

More On The Bridge (adding to earlier)

Jeff Huggins

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More On The Bridge

In the interest of continuing to present key factors that have to do with the bridge, that help to shape or establish it, or to illuminate it or the context within which it exists, I'll offer a few important additional thoughts to be considered along with those central matters already mentioned in my earlier message, "The Bridge, as you like it (with additional quotes)", a copy of which is included below.

I'll only briefly mention these factors here: They're discussed and illustrated in more detail in my papers. Also below, I offer a clarifying comment regarding a central point of the earlier message.

So here goes ...

First, I consider that my work deals with things in terms of degrees of likelihood, confidence levels, understanding held "tentatively" (that is, until more compelling understanding comes along), and so forth. In other words, the aim or claim is *not* "absolute certainty", "certain knowledge", or Truth with a capital T. Our understanding of "things" that have to do with the ways of nature, of humans, and so forth, is held in a *tentative and probabilistic sense*. (Of course, there is nothing new in that point: I'm merely mentioning the way that scientists consider scientific understanding, for example.) A number of my papers contain great quotes from Cicero and Aristotle to illustrate the basic point and related points.

Second, of course, it's important to keep in mind the distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom involves more than just knowledge alone, and (at the same time) it does not require *all* knowledge or *certainty* in knowledge. The quest for wisdom, and to apply wisdom, involves knowledge, but it is *not identical to* the quest for *all* knowledge or for *certainty* in knowledge. And of course, wisdom has to do with *life*. (To be clear, none of these points are new: I'm merely pointing out the distinction as something to keep in mind.)

Third, the scope that my work considers (that is, on which it focuses) is the *secular* scope. Put another way, my work doesn't assume the existence or non-existence of God or of any other "supernatural" being or entity. I consider matters from the standpoint of a *combination* of scientific understanding and secular reasoning, that is, moral philosophy focused on secular reasoning. Within that scope of consideration, an interesting (and important) point is that we humans face some questions and alternatives, and how we

choose to respond to those questions and alternatives—i.e., what *choices* we make—is “up to us”. We can use the best combination of evidence and reasoning we can muster, at any given time, in order to figure out the most well reasoned responses (to questions and/or conditions); and we have the freedom to choose those responses, within limits of course. Among other things, working within this scope of considerations, one doesn’t assume or expect that a supernatural authority will “justify” human existence *to* us and *for* us, provide us with answers, take care of us, or so forth.

Fourth, we humans are *aware* of the dimension of *time*. Although we certainly don’t understand time perfectly, we have an awareness of the passage of time and of the “dimension” of time, so to speak.

Fifth, we humans are also (imperfectly) aware that we have important interdependencies with the rest of nature and the natural universe. In other words, we are part of something, and dependent on it.

Sixth, from a number of sources and standpoints, including philosophy, the sciences, and common experience, we humans have an awareness that we are all humans, that we are all related (in a broad and biological sense), and so forth, and we have still-progressing ideas and ideals associated with human equality and common human rights.

And now for the note of clarification ...

One central point of my earlier message has to do with the following, quoted from that message ...

“Now I’ll just provide a quick simple expression of a very central ‘X’:

Life values its own survival and continuance (that is, reproduction) from the present generation to the next.”

The earlier message was not at all intended to describe and explain all the various processes and factors involved in evolution. Instead, I included the quotes—some of which are admittedly ambiguous, overly colorful, and imprecise or incorrect in various ways—merely as an assortment of quotes that help to illustrate the central point, mentioned above.

Hopefully that clarifies that. In order to avoid any problems or imprecision with some of the quotes, if you like, please focus on the central points made *above* the point at which I’ve included quotes having to do with cells, the nature of life, evolution, selection, and so forth. Thanks.

I’ll make the point of these messages clear in an upcoming message. Presently, I’m just trying to get much of the meat on the table. Of course, my papers describe all this in much greater detail.

Thanks for your consideration.

Cheers,

Jeff

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Copy of earlier message:

The Bridge, as you like it (with additional quotes)

Jeff Huggins

Originally posted on CHORA, February 11, 2010

Sometimes it is just plain easier to let quotes tell the story, let them illustrate key pieces of a puzzle, and to present the matter as a thought-exercise to inquisitive minds.

I've written a great deal about what I've called the "bridge", the "common foundation", or the "connective matter" between the scientific understanding of human morality and the reasoning (or moral philosophy) of the matter, from a secular standpoint. I won't repeat all of that here.

Instead, I'll offer a few thoughts and also quotes (from recognized names) that, when considered together, should serve to illustrate a central part of the matter, to those who think about it with curiosity and care.

I'll begin with a few thoughts, and then the quotes:

If scientific understanding informs us that a fundamental aspect of life is that "life values X"; and if, upon reflection and examination, we also find that a solid combination of reasoning and evidence *supports the choice to value X* (i.e., that such a combination shows that "it makes great *sense* for life to value X"); then something important is established: call it a correspondence, a key relationship, a connection, a bridge, or whatever.

(We'll talk about a particular "X" below.)

In essence, in such situation, with respect to X, a combination of reasoning and evidence supports an affirmation of what life itself values according to the scientific understanding of life.

Put another way, in such a situation, with respect to X, a combination of reasoning and evidence *supports* the *affirmation* of a *value* that the scientific understanding of life informs us (in the descriptive and explanatory senses) is a central quality or aspect of life.

In such a situation—that is, when and where such a situation exists—we have “philosophy”, using *reason* and *all things considered*, examining and affirming a value that life itself naturally holds: i.e., “Life values X. Let’s reflect on that and examine it. Aha! It makes great *sense* for life to value X. Indeed, all things considered, it makes *more sense* for life to value X than for life to value opposite-X or for it to value W, Y, or Z.”

For a moment, then, I’ll skip to a few quotes:

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

- Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Experiments in Ethics*

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

- E. O. Wilson

“To identify with a given desire is to affirm through reflection the normative content that the desire presents, in ways that would remain stable if subjected to further critical scrutiny.”

- R. Jay Wallace, *Normativity & the Will*

Now I'll just provide a quick simple expression of a very central "X":

Life values its own survival and continuance (that is, reproduction) from the present generation to the next.

And here are two quotes from Steven Pinker that are very helpful to keep in mind:

"As with so many aspects of the mind, a danger we face is the temptation to explain a puzzle by appealing to intuitions that feel thoroughly natural but that themselves need an explanation."

- Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*

"Nature does not go out of its way to befuddle us. If some phenomenon seems to make no sense no matter how we look at it, we are probably overlooking some deeper principle about how things work."

- Steven Pinker, *The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature*

For now, we'll skip to several more broad quotes, below which I'll also include a number of additional quotes that help to illustrate various aspects of "X" and closely related matters.

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

- Albert Einstein

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

- Aristotle, *Politics*

“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*

“Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed.”

- Francis Bacon

* * *

“The inherent tautology of the definition of life—that which lives and seeks to perpetuate itself— ...”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“They [biologists] have pointed out, for example, that the two fundamental functions of any living thing are that it must have some form of genetic code, the ability to pass on information from one generation to the next, and it must be able to perform chemical reactions, to break down food, for example. These are, respectively, the functions of genes and enzymes.”

- Michael J. Benton, *The History of Life*, part of Oxford University Press’s “A Very Short Introduction” series

“As it happens, there are many basic chores that every cell must know how to do. Whether of wildebeest, baker’s yeast, human humerus, or fly glomerulus, a cell must be able to take in nutrients, throw out the trash, stay in shape, and divide when told. ... The cell’s maintenance and division genes are among the most well preserved specimens nature has to offer.”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“For many biologists, evolution is part of the definition of life. ‘What is life?’ one researcher put it. ‘That which eats, that which breeds, that which is squishy, and that which evolves.’”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“[Dr. David] Wake has a message to share, and it is one that virtually all the scientists I spoke with, no matter their field, ranked at or near the top of their list of things they wish the public understood about science. The message is the alpha and omega, lox and bagels, of the life sciences. Theodosius Dobzhansky, the great Russian geneticist, said it pithiest: ‘Nothing in biology makes sense, except in the light of evolution.’”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“‘People like to think of physics as being the source of the fundamental laws of science,’ said the MIT physicist Robert Jaffe. ‘But there’s one fundamental law that comes from the life sciences, and it’s just as deep and all-pervasive and universal as anything in the pantheon of physics. Evolution by natural selection is an absolute principle of nature, it operates everywhere, and it is astonishing. ...’”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

[Evolution by natural selection] “... the principle underlying and interlocking all earthly life.”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“Yet no matter how they swat the details, evolutionary scientists do not dispute the fundamentals. They do not argue over the reality of evolution, or that existing species evolved from previous species. And they do not dispute the engine that drives evolutionary change, as elucidated so brilliantly by Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace 150 years ago: natural selection.”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“However life got started, one thing is clear. Life so loved being alive that it has never, since its sputtering start, for a moment ceased to live.”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“... the supreme brilliance of the entity of which bacteria and every other being on Earth is built: the cell. The cell is surely the greatest invention in the history of life on this planet, and ever since the first cell arose, as Gunter Blobel said, it has been all cell, all the time, a never-ending splitting of cells to make more cells, to keep life alive in the only way it knows how: in the context of the cell, by the bauplan of the cell.”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“This is the amazing thing, one of the most profound basic principles that biology offers: that once the first cell had pulled itself together, had assembled itself into a serviceable self-serving self, there was no turning back, and there has never been a cell-free moment since.”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“A cell is the basic unit of life, and the smallest unit of matter that can, by anyone’s book, be considered alive.”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“The cell lives, breathes, tastes, and makes waste, and when called upon will replicate. The cell is self-sufficient, and that is its conceptual beauty and power.”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

“A cell has three basic parts to it: a greasy, waterproof outer membrane, the plasma membrane, which serves as the border between cell and setting, self and nonself; a gooey inner part, the cytoplasm, where most of the work of the cell is performed; and a cache of DNA, the cell’s genetic content, its operating manual and ticket to tomorrow.”

- Natalie Angier, *The Canon: A Whirligig Tour of the Beautiful Basics of Science*

The ultimate point of “sociality” is enhancing fitness. Fitness refers to the net result—what actually happened—more offspring.

- Dr. Carol Boggs, Stanford (a rough paraphrase)

“Morality is an evolutionary adaptation to social living.”

- Bekoff and Pierce, *Wild Justice*

Be Well,

Jeff Huggins

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