

Conscious, Informed, Responsible Human Sociality

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In order to add to, and complement, my recent messages regarding “the bridge”, I’d like to mention something simple, having to do with terms ...

Briefly ...

As many people sometimes experience, the term ‘ethics’ can sometimes sound (to some people anyhow) as if it’s referring to something that is merely theoretical, technical, or legalistic. Of course, most ethicists and philosophers know what is meant by the term, at least roughly, but the term has its confusions and limitations, of course.

And ‘morality’: That term, of course, has its own ambiguities and imprecisions, and it means different things to different people in many cases. Yet, moral philosophers know what they mean by the term, and many life scientists use the term fairly often in their work on human social-moral dynamics, morality, and so forth.

These terms are still very useful, of course, and they have great meanings. My point here is not to suggest that they be gotten rid of. Nor is it to invent a new term.

So, what is the point I’m leading to?

The point is this:

For a moment, set aside the term ‘morality’. The intent here is not to get rid of it, but rather to open the mind in order to facilitate the understanding of something more about the topic.

Realize: ‘Morality’ is thought of, by some, as having mainly to do with sex. And, ‘morality’ is often thought of as something that can only or mainly be revealed by God or by a different spiritual being, depending on one’s beliefs.

In other words, the topic of “morality”, when that term is used, often links the mind directly to these sorts of thoughts or assumptions.

But now consider this series of words ...

Conscious, informed, and responsible human sociality.

This descriptive phrase allows the mind to consider and understand “morality” in a way that doesn’t automatically lead one—consciously or subconsciously—to one of the many associations just mentioned, or others.

‘Sociality’ is a word that is often used in science and has mainly to do with interactions between and among individuals in a social species. It’s a term that is valid and uncolored, scientifically, and doesn’t constrain itself to the human species. Many insects demonstrate sociality, for example, as do many other animals.

The term ‘conscious’, of course, adds that very important dimension to the matter. Here, by ‘conscious’, I mean aware, capable of reflection, capable of choice, and so forth. By thinking in terms of “conscious sociality”, we avoid the mistaken assumption that “morality” is mainly about sex; we begin to better see the distinctions and degrees that differentiate human “conscious sociality” from the wide range of sociality exhibited by many other animals, in their own unique and often impressive ways; and we use a phrase that helps us (for the moment) consider the matter in secular terms. In other words, “conscious sociality” doesn’t carry the mind directly to considerations or assumptions about supernatural matters or the corresponding questions. It allows the mind to more readily consider the matter in secular terms, for a moment.

If one is talking about “human morality”, then the term ‘human’ in the phrase ‘conscious, informed, and responsible human sociality’ is a valid, clear, and helpful descriptor.

So, so far, we have “conscious human sociality”. This helps “make more clear” some things that the bundled term ‘morality’ might leave less clear, depending on the question being addressed.

Now let’s consider the addition of the word ‘informed’: This word is helpful, I believe, because it is common and reasonably clear. And, importantly, it relates to the idea, among others, that “with knowledge comes responsibility”. For example, it would be inappropriate to hold someone who lived two hundred years ago responsible for burning coal in his fireplace or in a local mill, in relation to the CO₂ emissions and the risk of climate change. People back then had no idea that CO₂ likely plays a central role in climate change. But today, it is

much more reasonable to consider that someone has a degree of responsibility if she/he runs an electric utility that insists on burning coal, even in the face of the growing scientific concern about climate change. Again, “with knowledge comes responsibility”. So, an addition of the word ‘informed’ to the phrase is helpful and adds a degree of clarity.

Finally, we have the word ‘responsible’. The beauty of that word is that we all “understand” it, to a degree, and it also forces thought.

After all, what is the difference between “conscious and informed human sociality” and “conscious, informed, and *responsible* human sociality”? That is one aspect of the crux of the matter.

Also, I like the addition of the particular word ‘responsible’ here for another reason: Not only does ‘responsible’ carry its main common meaning, but it also means “capable of response” and related matters. Sociality is about interactions (actions and responses and etc.) between and among individuals in a social species. Part of morality involves the positive response to morality and the mitigating or correcting response to immorality. Or, put another way, “response” is an important dynamic when it comes to sociality.

So now, consider the full phrase:

Conscious, informed, and responsible human sociality.

Notice that this phrase lets us know that what we are talking about does not only, or even primarily, relate to matters of sex.

Notice also that this phrase allows us to think of the matter in secular terms, at least to the degree that we are open to doing so and that we choose to do so, at least for learning purposes.

Notice also that each term in the phrase adds value and captures an important aspect of the matter.

Notice also that this phrase allows one to see (or at least to contemplate) the continuities and differences between “conscious, informed, and responsible *human* sociality” and the various different degrees and natures of sociality exhibited by a wide range of other living beings.

Finally, and importantly, **notice** that this phrase makes it easier to see, more clearly, the sorts of points I’ve been mentioning in the earlier messages.

For example, (and without intending to repeat arguments here that I've communicated before and in my papers), it is easy for historic reasons for many people to hold to the idea that "scientific understanding isn't relevant to the heart of morality" or that "there is an insurmountable gap between 'is' and 'ought'".

But when you look at this phrase, and consider it ...

Conscious, informed, and responsible human sociality.

... then it becomes much harder to hold onto those dramatic and line-in-the-sand sorts of conclusions. Indeed, this phrase makes it much easier to consider, discuss, debate, and comprehend advances.

Again, I'm not suggesting a change in terminology. The word 'morality' has much to it, and it's far shorter than saying "conscious, informed, and responsible human sociality". Nor does the acronym make much sense, i.e., "CIRHS".

But, the phrase has some merit when it comes to evaluating and considering advances in our understanding of human "morality". It makes it easier to see and discuss some aspects of the matter, especially within a secular scope.

Cheers for now, and thanks for your consideration,

Jeff