*—may appeal differently to the differing languages and sensibilities of different audiences. That said, I’d like to repeat one particular form of the statement (with a couple added words for clarification), which is perhaps the most technically appropriate form for certain philosophical audiences, that is, the phrase at the end of version *iii*:

**We humans are justified in holding a view that we *ought to try to survive as a species, sustainably, based on all evidence and sound reasoning available to us.***

In order to clarify several aspects of this statement (*Statement C*) for present purposes, I'll briefly pause to point out five things:

*First*, to some people—and perhaps to many—some of these statements may seem intuitively obvious. For example, isn't it “common sense” that we humans should aim and try to survive from generation to generation? And, isn't it just a small logical step from there to realize that we should try to achieve *sustainability* in that endeavor? Well, perhaps so. Indeed, in a very real sense, the answer is *yes*, of course. However, many people don't consider the intimate and grounded connection between *morality* and survival in a *species* sense or in a *generation-to-generation* sense. This connection is not made very explicit by—or well understood by—common schools of philosophical thought. And, perhaps most importantly, as society sails forward in ways that are most likely *unsustainable*, many people don't see the unsustainable behaviors as contrary to morality, that is, as *immoral* in any sense. Some people might well think that a *personal freedom* to act in *unsustainable* ways is of higher moral import, or value, than the (moral) aim of sustainability. For these and other reasons, understanding the various relationships, and finding those that rest on solid ground, is very important.

*Second*, and in order to clarify the path of the argument, *Statements C*—and in particular, version *iii*—are established, supported, and justified via the set of premises described later herein. (I'll identify and briefly discuss the premises below.) Put another way, *Statements C* *aren't* assumptions or merely intuited. They aren't merely asserted premises. Instead, they can be established, supported, and justified from the “bottom up” via a number of premises and basic reasoning applied to those premises.

*Third*, although I inserted the word “sustainably” into the statement above, the aim of sustainability is not actually part of *Statements C* (though it could be, depending merely on how one would like to sequence different steps in the argument) as listed earlier but is, instead, supported more strongly by another aspect of the argument, mentioned in a later section. That said, this aim can also be derived from, and supported by, the premises themselves. In any case, I included the word “sustainably” in the above statement to provide a preview of where the argument leads.

*Fourth*, in order to communicate the eventual result and the so-called “big picture” up front, I’ve listed the *Statements A, B, and C*, above, in the reverse order of their derivation, or role, in the argument. This hopefully allows readers to “see where we end up” — that is, with *Statement A*. The actual path of the argument is mentioned below.

*Fifth*, several of the premises (all premises are listed in a later section) themselves include justificatory elements and/or together establish the justification of the conclusion. Put another way, the question of “justification” is addressed via a combination of the premises. That said, depending on what one means by ‘justification’, there are a few identifiable limits to the justification of the conclusion or, put another way, there are certain sorts of objections (e.g., “what if *nothing* is real in the universe?”) that the present argument doesn’t attempt to address. These limits are mentioned, briefly, in a later section. Nevertheless, aside from these limited limits, the present claim is *more justified than any incompatible contradictory claim*, I believe. And, the limits are those that would apply to any claim. Or, put another way, within the realistic and wide range within which the argument applies — wherein the limited objections are irrelevant or moot — the present conclusion can be *much more soundly established and justified than any incompatible contradictory conclusion*.

In sum then, and looking in the other direction now (that is, from the premises to *C* to *B* to *A*), the path of the argument is this: A set of premises (identified in a later section) establishes and supports *Statements C*. In turn, *Statements C*, when combined with certain additional facts and reasoning, together support *Statement B*. In turn, *Statement B*, when combined with other facts and reasoning, together support *Statement A*. *Statement A* is the summary statement — although, as with any statement regarding such topic, it’s certainly subject to misinterpretation. (One way for the audience to guard against misinterpretation, or to minimize it, is to realize that *Statement A*’s meaning is meant to encompass all the premises, facts, and reasoning that lead to it. Put another way, a great way to understand *Statement A* is to understand the premises themselves, the science behind them, the role of each premise in the matter, the other statements — i.e., *C* and *B* — and so forth.) My hope is that interested parties will understand what *Statement A* is *intended* to mean and what it’s *not* intended to mean, by reading this and other materials.

(Put another way, any failure or weakness in the clarity of communication on my part should not be confused, of course, with the actual conclusion that the premises and associated reasoning *can* indeed establish, explain, and justify. There are very likely to be clearer ways to express that conclusion than in my

wording of *Statement A*, especially if *Statement A* is interpreted in isolation and out of the context conveyed by the supporting premises and reasoning. That said, the clearest way to express the conclusion will likely vary depending on the audience and depending on the meaning of individual terms to each audience as well as on the existing paradigms of each audience. In other words, there is probably no single universal way to express *Statement A* in a way that would be perfectly clear to all audiences.)

### **Brief Comments Regarding Precision and Probability**

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 *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 ...”. When it comes to the broad subject of human morality, and human social-moral dynamics, and the many problems facing humanity, the appropriate degree of precision, of course, depends not only on the nature of the subject, but also on the question one is trying to address. In addressing some questions, a very high degree of precision can be achieved and might well be warranted. In this note, however, we need accuracy (at the appropriate level) but not precision in a “detail” sense of that word. In other words, this note does not address the particular details of a particular human social-moral dynamic or a particular social-moral question such as, When is it right to tell a lie, if at all?

And in *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 his view 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.”

### **The Premises (In Support of *Statements C*)**

I've mentioned that a set of premises can establish, support, and justify (within the limits discussed later) *Statements C*. Then, *Statements C*, when combined with a few other points, can ultimately establish, support, and justify the conclusion conveyed in *Statement A*.

What are these premises? How many are there? What is each premise's nature and role in the overall argument? How are they interrelated?

A complete discussion is beyond our present scope. That said, the premises are listed below, and explanatory notes (for some premises) are included near the end of this note.

For present purposes, and as hopefully helpful context, I'll mention several important points before listing the premises themselves:

*First*, there are 16 premises in total. Of course, there's nothing magical about the number 16. Many of the premises are interrelated, and some are highly interrelated. Some are, to a degree, just different ways of stating the same core matter. I can readily imagine that there are more distilled, efficient, and eloquent ways to present the same essential material in fewer premises, perhaps considerably fewer. Or, on the other hand, some audiences might need or want the detail that would only come from breaking certain premises into component parts, and providing more detail, thus resulting in a greater number of premises. In any case, of course, the number of premises is *not* the important matter, and I'm not claiming that there is any magic to the number 16. Indeed, once the essence of the matter and paradigm is understood, the mind can think of the whole thing as a *single paradigm* that makes sense, is grounded, and is justified, and the role of individual premises becomes that of explaining the matter to others.

*Second*, many of the premises are interrelated. And, many of them could be written in different ways, using different terminology, to convey the same substance. My aim in writing the premises has been substance, not eloquence.

*Third*, the natures of the premises vary, but they are all scientific, and/or observational, or (in a few cases) definitional or semantic in nature. None of them are mere assumptions. None of them are solely grounded in intuition. None of them are theological or rely on an authority beyond human science and human reason.

*Fourth*, a few of the premises are definitional or substantially semantic, and several others are readily apparent and, indeed, obvious. The six premises that are accompanied by bold asterisks — (\*) — in the list of premises below are based in relevant science and may not be as obvious (as some of the others) to those not familiar with the science. These six premises have all been reviewed and affirmed by a relevant expert in the field. And, they've been quadruple-checked by me, based on many relevant readings. If there is a problem with one of these premises, it's much more likely to be related to lack of clarity in my wording (to a particular audience) than to my intended meaning, the actual role of each premise in the argument, and the conclusion itself.

*Fifth*, the terminologies used in some of the premises may be more familiar to some readers than to others, and readers with some backgrounds may more readily understand some of the premises. In particular, an understanding of the basic dynamics of evolution will help readers better understand some of the premises.

*Sixth*, in the list below, I've grouped and presented the 16 premises in three groups—*Group 1*, *Group 2*, and *Group 3*. This grouping is *not* necessary, nor does it play a role in the argument, nor does it influence the relevant role of each premise, nor is it particularly precise. Instead, the grouping can be helpful in explaining and illustrating the argument in some forms, at a "higher level" than in terms of individual premises. For current purposes, suffice it to say that the premises can be grouped according to similarities and differences along the dimension of time (i.e., as they seem to focus primarily on past, present, or future); along the dimension of type/nature (i.e., into those premises that seem more related to "science", or to "reasoning", or to semantics and "definition"); along a dimension that can be divided into "top-down" or "bottom-up"; and along other dimensions. Various groupings of the premises can help readers explore and understand the premises themselves, their differing roles in the argument, the nature of the argument, and the nature of the conclusion. They can also help readers understand the justificatory dimension of the argument and conclusion. But, as mentioned, the grouping is *not* essential to the argument or to the conclusion.

*Seventh*, for some purposes, it helps to understand the nature of the roles of each premise in the argument as well as the nature of the argument (in support of *Statements C*) itself. Various premises play different roles in the argument. And, to a degree, though perhaps not entirely, the relationship between the different premises and the overall argument and conclusion, is a bit like that when, in facing a mathematics problem, one has  $N$  equations in  $N$  unknowns. Each premise plays a different role in delineating and defining the solution set of the problem. In the case of these 16 premises, some of them are somewhat overlapping and play similar roles, at least to a degree, and, as mentioned, the set of premises could probably be distilled and presented more eloquently. That said, much like a mathematics problem of  $N$  equations and  $N$  unknowns, the essential information represented (currently) in the 16 premises is vital: For example, in mathematics, a mathematician can't solve for  $N$  unknowns if she has only  $N-1$  equations.

*Eighth, and finally*, some of the premises have key justificatory roles, that is, key roles in justifying the "ought" and moral force of the conclusion. Several portions of the present paper either point to, or discuss key aspects of, the justificatory font of the matter. In particular, several points within the DIY exercise (in a following section), as well as the section titled "A Few Additional Comments Regarding The Justificatory Dimension", address the matter of justification at an introductory level of detail. I'll write more, and more explicitly, on the justificatory dimension of the premises and argument in a future paper.

With that context, the 16 premises are listed below, numbered 1 through 16, and organized into three groups. **Notes to the premises are at the end of the paper.**

### *Premises — Group 1 (of three)*

1. Human social-moral faculties (in a biological sense) and biological enabling mechanisms are products of our evolutionary development. (\*)
2. Human social-moral behavioral dynamics—and human morality—arise from, depend upon, and are intimately interrelated to human social-moral

- faculties (in a biological sense) and biological enabling mechanisms.  
 (Note that this *doesn't* mean that these faculties and mechanisms are *all* of the factors involved in human morality, nor that other factors are not also involved in influencing specific human social behaviors.) (\*)
3. Humans have social-moral faculties and biological enabling mechanisms, as well as the corresponding social-moral behavioral dynamics, *because of* their past effectiveness in contributing substantially to continuing human survival, to reproduction and the passing of genes from generation to generation, to our evolution, and to our continuing *existence*, all in the face of pressures that ultimately lead to death for individuals. This contribution has been, and is, a *substantial* one. (\*)
  4. Evolution effectively occurs and continues (in part) by way of reproduction and the passing of genes successfully from one generation to the next in a way that the receiving generation may also be successful at creating a “next generation”, and so on, all in a way that “effectively” serves the “end” of continuing survival from generation to generation (although the process of evolution is *not* conscious or purposeful, of course). (\*)
  5. Death is the “screening-out mechanism” or “test” by which natural selection—the defining limiting mechanism in evolution—works. (\*)

*Premises — Group 2 (of three)*

6. *Existence*, in an alive state, is a *prerequisite* for having social-moral faculties (in a working biological sense) and biological enabling mechanisms. Moreover, it is a *prerequisite* for enacting moral, immoral, and other behaviors.

7. Reproduction and the successful passing of genes from generation to generation during current generations—and through successive generations—is the only means by which a future person can come to exist.
  
8. Human social-moral faculties (in a biological sense) and biological enabling mechanisms do not and cannot continue over substantial periods of time (i.e., over many generations) *unless* human reproduction and the successful passing of relevant genes from generation to generation continue over the same substantial periods. Put another way, *continuing* human existence is a prerequisite for the *continuation* of human social-moral faculties, corresponding behaviors, and morality.

*Premises — Group 3 (of three)*

9. Existence is what nature “acknowledges” and “rewards.” For biological beings, existence equals life.
  
10. Relatively speaking, the contributions of human social-moral faculties and biological enabling mechanisms, and of the behavioral dynamics they support, to human *survival from generation to generation* (i.e., to continuing human existence) are more foundational and necessary than the contributions of these things to human happiness, fairness, justice, love, and so forth. Put more accurately, the contributions of our social-moral faculties and social-moral behavioral dynamics to ongoing human survival are more foundational and necessary than their contributions to the *particular aspects of* (and *degrees of*) human happiness, fairness, justice, love, and so forth that go *beyond* serving our survival needs and act as “icing on the cake” of life. Of course, these other aspects of life can’t even exist without survival as a *prerequisite* and *platform*. (\*)

11. A person must first exist, in an alive state, in order to pursue happiness, act fairly, act justly, contribute to peace, love, or act in any way. Similarly, a person must exist, in an alive state, in order to be happy or to experience fairness, justice, peace, love, and so forth. Put another way, existence is a *prerequisite* for experiencing happiness, pursuing happiness, experiencing fairness, acting fairly, experiencing justice, acting justly, experiencing peace, acting peacefully, experiencing love, feeling love, providing love, and so forth.
12. Death is the cessation of existence (that is, of an *alive* state of existence) for living biological beings.
13. Death marks the cessation of the active biological, emotional, mental, and social life of any given person as far as direct observation and current science can tell.
14. Morality is the subject that (among other things) has to do with questions of “ought.”
15. Fairness and justice are (among other things) components and dynamics of the subject of morality—i.e., important *subsets, ingredients, and/or aspects* of morality—rather than the other way around. In other words, morality is *not* understood (or defined) as being a component or subset of fairness and/or justice.
16. There is a semantic-logical linkage between an criterion often associated, either explicitly or implicitly, with the human concepts of “morality” and “moral system” and with other key points herein, from a scientific standpoint. This linkage may be very important to some people and less relevant to others. Refer to pages 48-62 in chapter 1 of my book, *The Obligations Of Reason: Exploring the existence, nature, dynamics and implications of the Natural Moral System*.

## Other Elements of the Case, Briefly Mentioned

Once *Statements C* are established (in particular, version *iii* of *Statements C*), the balance of the argument—to derive and support *Statement B* and then *Statement A*—rests primarily on several important pillars, none of which are particularly controversial (in themselves) and at least one of which has been acknowledged and explored in most schools of philosophy:

- Our human *awareness* of the dimension of *time* (though this is admittedly an imperfect awareness);
- Our real and progressing understanding of our substantial interrelationships with—and dependence on—the environment and the biological community;
- Our core philosophical ideals of human equality (in the relevant senses).

A complete discussion of each of these pillars and of each step of the argument (that is, from *Statements C* to *Statement A*) is beyond the scope of the present paper. That said, I'll cover the outline of the path of the argument via an excerpt (slightly edited to fit here) of earlier material, as follows:

\* \* \* BEGINNING OF EDITED EXCERPT

Given the premises and their implications, alone and when taken together, and related arguments conveyed in my materials, it is reasonable to conclude that morality is, first and foremost, “about” survival from one generation into the next, and so on, in the sense discussed earlier. This is *not* to say that morality is *only* about “brute survival”, that it supports or encourages reckless and risky means of pursuing the survival of some individuals or groups at the expense of others, or that it excludes means and enjoyments such as happiness, peace, justice, and etc.

Put another way, *if* our social-moral faculties are products of our evolutionary development; *and if* we have them *because* they helped our ancestors survive well

enough to produce “next generations” (i.e., children) who in turn were able to survive well enough to produce a “next generation” of their own, and so forth; *and if* their (our social-moral faculties’) very ability to help humans do so (relative to not having them) is the reason they exist today; *and if* human social-moral faculties and human morality itself would not exist if not for human survival; *and if* existence is the most basic foundational state (as far as science can tell us) and is the prerequisite and platform for other qualities; *and if* the most basic “end” of life is the continuance of life (as far as science can tell us); *and if* a person (current or future) can’t be moral or immoral unless she/he is alive; *and if* we face and answer the life-question affirmatively; *then* it follows that we can reasonably conclude—at least tentatively, until compelling evidence to the contrary is found—that we are justified in our quest to achieve species survival—ideally in a sustainable way. Similarly, we can reasonably conclude that morality is most foundationally “about” survival from one generation to the next, and so on, as described above.

Put yet another way, *if* the “effective” function—the “effective reason-for-being”—of our human social-moral faculties is to help us survive from one generation to the next; *and if* survival from one generation to the next is the most foundational “end” as far as current scientific understanding can tell us; *and if* we recognize the unavoidable question we face and choose to affirm that “end”; *and if* our social-moral faculties (and human morality itself) wouldn’t even exist were it not for our own existence; *then* the above-mentioned conclusions reasonably follow.

Given this understanding, and given our self-aware, science-informed understanding of our human heritage and evolved human abilities, it is reasonable and justifiable to refine and expand the above statement (i.e., *Statements C*) along the following lines:

- a. Given that humans have the evolved ability to understand the concept of *time* (albeit imperfectly) and to “plan ahead” to a degree (albeit imperfectly), it is reasonable and justifiable, in light of the earlier discussion, to *not* be satisfied from a moral standpoint with the mere continuation of humanity into a single “next generation”. Rather than understanding morality as a vitally important ability and dynamic to help us survive into *one* “next generation”, or *two*, or *three*, or *ten*, or even a *hundred*, we should understand the “effective” function of morality as being to help humanity achieve continuing and *sustainable* survival. There should be *no excuses* (from the standpoint of moral understanding anyhow) for

behaviors that undermine sustainable survival or place it at significant risk. After all, the instant that we (humans) come to an end, the central “effective function” of the entire enterprise of human morality will have been defeated, and it will no longer continue.

- b. Given that, as far as science tells us, we are all members of one human family (i.e., all descendants of the same small group of early humans who lived in Africa not all that long ago); *and* given that we are an interdependent social species; *and* given that we can reasonably and justifiably conclude that all humans are “equal” in some very important senses (based on numerous arguments, too many and varied to repeat here), or at a minimum we can at least *stipulate* to that conclusion; *therefore*, it is reasonable and justifiable to clarify (or refine) our statement about morality to ensure that the sustainable survival of the human species is sought (and hopefully achieved) in ways that understand all humans to be *equals* in these senses. Moreover, this conclusion is *not solely* based on intellectual discussions, philosophical logic, or ideals regarding human equality: It is also based on the interdependent nature of our species, our situation, and on basic practicality. Put another way, “we are all in this together”.
- c. Given that we have the evolved abilities (albeit imperfect) *and* the relatively recent scientific understanding (albeit imprecise) to see ourselves, our situation, and our well-being as being highly interdependent with the survival of biological diversity and the condition of the planet we call home, it is reasonable and justifiable to conclude that, in order to achieve the sustainable survival of the human species, we must also achieve (to a safe and healthy degree) the sustainable survival of *biological diversity* and the *sustainable health of planet Earth*. Put another way, we must (and *should*) include other species, biological diversity, and Earth’s health and sustainability in our overall understanding of morality and in the overall moral equation. Given that we have obtained this (aforementioned) degree of understanding regarding our interdependence with other species and our dependence on Earth’s health, and given the understanding of morality discussed herein,

we cannot now *choose* to become *ignorant* regarding these facts—at least not *morally*. To put this in terms sometimes used in legal and political discourse, any case for “plausible deniability” regarding the moral need to respect biological diversity and environmental health is no longer compelling. (There are also other very good reasons to respect biological diversity, other species in total, and *members* of other species, which need not be repeated here.)

- d. Therefore, given points “a”, “b”, and “c”, it is reasonable and justifiable to clarify and refine the earlier statements (*Statements C* and *B*) as follows (i.e., *Statement A*): **Morality is most foundationally “about” the sustainable and healthy survival of the human species, along with ample biological diversity, along with the sustainable health of our home, Earth, all accomplished in a way that respects human equality (in important senses) and embraces a living and somewhat fragile planet. Or something like that!**

\* \* \* END OF EDITED EXCERPT

Before leaving the present discussion and moving on, I should make an important observation: My focus here has been on the core of the argument. The main focus of the *present* argument to expand our consideration of “morality” and the relevant moral circle to include the broader biological life community has to do with the interconnectedness and interdependence of the life community and the need for the broader life community in order to sustain human life. In other words, the broader life community is important in sustaining human life and the environment that supports human life.

Now, of course, that’s an important, and valid, and necessary, portion of the argument, but it’s also (admittedly) narrow in a very important sense, and it doesn’t contain all aspects of the broader argument.

By understanding the roots of morality and of the present argument, *in nature herself*; and by understanding the role of morality as it relates to life’s continuation; and by realizing that, although we humans are different—in some respects, to some degrees—from other members of the life community, they too naturally aspire to life, and many of them are social, and many were here before

we were; I think we can conclude that we are all in the “moral universe”, or the “universe of moral considerations”, together—humans, animals, and even (to a degree) plants. This aspect of the matter has not been, and isn’t, my focus. But, it seems to me, membership in the life community involving a claim on our moral consideration is, at a minimum, a matter of degree and not “hard stops” when it comes to non-human life. In other words, it seems to me that no strong argument can be made that a member of the life community is, by definition, “out” of our moral universe and that such species do not have any standing when it comes to their ability to sustain themselves. In any case, perhaps the important point to make for present purposes is this: The present focus does *not* exclude other key, and valid, arguments that would include, to some degree or perhaps even fully, other species in the moral universe for reasons in addition to those noted in the core argument. Indeed, it seems to me, such additional reasons *do* exist and are highly compatible with the present argument. Indeed, at least some of them flow from the intimate interlinkages between the very notions of morality and life.

### **Heraclitus’ “Character is Destiny”**

I repeat *Statement A* once again in order to illustrate another point:

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

In a sense, the central theme of this statement can be seen as a long-term, human-species-wide, literal version of Heraclitus’ famous proclamation, “character is destiny”.

Consider the parallelism:

- Character is destiny. (Heraclitus)
- Morality is most foundationally “about” the sustainable survival of the human species (accomplished in a way that also satisfies the other important considerations).

## **Some Thought-Exercises: *A DIY Exploration of the Relationship Between Morality and Sustainability***

(Note: The following is a version of material that some readers may have seen in my materials in other forums.)

### **The Morality of Sustainability: *A DIY Exploration***

Is it morally important to achieve sustainability? Should we try our best to do so? *Why? How do we know?*

Would it be incommensurate with—and contradictory to—the very point, warp, and woof of morality to knowingly continue on an unsustainable path? That is, would doing so be immoral?

We humans often learn best by considering things ourselves. We don't like being told: We like *finding!* So, I offer some exercises, questions, and quotes for your exploration. Try to consider each one to its core. After each, ask yourself, "What did I find?" Ask, "What are the implications for the larger picture?"

Begin with a clear mind. And remember the aim: to explore the relationship between morality and sustainability.

1. Imagine a spaceship with thirty women and men aboard, lost in space, with no Earth or other home left. The inhabitants constitute the only human community. Imagine that the spaceship contains a sufficient—but not unlimited—quantity of life's necessities, e.g., air, water, soil, and other life. What do you learn? What does this situation suggest about morality and its relationship to sustainability?

2. What is the most foundational function of the human hand? Put another way, what is the hand's "reason for being"? To understand what I'm getting at, you might need to ask someone familiar with the basic role of "adaptations".
3. Consider Dylan Thomas's great poem, "The Hand That Signed the Paper". The last line is, "Hands have no tears to flow." What does this poem help us see?
4. Add to the picture this observation from Charles Darwin's "Descent of Man": "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."
5. Consider the question that Shakespeare's Hamlet put so well: "To be, or not to be, that is the question." I'd also suggest reading Albert Camus' acknowledgment of this question's fundamental importance in the opening paragraph of his book, "The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays", under the heading "Absurdity and Suicide". Consider that this question can be posed at the human-species level as well as at the individual-person level.
6. Now imagine yourself as someone else—e.g., in her shoes. Imagine trading places. Go deep, and be as real as you can. What does this tell you about morality? While you're at it, reflect on Daniel Goleman's point in the last sentence of his book, "Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships": "The social brain's wiring connects us all at our common human core."
7. Watch the movie "Children of Men". Really.
8. Consider whether we humans should count on, or expect, "justification" for our own existence to come from an authority other than a sound combination of our own "reasoning" and evidence available to us. I pose this question with the present aim in mind (i.e., to understand the morality-sustainability relationship) and with the realization that a diversity of people face the sustainability problem together.
9. Consider that if we can't count on justification for ourselves to come from an authority other than our own reasoning and evidence, we inevitably

must address the question of whether we “ought” to exist, that is, whether we will justify our own existence. I call this the *self-question* or, on a species level, the *life-question*. This is, in essence, Hamlet’s and Camus’ question, considered at the species level. There are only three ways to address it:

- a. With a life-affirming answer;
- b. With a life-negating answer (i.e., in a self-defeating way);
- c. With denial and avoidance, or persistent hesitation.

10. In relation to this life-question, consider the wisdom in these lyrics from an Isley Brothers’ song: “It’s your thing. Do what ya wanna do. I can’t tell ya, who to sock it to.”
11. Why do people say that it doesn’t make sense to “bite the hand that feeds you”, especially if that “hand” is reasonable and basically responds to your own actions? And what do we mean by saying, “he pulled the rug out from under me”?
12. Add to this mixture of considerations our human awareness of time, of our interrelationships with the environment and with the community of life, and of the dynamics of cause-and-effect. How do these human abilities add to the picture? What responsibilities do they carry with them?
13. Consider this point, from the Dalai Lama’s book, “Ethics For The New Millennium”: “And because, as we have seen, our interests are inextricably linked, we are compelled to accept ethics as the indispensable interface between my desire to be happy and yours.”
14. Consider this comment from Bertrand Russell: “Some people would rather die than think; and many do.”
15. Consider the parallelism between these two statements:
  - Character is destiny. (Heraclitus)
  - Morality is most foundationally “about” the sustainable survival of the human species (accomplished in a way that also satisfies other important considerations, including our interdependent interrelationship with the biological community).

Finally, ask yourself, “What do my findings, taken together, tell me about the interrelationships between sustainability and morality – and about morality itself?”

Over the next few days, I’ll post (in the comments) some quotes that shed clarifying light on the matter, from sources including Einstein, Jefferson, Aldo Leopold, a Native American constitution, a major global corporation, Bob Dylan, the Youngbloods, and others.

I hope this has been helpful. Thanks very much for your consideration, Dot Earthlings. And Cheers!

Jeff Huggins  
Los Gatos, California

*[end of DIY exercise]*

### **A Few Illustrative Quotes**

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

- From the *Constitution of the Iroquois Nations*

*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 (also similar to a Kashmiri proverb)

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

- Aldo Leopold

*Today we begin in earnest the work of making sure that the world we leave our children is just a little bit better than the one we inhabit today.*

- Barack Obama

*In keeping with our commitment to environmental justice and education, we invite all our guests to reflect on their need to reverence and preserve the earth and their responsibility to work toward a just and sustainable future for all creation. Let ours be a time remembered for the awakening of a new reverence for life, the firm resolve to achieve sustainability, the quickening of the struggle for justice and peace, and the joyful celebration of life.*

- Presentation Center, Los Gatos, California (from their Welcome Wall)

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

- Perry Minnis, Global Director, Ethics & Compliance, Alcoa

### **Several Movie Suggestions**

Perhaps a more enjoyable way to consider the matter is to watch some illustrative movies. For starters, I'd suggest:

- *Children of Men* (2006)
- Ingmar Bergman's 1957 classic, *The Seventh Seal*
- Homer's *The Odyssey*—I suggest Hallmark's production with Armand Assante and Isabella Rossellini
- Disney's *The Lion King* (1994)
- Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*—I suggest the production with Liam Neeson and Uma Thurman

## A Few Words On “Justification” and Limits

It’s helpful, and important, to note the types of “objections” that the present argument and conclusions don’t attempt or presume to address. As far as I can tell, there are three:

- The objection, perhaps believed by some, that asserts that “nothing is real!”. Of course, the present argument is based on our present empirical understandings of the natural universe, of “human nature”, and of related matters, as well as on our human abilities to reason as well as we can do so.
- The objection that asserts that a supernatural authority tells us to, or would want us to, conclude something substantially different from the present conclusions. Of course, the present argument and conclusions are intended to be based upon an integrated combination of scientific understanding and reasoning applied to that understanding.
- The objection that asserts that basic dynamics of nature, and possibilities that those dynamics allow, are dramatically discontinuous from past to future, even within our relevant region of space-time. Of course, at least some of the present argument is based on the expectation, or the likelihood, that nature’s most foundational dynamics are continuous from yesterday to tomorrow, at least as they are relevant to us, and at least in our region of space-time.

An important aspect of the “justificatory” dimension relevant to the present matter is that it is amenable to degrees, valid comparisons, and probabilistic factors. It isn’t the case that something can be only “100% certain” or “100% impossible”. Instead, some views and arguments can be “much more justified” than others, or “justified to a higher degree” than others.

Of course, this characteristic of the “justificatory” dimension is fully consistent with, and indeed flows from, Cicero’s point and also, for the most part, Aristotle’s point. And, importantly, it is consistent with, and flows from, the very nature of the scientific assessments and understanding that form the evidentiary ingredients that provide the grounding for our moral reasoning.

Indeed, the following seems a fair question to ask of any mode of reasoning, or any reasoning tool, that claims to either prove something with *certainty* or to prove that something highly plausible is invalid: How can something *other than* a narrowly semantic relationship—one that is certain primarily or solely by virtue of definitions—be judged either “certain” or “proven” or plainly “invalid” in light of the probabilistic nature of empirical evidence, Aristotle’s point, and Cicero’s point?

Finally, as Cicero has observed and for a range of reasons, nothing in this mode of thinking leads one to conclude that “morality” doesn’t exist or that any moral view, judgment, or argument is no better or weaker than any other moral view, judgment, or argument. In other words, the arguments presented here are not the same as, and would not lead one to, ungrounded and unhinged moral relativism.

## Other Materials

Many of the following materials are already posted on my web site, [www.ObligationsOfReason.com](http://www.ObligationsOfReason.com). I will post the others shortly. The materials contain a wide range of additional detail, quotes, references, illustrative examples, “ways to look at the argument”, and related matter.

For most interested audiences, the best “next item” to read would probably be *A Framework and Paradigm Of Morality*. The paper, *Regarding ‘Directional Dynamics’ and ‘Normative Facts’*, should be helpful for people interested in some aspects of the “is-ought problem” as well as people with a general interest in the relationship between ‘is’ and ‘ought’. An examination of the Hume quotes may be helpful for those interested in understanding the relationship of what Hume wrote to the present arguments. And, the last item in the list is my book, *The Obligations Of Reason*, which contains much more context than the present paper as well as much more of a discussion of many of the relevant scientific dynamics. That said, I wrote the book in 2005-2006, and it does not contain the argument in the same forms presented herein or in some of the other materials. It presents the argument in more of a narrative pathway, without making certain points in the argument as explicit as they are made in the premise-conclusion form. The conclusions are the same; the underlying factors are the same; but some of the supporting logic is not as explicit in the book as it is in more recent materials.

- *On Morality* (this paper: February 2009)
- *A Framework and Paradigm Of Morality* (May 2007)
- *Portions of the Supporting Argument In Additional Forms* (July 2007)
- *Regarding 'Directional Dynamics' and 'Normative Facts'* (October 2007)
- *Illustrative Quotes* (January 2009)
- *Some Relevant Hume Quotes, Organized* (January 2009)
- *The Nature of the Relationship Between Is and Ought* (April 2007)
- *The Nature of Morality* (February 2007)
- *The Obligations Of Reason: Exploring the existence, nature, dynamics and implications of the Natural Moral System* (book: 2006)

### **A Few Additional Comments Regarding The Justificatory Dimension**

I include this section as a brief introduction and preview (of materials to come) regarding the matter of “justification” and the important relationship between some of the premises and what I call in various places (above and below) “Hamlet’s question” (viewed on a species level), “Camus’ question” (viewed on a species level), the “self-decision”, the “self-question”, the “life-question”, or the “self-choice”. Perhaps the best terminology is the *life-question*.

I’ve excerpted the discussion below from an earlier correspondence and made minor edits to help the discussion fit here. So, with that context:

\* \* \* BEGINNING OF EXCERPT

For a moment, leave aside the assumptions, details, and kerfuffle of some of our current paradigms and techniques. Take a *big* step back. Then, with fresh and clear mind, consider the following:

- For present purposes, one must “distill out” any need for any *supernatural authority* from our notions of ‘justification’ and ‘ought’. After all, for present purposes, we can’t assume or expect the existence of such authority. Our task is to use a combination of empirical evidence and excellent reasoning to figure the matter out.
- Thus, we are left to use the ingredients of *empirical evidence* and *thinking*. Note carefully that this means we are left with the ingredients of empirical evidence—that *we humans* discover and validate—and with *our own human thinking and thinking tools*. With access to, and use of, these ingredients, we face three options (to put the matter simply) in what I think of as a *self-decision*. Essentially and ultimately, we can make one of three choices as we face and answer this self-decision: We can try to avoid and ignore the matter. *Or*, we can make a choice that is self-negating and self-defeating. *Or*, we can make a choice that is self-affirming. We can’t avoid this question—essentially the species version of Hamlet’s “to be, or not to be?”—i.e., the species version of Camus’s question of suicide—nor can we avoid making a choice, in effect at least. (After all, to try to ignore the matter and avoid a choice *is*, effectively, a choice.) So, of course, this self-decision must be faced one way or another. As I will discuss elsewhere herein, as it turns out, how we make this self-decision addresses the question of “self-justification”. This becomes painfully, or refreshingly, obvious once you think about it. There is no *absolute external justifying authority* (we must assume), nor is there any *absolute authority independent of ourselves* (we must assume), nor are we humans an “absolute” authority, depending on what we mean by that word on this question. So, we humans face a self-decision that we must make, one way or another, based on evidence *we* discover and find valid in combination with *our own thinking*.
- Alas, when we face this self-decision, with these ingredients accessible to us, we can decide a relative ranking. Although our decision can be a clear one, we don’t really have to pretend or consider that our information is perfect, “certain”, or externally validated. After all, we understand our empirical evidence in probabilistic ways, and it’s probably wise to consider our thinking as “the best we can muster”, always in a tentative sense, in other words, “until we can muster better”. So, for example, we can judge that, relatively speaking, we choose the self-affirming option. There is no reasonable need or reasonable reason to choose the self-defeating, self-negating option. Nor is there any need or reasonable

- reason to ignore or avoid the question. After all, our information will never be perfect, and we can make the self-affirming choice in a way that we consider tentative, that is, in a way that we consider valid unless and until we discover compelling evidence to the contrary.
- As might already be apparent, but as we'll discuss a bit more, a self-affirming choice on this question relates directly to the matter of "self-justification". It allows us to understand the import and force of key premises in my list. (More on that below.) That said, the sort of "self-justification" that flows from making a self-affirming choice as described above does *not* contain the sorts of problems that we often think of when we hear "self-justification". (More on this elsewhere.) Nor does this brand of "self-justification" carry many of the ramifications that many people might assume. And, the conclusions and realities that follow have powerful, practical teeth. In other words, there's no good reason, and no reasonable reason, to be afraid of choosing the self-affirming path or to be afraid of this sort of "self justification". Indeed, quite the opposite: The choices that we might well consider as worthy of fear are those of self-defeat and of avoidance or ignorance.
  - Now, and within that context, consider Premises 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13, and even 5 and 6 to a degree, in the earlier list I provided. They get to the *heart* of the matter. Or rather, they capture the heart of the matter. (The premises are not matters of imagination or of un-groundable "theory", of course: They reflect key realities of the situation.) The premises are *real*, and their relevance, import, and force comes from our self-affirming choice. To negate the import or force of the essence of these premises as they relate to the present argument and conclusions (i.e., to *Statements C and A* and their supporting arguments) would be to make a self-defeating, or needlessly and unwisely avoidant, self-decision. What's more, such a self-defeating or needlessly avoidant self-decision would need to be *explained*, of course. Such a self-defeating or needlessly avoidant self-decision would need to be 'justified'! Now that the matter has been put this way (if it hasn't already been put this way before), or in any case, now that my premise form of the argument has been related to the matter in this way, the justificatory burden is now "on the other foot". That is to say, someone would have to 'justify' the avoidant or self-defeating self-decisions. That would be quite difficult to do, I would think. One would have to argue against Shakespeare, Thomas Jefferson, Camus, Bertrand Russell, Bob Dylan, and many, many others.

- The other premises that we've reviewed and discussed [referring here to the earlier context of this excerpt] also play pivotal roles, of course, but those premises are self-explanatory and are meant to reflect key aspects of the science of the matter. So, I won't go into them here, except to say . . .
- There is an informative, important, explanatory, unsurprising, and comforting symmetry between the premises that can be said to involve "the past up through now" and the premises that play a "looking forward" role. This symmetry is important, at least in some senses, and it tells us several things. For one thing, what nature (evolutionary dynamics) points us to in terms of its essential, effective (if roughly implemented) "aim" is the same aim that basic logic would suggest to us going forward. This sort of symmetry is both helpful and comforting. It suggests that, as far as we can tell, life's processes have explored the viable nooks and crannies and there is no "better place" to aim for than ongoing life (as a foundational aim anyhow) plus all the happiness we can get as "icing on the cake", as long as our quest for happiness doesn't undermine the main aim or violate a few other basic moral considerations. And, it's interesting to consider this: What was "tomorrow" ten years ago is the past today. In other words, when it comes to certain continuities, time slides forward, and one person's tomorrow is another person's yesterday. So, we'd expect some symmetry, unless of course we've missed something VERY BIG.
- Other premises play important roles to define interrelationships, hierarchies, and so forth, and to distinguish between means and ends. (More on this later.) And, of course, some premises are mainly semantic and definitional. (More on this later.)
- Now we get to the matter of the "is-ought problem" and related matters. In a nutshell (but much more on this later), my view is as follows:
  - To address the "is-ought problem" in descriptive, explanatory, *and* 'justificatory' senses, we need (and use) two things:
    - There needs to exist a string of understandable cause-and-effect relationships that provide a pathway between everything that 'is' and "what we mean when we say 'ought'". And of course, science establishes and explains this string, based on empirical evidence and our scientific reasoning. All sorts of work support this. Also, although it

has been put many ways, I think it helps to consider several of the other materials [listed in the present context in this note], including the quotes, the Hume quotes, and the “directional dynamics” paper. (More on this later.)

- And, to establish the ‘justificatory’ dimension and give the *ought* normative force (such as that stated in *Statements C* and also encompassed within the intended meaning of *Statement A*), we need to apply the premises and the reasoning that follows from the premises. Much of this reasoning is covered herein.
- Put another way, we need the combination of the two ingredients above.

The total enterprise bridges the is-ought gap (with respect to *ongoing survival*; **not** with respect to anything and everything), without in any way making “is” and “ought” identical or un-differentiable, of course. It does so with respect to the descriptive, explanatory, and ‘justificatory’ dimensions. It gives normative force to the *ought* stated in or encompassed by *Statement C* and (with the additional considerations added) *Statement A*. It allows us to face and answer the “self-decision” in a self-affirming way, and it suggests that we do so, or it doesn’t give us any good reason *not* to do so. (In fact, the very notions of ‘good’ and answering the self-decision affirmatively are intimately interrelated.) It places the whole thing in a helpful context, and it grounds the whole thing in an integrated combination that considers science and good reasoning. And, as we will discuss below, it places the burden of proof on the “other side” to try to prove that all this is *not* the case, that is, *if* anyone thinks that this is not the case. And, it has all sorts of positive implications that make “common sense” in hindsight. (That said, even though the implications make “common sense”, this argument and conclusion give much more normative weight to certain *oughts* that are “common sense” than they would otherwise seem to have.)

In some ways, this is like “thinking in Darwin’s way” but looking not only backward (at evolution and how it works) but also *forward* at the same sorts of considerations. It’s looking at the world through Darwin’s eyes (and the eyes of those who have updated his views) in a way that widens the time horizon (to cover past, present, and future) and in a way that allows for the limited degrees of flexibility enjoyed by humans, thank goodness. (More on this below.)

Indeed, it involves looking at the world in that way, over a broad time horizon, *in combination with* the sentiment reflected in “The Serenity Prayer”, commonly attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr:

“God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.”

\* \* \* END OF EXCERPT

### Notes to the Premises

(The number of each note corresponds to the number of the relevant premise.)

1. NA / Self-explanatory.
2. NA / Self-explanatory.
3. Here, in using the phrase “continuing human survival”, I’m not speaking of an un-ending, continuing survival of specific *individual* humans. Instead, I’m speaking of survival (and sufficient reproduction) from one generation to the next. I’m speaking of the continuation of—and passing forward of—survival from one generation to the next.

For example, consider that it’s *not* immoral—or contradictory to the effective function of morality—to eventually “let die” from natural causes an individual human. *Individuals* eventually die, even as the species (hopefully) continues from generation to generation.

The abbreviated terminology ‘survival’ can sometimes be confusing here unless one understands the term in this way and unless one understands evolutionary basics. The way to understand the accomplishment of “survival” intended here is to understand it as that accomplishment which facilitates the continuation of the species from one generation to the next. In other words, the mere “survival”, in a narrow sense, of a human individual from birth to age five is not sufficient. Nor is “reproduction”, in a narrow sense, sufficient if the offspring of such reproduction die (i.e., don’t survive) two days after birth. The accomplishment that facilitates the continuation, in time, from generation to generation, is that

combination of “survival-plus-reproduction” that consists of people (on average) living long enough to have children successfully, who in turn live long enough to have children successfully, and so forth.

(Of course, this does *not* mean or even suggest that it’s immoral for individuals to *not* have children. People contribute to society in many different ways. Movement from generation to generation is an “on average” thing and can even—and in some conditions should—actually result in population reduction over time. Too much population growth can pose all sorts of problems and undercut sustainability. And, of course, people can have a *neutral* impact on population. That said, knowingly and substantially detracting from the ongoing sustainable survival of the human species, and knowingly diminishing sustainability, are two of the many ways of contradicting morality itself. Put another way, as the overall argument establishes, they are two of the many ways of acting immorally.)

Also, the intended meaning of this premise and related premises is entirely consistent with evolutionary theory, that is, with the broad and specific mechanisms of evolution as we understand them based on the work of Charles Darwin and many others, including (just as a couple examples) Richard Dawkins, E. O. Wilson, and others. Indeed, the evolution-related premises in the list of 16 premises, and in the broader argument, are dependent only on the broadest nature and mechanisms of evolution and are quite flexible and accommodating when it comes to specific questions and balances that exist regarding evolution’s particulars. (A full discussion of this point is beyond the scope of this note.)

Finally, the last sentence in this premise—that is, that “This contribution has been, and is, a *substantial* one.”—is an important point that is sometimes not stated explicitly or acknowledged outside of the relevant scientific communities. Our human social faculties and dynamics are *not* ancillary and unnecessary aspects of our human-ness, and they have played immensely important roles in our survival from generation to generation to this point. Indeed, the social dynamics of other social species (ants, bees, dolphins, etc.) are also integral to “who they are” and to their survival.

4. See Note 3 (above).

Also, when I use the term ‘effectively’ here, I *don’t* mean “perfectly”, i.e., with perfect effectiveness and efficiency, i.e., without mistake or waste or exception.

And, when I use the term ‘end’ here, I don’t mean that evolution is conscious, is aware of any purpose, has a “purpose”, or is even a singular thing (rather than a term to name a combination of processes).

5. In one of my discussions with a relevant scientist, it was mentioned that death is *a* screening-out mechanism or test by which natural selection works, rather than *the* (i.e., only) screening-out mechanism or test by which natural selection works.

In relation to the intent and role of this particular premise, and to what I mean by the various concepts in this premise, the question of whether death is “a” or “the” screening-out mechanism by which natural selection works depends on the “level” of consideration and the intended meaning of the premise. In keeping with the role this premise plays in the argument, and in conjunction with the other premises, the term ‘death’ here means what it normally means and is, indeed, the ultimate “stopper” and screening-out mechanism.

For example, differential rates of reproduction among members of a given generation of individuals, or among individuals living at roughly the same time, also play a substantial role in the evolution of a population and of traits within the population. But, this all occurs within the context of life, of course. Life is the *prerequisite*. An individual can die before or after having children, and this difference *makes a difference*. Or, some or all of the children can die, and they can die before or after having their own children.

What I’m trying to say is this (and it may already be obvious to most people): Although *survival rates of individuals*, combined with *differential birth rates*, both play important and interrelated roles in the overall evolution of a population and its traits, nevertheless, death (of an individual prior to reproduction, or of a child, or of anyone) is the ultimate stopper and “screen”, in any case. In this “big picture” sense, death as the screen encompasses all else. Put another way, ‘death’ here is meant, of course, in the sense of “not surviving” — and it is the all-encompassing antithesis of the continuation of survival discussed elsewhere.

Considering relative rates of reproduction, one can *in a sense* say that a parent of one child who later dies (the parent, that is) has passed on her/his genes into the next generation to a certain degree, and thus that parent “survived” (and did not “die”) to that degree, while a parent of four children who later dies (the parent, that is) has passed on her/his genes into the next generation to a larger degree, and thus that parent “survived” (and did not “die”) to a larger degree. Of course, here we are getting unnecessarily into semantics. The main point here is that, for purposes of this premise, the term ‘death’ is used in its big-picture sense, and given the role of this premise in the argument, death is ultimately *the*, not *a*, final limiting mechanism. This is true at the individual adult level (e.g., adults die), at the child level (e.g., children sometimes die), and at the gene level (e.g., individual genes can die, and unsuccessful genetic material can, over time, die out in the population, become screened out of existence, or become passive and inactive).

6. NA / Self-explanatory.
7. Much of the context here is explained via other premises and in the notes to other premises. That said, one particular point should be added: Depending on how one chooses to interpret certain terms in this premise, it could be argued that it might be possible, some day, to bring a future person into existence via means that aren’t covered (in someone’s interpretation) by the phrasing of this premise. My intention is that the premise does cover all of those possible means, or at least any that we can realistically imagine. Also, any means that falls beyond this premise, if any, would nevertheless not diminish the overall argument. The argument does not hinge on whether, in the future, a person can be brought into existence without genetic material or with completely synthesized genetic material.
8. NA / Self-explanatory.
9. By saying that existence is what nature “acknowledges”, I’m simply saying that, in physical terms (or mass-energy terms), what *is*, *is*, and what doesn’t exist, *doesn’t exist*, at any given point in time. And, what doesn’t exist at a given point in time can’t enter into the Newtonian “ $F = m \times a$ ” dance or the Einstein-ian “ $e = mc^2$ ” dance. By saying that existence is what nature “rewards”, I’m simply saying that, in order to bring something else into existence, something must first exist itself. For example, babies don’t just appear from thin air: Their arrivals require a mother or at least some

laboratory apparatus and chemicals. This terminology and point are not necessary for the argument, but they are helpful in some ways to understand the comparison of the present matter to some of the ways we humans think of other moral systems. The details of this point are beyond our present scope, but interested audiences can find the matter covered as part of Chapter 1 in my book, *The Obligations Of Reason*.

10. The matter of this premise should be clear and self-explanatory. Key words include “relatively speaking”, “foundational”, and “necessary”. This premise has a lot to do with the form of the conclusions (that is, *Statements C, B, and A*). It has much to do with the “necessary but not necessarily sufficient” aspect of the conclusion, that is, of ongoing survival: In other words, ongoing survival, and ongoing sustainable survival, are *necessary*, but the conclusions do *not* indicate that these are *sufficient* or that we should not strive for higher degrees of happiness as “icing on the cake” of life. For the most part, the central themes of the eventual conclusion (i.e., *Statement A*) identify necessities but do not preclude, or even encourage against, extras. In fact, although my online materials don’t go into the dynamics of “happiness” much, it is an important theme in my book, and my view accommodates and encourages healthy happiness and the ability to achieve whatever degrees of happiness one might be able to achieve, as long as doing so doesn’t conflict with the requirements of morality as they relate to others. Finally, the word ‘foundational’ plays an important role in this premise, or, rather, what I mean by ‘foundational’ takes its meaning from this premise and related premises, as well as from the dictionary, of course. The word ‘foundational’, appearing here, carries its meaning and implications through to the conclusion. I don’t use the word in any unique way, of course. The “foundation” of a building is the bottom part, and the grounding part, and the part that connects the building to the rest of “reality”, and the part that allows the building to stand and enjoy structural integrity, but it’s *not* the *only* part of the building. Buildings have, and contain, much more than their “foundations”, of course.

This said, here I’ll make a point that not only applies to this word ‘foundation’, but also applies throughout my view and work. The meanings of specific words I’ve used, or their intended meanings to convey the substance of the view of morality I hold, are not the important matters, of course. Or, put more accurately, the *substance* of the matter matters, not the words I’ve chosen to use to try to convey it, in some cases

clumsily. The best way to understand the *substance* of the matter is via all of my materials as well as via the scientific materials, and other materials, to which I refer (not to mention all of the many other materials that describe the underlying knowledge itself).

11. NA / Self-explanatory.
12. NA / Self-explanatory.
13. NA / Self-explanatory.
14. This premise is an important one but plays mainly a definitional and semantic role. As Shakespeare has written, in essence, a rose is still a rose by any other name.
15. This premise is largely self-explanatory. Its role has to do both with real relationships (between real things, dynamics, etc.) and with definitions and semantics.
16. This premise is not necessary to the argument but can play a very helpful role in relating the matter to the way we humans think about common moral systems and about morality itself. A discussion is beyond our present scope, but a more complete discussion can be found on pages 48-62 in Chapter 1 of my book, as the premise notes.

END OF NOTES TO PREMISES

Continued . . .

## Concluding Remarks

Thank you very much for your interest and attention! I apologize for any lack of clarity, presence of typos, and misspellings of course.

If you have any questions, or if you have any concrete arguments or points that you don't feel have been addressed, please contact me. You can reach me via the "Contact The Author" page of my web site, [www.ObligationsOfReason.com](http://www.ObligationsOfReason.com).

Thanks Again, and Be Well!

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February, 2009

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