

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

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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

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“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,

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