

# *What good am I?*

By Jeff Huggins

Welcome, and thanks in advance for your time and consideration.

If you are reading this, you probably already know why: I may have given it to you directly—hopefully with at least *some* context. Or, perhaps you’ve already read some of my other work. Either way, for present purposes, it’s probably easier—and more interesting—to dispense with further introduction and get right into the meat of the matter.

Here goes . . .

## **Scientific Context and Foundation**

Thanks largely to Charles Darwin, from the time he published *On The Origin of Species* in 1859, we’ve known—with increasing likelihood, confidence, context, understanding, and detail as science progressed—that we humans have been roughly but powerfully shaped by the evident reality that what works works, and what doesn’t doesn’t.

Imagine gathering the great insights and works of the following people and throwing them into a blender together: Charles Darwin, Gregor Mendel, James Watson and Francis Crick, W. D. Hamilton, Edward O. Wilson, Robert Trivers, Richard Dawkins, Robert Axelrod, Mark Blumberg, David Buss, Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, Frans de Waal, Jared Diamond, Michael Gazzaniga, Dennis Krebs, Donald Pfaff, Steven Pinker, Robert Sapolsky, Robert Wright, the entire fields of evolutionary biology and evolutionary psychology, and others.

(For readers concerned about sharp blades, I don’t mean for “throwing them into a blender” to sound painful or dilutive, of course, but rather combinatory and, to a degree, distilling.)

One essential dynamic that can be *gleaned* from the resulting, amazing mixture at a high level of distillation—and what can be said—will be obvious to many readers: Although some views differ, in degree at least, regarding the precise, or even (in some cases) mid-level, means by which evolution occurs, nevertheless,

there is at least one “macro” idea shared among the views: that selection shapes living organisms. Or, put another way, that what works works.

Of course, when we say “what works, works—and what doesn’t, doesn’t”, we use the phrase “what works” to mean what facilitates the continuation of some intimately interrelated combination of genes and corresponding behavioral dispositions—i.e., of *life*—from one generation to the next, and so forth. In other words, what works is (roughly put) what accomplishes *the continuation of survival from one generation of living beings to the next*.

(To avoid confusing baby with bathwater, and to hopefully head off interpretations that think I’m saying what I’m *not* saying—or at least *not intending* to say—I should briefly mention several points: First, this statement doesn’t assume to know the precise interrelationships among genetic-environmental-cultural factors within the context of evolution. (Note 1) Second, it doesn’t depend upon the precise “levels” at which selection takes place, or the interrelationships among the levels. Third, although the statement is focused on the continuation of life itself from generation to generation to generation, it does not mean, of course, that the various *means* and *enjoyments* of life—e.g., happiness, love, cooperation, etc.—don’t exist or that they don’t play vitally important roles. And finally, although the statement may sound mechanistic to some—perhaps especially to non-scientists—what it means is no more or less “mechanistic” than life itself, including the full range of experiences life involves.)

Being conscious beings, if we humans were to write an “aim” to reflect the foundational matter, it might be written as:

To, in effect, execute the foundational function of facilitating the continuation, i.e., the “passing forward”, of genes (and of corresponding learning and behavioral dispositions, etc.)—and thus also of human *existence* and human *life*—from one generation to the next, in a way that facilitates that next generation’s ability to accomplish the same, to a degree sufficient to keep the train moving, at least roughly, over the course of several generations.

(“Evolution” does not, of course, have any awareness, nor is it farsighted, nor is it anything other than a name for its corresponding processes.)

Although there are many passages in many great works that capture the essence of the matter, here are just two very helpful and illustrative ones:

“Impersonal, blind to the future, it [natural selection] has no goals, only results. Its sole standards of valuation are survival and reproductive success. From scattershot variations, culled and accreted, it produces pragmatic forms of order. . . . its products and byproducts are adaptation, complexity, and diversity.”

- David Quammen, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution*

“Current mechanisms of mind are the end products of a selective process, a sieve through which features passed because they contributed, either directly or indirectly, to reproductive success. All living humans are evolutionary success stories. They each have inherited the mechanisms of mind and body that led to their ancestors’ achievements in producing descendants. If any one of their ancestors had failed along the way to survive, mate, reproduce, and solve a host of tributary adaptive problems, they would not have become ancestors. As their descendants, people hold in their possession magical keys—the adaptive mechanisms that led to their ancestors’ success.”

- David M. Buss, *The Evolution of Happiness* (*American Psychologist*, January 2000)

As an important part of this picture, and given that we humans are a social species, our social-moral faculties (in a biological sense)—including the emotional-and-mental dynamics they enable, facilitate, and (in combination with our circumstances) motivate—and along with the corresponding behavioral dynamics they enable, facilitate, help inform, and help motivate—are most foundationally “about” the continuation of human life from one generation to the next.

Put another way—my aim here being clarity, not eloquence—these things are most foundationally “about” the continuation of *life*—the movement forward in time of *life*—from one generation to the next. Of course, they are *also* about other things—that is, about the *means* of implementing this foundational effective function, about the achievement of *subsidiary ends*, and about the achievement of *icing on the cake* along the way.

And, of course, they are far from perfect—in some cases, *very far from perfect*. Nevertheless, one can readily *glean* the *essence* of the matter from the blended soup described earlier: What works, works—and what doesn't, doesn't. (Note 2)

“By means of beauty all beautiful things become beautiful.”

- Socrates (as quoted by Plato)

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

- Leonardo da Vinci

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

- Francis Bacon

### **An Accurate, Fair, and Necessary Point**

But, of course, just because something *has been* a certain way in the *past*, and even up to the *present instant*, doesn't mean that it must be that way going forward—at least not when it comes to many sorts of things. (Things like time and gravity will probably continue to work in the future the same way they have been working so far, at least in our vicinity of space-time, and at least within time horizons relevant to us.) Many things can be reflected upon and examined. Some things can be changed, going forward. Some things—indeed, many—can be improved upon. Human beings can reflect, examine, reason, do differently, and choose—at least from within the wide scope that Nature's most fundamental principles allow to us.

Although many believe that “ought” implies “can”, this notion certainly doesn't mean that “ought” *is* “is”, of course, or that the two are necessarily related in any way: Not only are the two—i.e., *is* and *ought*—not identical, and indeed they are very different of course, but many people have come to also believe that it is *impossible* to arrive at any compelling “ought” whatsoever by use of excellent

reasoning applied to the entire scope of what “is” —and that the two are indeed *unbridgeable*.

For example, Note 3 contains two representative statements—one from the major media (in this case, *The New York Times*) and another from a distinguished scientific journal—that reflect the views of many philosophers, or at least reflect the understanding of those views on the part of reporters and the scientific community. Note 3 also contains a different sort of view, for illustrative purposes, held by some philosophers. And, of course, there are many views, held by some schools of philosophy, that aren’t contained in Note 3.

The differences *and* relationships between what “is” and what we mean by “ought” are *vitally* important, of course. The normative force of any compelling “ought” necessarily involves reasoned “justification” of some equally compelling sort, at least when the matter is being examined and considered. Philosophers have been grappling (to use a word from one of the quotes) with the matter of “is” and “ought” for quite some time, and it’s one of the key matters that the present paper and my other work are intended to address.

“Taking ourselves seriously means that we are not prepared to accept ourselves just as we come. We want our thoughts, our feelings, our choices, and our behavior to make sense. . . . We want to get things right. . . . To remain wantonly unreflective is the way of nonhuman animals and of small children. They do whatever their impulses move them most insistently to do, without any self-regarding interest in what sort of creature that makes them to be. . . . What counts is our current effort to define and to manage ourselves, and not the story of how we came to be in the situation with which we are now attempting to cope.”

- Harry G. Frankfurt (Princeton), *Taking Ourselves Seriously*, The Tanner Lectures in Moral Philosophy at Stanford

Continued . . .

“God, give us grace to accept with serenity  
the things that cannot be changed,  
Courage to change the things  
which should be changed,  
and the Wisdom to distinguish  
the one from the other.”

- Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Serenity Prayer”

“It’s a pretty good zoo,”  
Said young Gerald McGrew,  
“And the fellow who runs it  
Seems proud of it, too.”

“But if *I* ran the zoo,”  
Said young Gerald McGrew,  
“I’d make a few changes.  
That’s just what I’d do . . .”

- Dr. Seuss (Theodor Seuss Geisel), from the beginning of his 1950 book, *If I Ran The Zoo*

Of course, as Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out in his own way, some things *can* be changed, and some quite easily, while other things probably *can’t* be changed, at least as far as we can tell: It’s easy to change the color of one’s hair these days. Eating habits can often be changed, but usually with more difficulty. In many places, spouses can be changed, even for no reason. These days, one’s gender can even be changed, or at least adjusted. But, the color that pure Gold appears to us humans can’t be changed without fooling with our own eyes, with the territory between the Gold and our eyes, or with the type of light we shine on the Gold. And, can gravity itself be changed, by humans? As far as we can tell, probably not. Can the foundational role of *existence* be changed? Can our deaths come *before* our births, biologically speaking?

And too, what *aims* can we imagine having, as individuals *and* as a species of individuals? What aims *can* we have? What aims make *the most sense* to have at

a *foundational*—i.e., a necessary but not necessarily sufficient—level? And, what are the foundational aims that most of us will—or at least might—agree make the most sense to have—that we can hold and try to achieve *together* as a *social species* sharing *one planet*?

Can the foundational aim to continue life from generation to generation be changed? Is there anything else more foundational—i.e., better as a *foundation*—that reason would tell us to consider as the most foundational (i.e., necessary but not necessarily sufficient) aim?

Do we have compelling reasons to *reject* what is, in essence, in effect, the foundational (though unconscious) “aim” that we can glean from reflecting on evolution itself? *Or*, do we have better reasons to acknowledge and accept this “aim”, view it with a longer time-horizon, view it in the context of our interdependence with the biological and natural environments, examine it, and try to refine-out the rough edges and implement it in such a way that it can be lasting through time, i.e., sustainable?

And, if our best reasoning tells us that it would be much more reasonable to do the latter than the former—i.e., to accept and improve upon the aim rather than to reject it, at least tentatively, unless we someday find compelling evidence that it would be more reasonable to do otherwise—then what does that say in terms of the relationship between “ought” and “is”, at least with respect to the subject of the continuation of life itself?

### **The Human Situation: The *Self-Question* and the *Life-Question***

Shakespeare’s Hamlet famously asked himself

“To be, or not to be . . .”

More recently, Albert Camus, in the opening paragraph of the first essay of his book, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, wrote

“There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards. These are games; one must first answer. And if it is true, as Nietzsche claims, that a philosopher, to deserve our respect, must preach by example, you can

appreciate the importance of that reply, for it will precede the definitive act. These are facts the heart can feel; yet they call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect.”

(Note: I discuss some of the following in more detail in other materials. So, in the interest of preserving as much brevity as possible, I'll treat the material herein in somewhat abbreviated fashion.)

For present purposes, let's call the question Hamlet asked himself—and that Camus also identified and discussed—the *self-question*. Upon being born and growing to the age of self-awareness, each human individual is ultimately faced with this question, whether she or he recognizes it as such or not. Life itself *presents* self-aware beings with this question. Most, if not all, people probably wonder about this question at one point or another in life, or perhaps often.

We humans also face a directly parallel question at the *species* level, i.e., we face the human-species equivalent to the *self-question*. Indeed, members of any interdependent group face a similar question, as a group. (Imagine ten people on a life-boat.) To continue living, or to die? Let's call the species-level version of the question, the *life-question*.

At any given time, all living human individuals share a stake in—and play some role (relatively larger or smaller) in—this species-level *life-question*. Indeed, in some senses, previous humans (now dead) share a stake in the present *life-question*. And, in another sense, future persons, not yet born, also share a stake in this question. Put another way, all humans—past present and future—in some sense(s) share a stake in the ongoing human enterprise.

(That said, for present purposes, we'll stick to the concrete matter of the *life-question* as it's faced and felt by *living* members of the human species, although the living members are aware of their role, at least roughly, in the chains and circles of life.)

Note that this *life-question* will probably seem to many people to be more indirect and diffuse than the more personal and immediate *self-question*, the definitive responses to which are much more directly under one's own control, at least often. Nevertheless, the *life-question* is *not* imaginary, inconsequential, or “theoretical” by any means. It is a very real, practical, and consequential question—a vitally pertinent philosophical question. And indeed, in some respects, the *life-question* is a much “stickier” question than the individual *self-question*: Although an individual person can decide, or act, to end or devalue his

own life, an individual can't normally decide to end or substantially devalue the lives of many others and get away with it for very long. We are members of a social species. And we are "in this" together.

In facing the *life-question*, just as in facing the *self-question*, groups or individuals are afforded three possible responses, in essence:

1. To respond *affirmatively*, that is, in a life-affirming way;
2. To respond *negatively*, that is, in a life-defeating or self-defeating way;
3. To ignore, deny, or *pretend to avoid* the question.

In acknowledging the *life-question* and considering the three possible responses, it helps to keep in mind, or note, the following:

First, note that the *self-question* and *life-question* are not questions that we can choose to not "have." Better put, we can't choose a situation that doesn't in essence, in effect, present them to us—at least not without first responding in the form of suicide, in which case one avoids facing the question in the future by responding in the present. In other words, *life* presents these questions to us. We *inherit the situation* that contains and presents these questions.

Second, note that Response 2 and Response 3 carry with them problems that challenge most views of "reason" and "rationality". For example, as Camus points out, Response 2 seems to be inconsistent with the very notions of getting up each morning, eating breakfast, having children, and so forth. That is, Response 2 challenges the rational integrity and coherence between one's mind's thoughts and one's feet's actions.

Third (and also related to the above point), note also—and this, I think, is helpful to recognize—that reason *can* help us weigh the three options against each other. In other words, it is *not* accurate—at least not according to most definitions of "reason" and "reasonable"—to say that the *only* way to weigh these options against each other, in relation to each other, is to recognize emotions "in the heart" that tell us that we *desire* to live and then to make the choice from among the possible responses based *only* on such emotions or intuition, without substantial use of examination and reason.

We will consider the matter momentarily, but first there is another important point to acknowledge.

## Being Adults

Of course, as discussed earlier, “is” and “ought” are not identical and, indeed, are very different from each other in many respects. And, description and explanation are not the same as “justification”, excellent forward-reasoning, or compelling argumentation about the future.

But nevertheless, all of these concepts “exist” — at least in our evolved (though far from perfect) human minds—in the *same broad universe* with each other.

In considering the matter, it helps to consider the following:

If we want (for present purposes) to avoid assuming the existence of—or relying upon—a supernatural authority independent of humanity, then it follows, I suggest, that we must form our views and make our decisions based upon the best combination of empirical evidence (including observation) and human thinking we can muster: We must *reason* based on a combination of *human-gathered, human-interpreted evidence* and *human thinking*. Of course, as philosophers or scientists, we don’t assume that an independent supernatural voice will *tell us* the answer, “justify” our human existence *to us* and *for us*, tell us precisely what to *choose* or to *do*, bless us, or tuck us in at night.

Put another way, and more concretely, in this context we humans are left to ourselves to choose between Response 1, Response 2, and Response 3 to the *life-question* by drawing on a combination of *human* interpretations of *human-discovered* empirical evidence along with *human* thinking. (Note 4)

(To be clear here, by putting the word ‘human’ in *italics*, I’m not trying to express a view about the degree to which our empirical evidence actually represents the deepest workings of the universe: Is there one universe or three? Don’t ask me. Did time begin at some point, or is time without beginning? Don’t ask me. Instead, I’m simply pointing out that we can’t expect an independent supernatural authority to “justify” our existence *to us, for us*, or to tell us how to *choose*, especially in scientific and philosophical discussions that assume that such an authority doesn’t exist or, at least, that we can’t count on it existing.)

So, when facing the *life-question* and considering the three possible responses available to us, we must be “adults”. We can’t rely on mother or father to choose for us.

“Men at some time are masters of their fates.  
The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,  
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.”

- William Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* (Cassius speaking to Brutus). This idea is often paraphrased as, “It is not in the stars to hold our destiny, but in ourselves”.

“Man can will nothing unless he has first understood that he must count on no one but himself; that he is alone, abandoned on earth in the midst of his infinite responsibilities, without help, with no other aim than the one he sets himself, with no other destiny than the one he forges for himself on this earth.”

- Jean-Paul Sartre

### **Reasons, Integrity, and Coherence**

So where are we?

We humans face the *life-question*. There are, in essence, at the *macro* level, three *possible responses* available to us. And, we are left with using a combination of human-discovered empirical evidence, interpreted by humans, combined with human thinking, to make *the most well-reasoned choice* from among the possible responses. We can't expect an independent authority to choose for us.

These are not the only considerations, of course. But, given my goals for the present scope, space doesn't allow me to go into all of them. That said, I'll include here two quotes from Cicero and Aristotle to at least touch on two important considerations as we briefly consider the *life-question* and the notion of choosing from among the three responses.

The “way of thinking” and degree of precision intended in the combination of this paper and the balance of my work are illustrated by those expressed by Aristotle and Cicero long ago, as follows:

In his *Nicomachean 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?

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.”

With that additional context . . .

For present purposes, it’s helpful to note several things:

First, there is an important difference between knowing something with “certainty” and the task of using the best evidence and reasoning we humans can muster in order to choose the most well-reasoned, the most compelling, the most sensible of three responses to a key question we cannot avoid. *Certainty* is different from *choice*. Put another way, well-reasoned choices often don’t involve, or depend upon, certainty. Indeed, insistence on certainty often (one could say always, because “certainty” in its deepest sense has never been found) runs counter to the task of making well-reasoned choices on an effective and timely basis.

Second, of course, all choices and arguments are not equally “rational” and “reasonable” (i.e., compared with each other). If, at any given moment, we cannot ascertain something about “how the universe actually works” with

*certainty*, that doesn't mean, of course, that nothing can be said or that all arguments are equally invalid. There are *degrees* of "reason", "reasonableness", and "rationality", of course, that fall between "0" and "100" and that allow more compelling conclusions to be distinguished from less compelling conclusions and from assertions that aren't compelling at all.

Within our human systems of reasoning, there are several very *macro* considerations that many humans often use—either explicitly or implicitly—to weigh reasonableness and to try to determine the degree of strength achieved by a particular reasoned argument. We all know them, so I'll just briefly mention a few here:

- a) The consistency between the reasoning and the actual choices of the reasoner, at least with respect to major decisions (e.g., see Camus)—i.e., what one might call "mind-action integrity";
- b) The *internal* consistency and integrity of the reasoning as well as of the resulting system of conclusions it claims to support—i.e., the avoidance of internal contradictions;
- c) The "coming together" of diverse dimensions of the picture and of various lines of reasoning in a way that provides that "consilience" that Edward O. Wilson discusses and that sense that you get when you solve a crossword puzzle (e.g., see Susan Haack);
- d) The overall "coherence" of the view—not meaning the clarity of communication (after all, there are well-communicated poor arguments as well as poorly-communicated accurate arguments), but rather the overall "hanging together" of the threads and fabric of the view, to the degree that this sense of "coherence" is anything beyond the notions of internal consistency and integrity described in item "b", above.

In addition to these considerations, and others, there are still others that are not always considered when approaching a question in a way that doesn't attempt to tie somehow to empirical evidence and observation. For present purposes, I'll mention one of those considerations, as I see it:

A coherent and compelling view must acknowledge, reflect, and accommodate the "solution space" that is established by our ever-improving understanding of the dynamics of the universe (including the probabilistic nature of that understanding and the fact that it could be wrong in substantial part) combined

with the idea that Reinhold Niebuhr tried to capture, in his own way, in The Serenity Prayer. It seems to me that views entirely divorced from scientific understanding are ungrounded and, if they are contradictory to scientific understanding in fundamental ways, indefensible. It also seems to me that views that ignore Niebuhr's point miss that key part of reality, ignore the degrees of choice that we humans *do* have (or at least that we perceive that we have), and ignore the very real difference between the past dimension of "is" and the future dimension of what we mean by "ought".

(For relevant related discussions, see Kwame Anthony Appiah's *Experiments in Ethics* and Nicholas Maxwell's *From Knowledge to Wisdom*.)

So, to capture a part of the recent discussion, I think it's reasonable, of course, to say this: that reason and rationality can, of course, be very important ingredients in making *well-reasoned choices!*

I think it's also important to point out, even at the risk of redundancy, that in important senses it's not "reasonable" or rationally compelling to knowingly ignore or avoid a question that one has no choice but to face—at least not a question such as the *life-question*, and at least not in the context of an energetic philosophical quest. I would argue that we shouldn't try to ignore or avoid the *life-question* or the realization that we inevitably must respond. When one faces a question of such importance, then can it be considered to be consistent with reason, to be rational, and to be "reasonable" to perpetually delay responding to (i.e., "answering") the question and recognizing the direct implications of the response—*unless* one has very good reason to believe that one will soon have evidence that will allow one to address the question with a considerably higher degree of confidence or even, perhaps, with "certainty"?

In making some earlier and recent comments, I'm *not* suggesting that emotions and emotion-informed intuitions don't matter, of course. Indeed, emotions and intuitions that we could reflect upon, and that we do reflect upon, and that would survive an examination of the sort that Socrates might suggest, would and should *also* lead us to an affirmative response to the *life-question*, that is, to Response 1. (That's one reason why there are nearly 7 billion of us!) Instead, I'm suggesting that any reasonable definitions of human "reason" and human "rationality" *also* support an affirmative response to the *life-question*. In other words, an application of *excellent human reasoning* also supports *choosing* Response 1 over Response 2 and Response 3.

(Needless to say by this time, of course, is that if we are searching for a “pure and excellent reasoning and rationality” as it might exist in the mind of an *authority independent of humankind*, or as it might exist built into the universe itself, then it’s quite possible that such a “pure and excellent form of reasoning” might not care about humankind one iota. In fact, if we assume for present purposes that such an authority does not exist or that it can’t be connected-with in a compelling empirical way, then we are left to use the best human reasoning available to us in order to choose from among Response 1, Response 2, and Response 3.)

Although the following considerations are *not* the entire argument, nevertheless, I think much can be learned by considering the following statements and some of their implications:

- *Certainty* is different from *choice*.
- We humans, for purposes of philosophical-scientific arguments, can’t assume that an independent (from humankind) authority will “justify” our existence *to us* and *for us*, or tell us what *choices* to make or what precisely to *do*.
- Excellent reasoning and rationality can, of course, be very important ingredients in making *well-reasoned choices*.
- Some questions can’t genuinely be avoided, or, put another way, some situations are such that we humans respond one way or another, whether we do so with awareness and explicitly, or not.

It’s also interesting to consider that, sometimes, excellent reasoning and the *quest* for *certainty* diverge from each other (in terms of the choices they recommend), advise different choices, and result in different *sorts* of very real results. That’s an interesting subject to explore further, but well beyond the present scope, at least in some senses. But, this general pattern, or related patterns, of course, can be seen at every level of life: If I don’t step outside my front door each morning until I’m *certain* that I won’t get hit by a car or by lightning, then I’ll never step outside my front door. If we humans wait until we know the precise degrees of the climate change problem, and until climate calamities forcefully demonstrate the matter to us, with “certainty”, before we do anything to address the matter, then the world will most likely be a different place after that point in time than it would be had we been willing to act sooner based on science, probabilistic assessments, and excellent reasoning. (Note 5)

“Some people would rather die than think; and many do.”

- Bertrand Russell

## **And The Rest**

As they say, *And the rest—as important, as grounded in science, as sound in reasoning, and as solidifying as it is—is detail.*

Because of the scope of this particular paper, the discussion above includes an important *part* of the overall argument. Laying out other, complementary, more-detailed aspects of the argument here would be increasingly redundant with my other materials. So, for present purposes, I'll simply present one expression of one important conclusion, and refer readers to a few other materials. Those other materials go deeper into the science (though still with a focus on the essentials), put matters into premise-conclusion form, identify subsidiary conclusions, explain the “justificatory” dimension and force of the argument and conclusions, add one or two additional considerations, provide illustrations, and so forth.

Nevertheless, for present purposes, and realizing that such statements are susceptible to misinterpretation when they are offered without detailed context, I offer the following statement to represent one key conclusion resulting from the above considerations, the science of the matter, and my broader work:

**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.**

And, I list, below, other materials that explain other portions of the argument and also explain the above-mentioned portions in different ways. (See the section below, titled “Materials”.)

I should also at least touch on (more explicitly than above) a subject that's discussed in much more detail in some of my other materials: that is, addressing the question of "is" and "ought" with respect to the matter at hand, i.e., the ongoing movement from generation to generation of life itself.

In terms of materials regarding (in part) that subject, I suggest that audiences read "On Morality" (the paper, not the abstract); "Some Roots and Relations, Noted"; "Regarding 'Directional Dynamics' and 'Normative Facts'"; "A Framework and Paradigm Of Morality"; and "The Nature of the Relationship Between *Is* and *Ought*".

(I'd also be happy to provide an assortment of organized quotes from David Hume on the subject that may be helpful for those who would like to understand in more detail how the present argument addresses Hume's famous passage. That assortment is available upon request.)

Although other considerations also touch on the subject, in a nutshell, the relationship between what "is" and what we mean by "ought" on this matter of life's continuation—covering the descriptive, explanatory, *and* justificatory dimensions—involves a complementary combination of several things: the existence and dynamics of a string of cause-and-effect relations between what "is" and what we mean by "ought"; a series of rather basic and, in hindsight, obvious premises; and the considerations and reasoned choice discussed in this note, above. A number of sensible, and very real, premises among the larger set of premises (see my other materials) play important and strong roles in giving normative force to the "ought" of the matter when they are made relevant by, energized by, and given force by the considerations and reasoned choice mentioned above. Another good way to explore these relationships is by considering my note, "The Relationship Between Morality and Sustainability: A *DIY Exploration*".

(It is also helpful to note that concluding—or accepting the assumption—that we humans can't rely on finding an independent (from ourselves) absolute authority to justify our existence *to* us and *for* us, is *not* the same as concluding that "ought" doesn't exist *or* concluding that there is no solid way to derive a forceful normative "ought" that is more compelling and more grounded in scientific evidence and understanding than are incompatible alternative "oughts". Put this way, this statement may seem obvious. But, some existing paradigms and analytical tools seem to make this mistake, at least when they are not used very cautiously and when they are used without a clear understanding of the various possible senses and sources of "justification".)

Before moving on to the final sections, I think it will be helpful, for some audiences, at least for contextual purposes, for me to also offer (or acknowledge) the following points:

Some audiences that *assume* or *intuit* the intimate connection between life and “value” may find the corresponding conclusions to be obvious, or at least not surprising. That’s fine and good, and to be expected. Hopefully this particular line of reasoning (along with complementary information and arguments in my other materials) will help add substantially more grounding and confidence to their views and will help shed light on important contours and dynamics of the matter. Also, of course, the analysis presented herein and in my other materials relates morality, “ought”, value, and so forth to the ongoing enterprise of life and not solely to the notion of an individual’s own *individual* life. So, when I, or anyone, use the shorthand connection between “life” and “value”, we should realize that not all views that acknowledge this intimate and (in some senses) defining connection see it in the same way or even in remotely similar ways. The life of any particular individual is vitally important, of course, and is part of the larger picture, but, nevertheless, the life of a particular individual is not *identical to* the matter of the ongoing enterprise of human existence.

If, on the other hand, a member of the audience feels himself (or herself) temporarily blocked from accepting the present view by an assumption or view that the “is-ought gap” cannot be bridged with respect to *any* matter whatsoever—that is, that the two can’t be linked, and that no “ought” can ever be derived from what “is”—then such audiences now have the foundational beginnings of a compelling response to that assumption or view. The only reason I say “beginnings” is that the rest of the matter is presented in more detail in my other materials. Most of the energizing ingredients are introduced above, but the “connecting of the dots” is done more explicitly in the other materials.

Or, if you are a scientist, and if, perhaps, you have assumed in the past that the matter is simply “obvious” from the basic science (e.g., from the first section of this paper, including the matter represented by the quotes of David Quammen and David Buss), and if you have therefore ignored or discounted the importance of some appropriate and well-reasoned philosophical questions, you now know: those questions are indeed valid and very important; but they *can* be addressed. That said, it is vitally important to understand *how* and *why* they can be addressed, and with respect to what matter (i.e., life’s continuation) they can be addressed. It’s also very important to understand where (i.e., with respect to what other questions and matters) they *can’t* be addressed, i.e., where “ought” cannot be derived from “is”, and why.

Or, if you have come to believe prior to today that the deepest level of moral grounding must come from the notion of “intuition” or that of “volitional necessities”, or etc., or that the farthest and deepest one can go is to that level explained by pluralistic “*proximate* adaptations”, or by the substantially intuitive acceptance of “normative facts” (that may not always be grounded in the sort of reasoning presented herein), then I would like to convince you that one can indeed go much deeper, to the deepest bedrock accessible to us, in order to provide a more full foundation for our understanding of morality and for finding, acknowledging, and supporting some central normative “oughts” in grounded ways.

### **Apologies**

Thank you in advance for reading and for your time and consideration. I have, admittedly, focused more on “substance” and have thrown considerations of eloquence and brevity pretty much out the window. I’m sorry, and I apologize. Again, I appreciate your consideration, and I hope the discussion has been helpful.

### **Materials**

The following materials are available (see below), some of them on my website and some of them by request. My website is [www.ObligationsOfReason.com](http://www.ObligationsOfReason.com) . Interested parties can reach me via e-mail through my website or directly via e-mail at [huggyje@comcast.net](mailto:huggyje@comcast.net).

- ❖ *What good am I?* (the present document)
- ❖ On Morality: A View and Argument (a recent abstract)
- ❖ The Relationship Between Morality and Sustainability: *A DIY Exploration*
- ❖ Illustrative Quotes
- ❖ Some Roots and Relations, Noted

- ❖ On Morality
- ❖ A Framework and Paradigm Of Morality
- ❖ A Few Paradigm/Frame Shifts
- ❖ Regarding 'Directional Dynamics' and 'Normative Facts'
- ❖ Portions of the Supporting Argument In Additional Forms
- ❖ Responsibility
- ❖ The Nature of the Relationship Between *Is* and *Ought* (fairly old now, and most of the matter is better presented in the other materials)
- ❖ The Nature of Morality (fairly old now, and the matter is better presented in the other materials)
- ❖ My initial book: *The Obligations Of Reason: Exploring the existence, nature, dynamics and implications of the Natural Moral System* (2006)

Continued . . .

“What good am I if I know and don’t do,  
If I see and don’t say, if I look right through you,  
If I turn a deaf ear to the thunderin’ sky,  
What good am I?”

- Bob Dylan, *What Good Am I?*

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

- Albert Einstein

“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.”

- John Muir

“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

“The unexamined life is not worth living.”

- Socrates

“Character is destiny.”

- Heraclitus

“A little bird did sing  
Man loses all  
When he wants everything”

- *Scarlet Tide*, sung by Joan Baez (by Elvis Costello/Joseph Henry Burnett)

## Notes

### Note 1:

Consider the following sampling of very relevant—and excellent—work involving, among other things, the origins and mechanisms of human social-moral faculties and dynamics as related, in particular (for present purposes), to the intimate interrelationships among genetic, environmental, and cultural factors: Darwin; E. O. Wilson (e.g., “Evolution ‘for the Good of the Group’”, *American Scientist*); Richerson and Boyd (e.g., *Not by Genes Alone*); de Waal (e.g., *Primates and Philosophers*); Blumberg (e.g., *Basic Instinct*); Sapolsky (e.g., *Monkeyluv*); Cosmides and Tooby (numerous); and Krebs (e.g., “Morality: An Evolutionary Account”, *Perspectives on Psychological Science*).

Although different in some respects, these views and works share something very foundational in common: *the role of the very notion of “selection”*. In other words, what works, works. These works all reflect the *macro* dynamic of the nature of life itself in the context of time’s forward movement. Another way to put this is as follows: These works all reflect the reality of the limited (in time) duration of the life-spans of *individual beings* along with the notion that genes, the corresponding dispositions they enable, and the corresponding learning mechanisms they enable, (i.e., taken together, *life*), have discovered ways to “copy forward” from generation to generation according to “what works, works”.

Of course, the actual, specific, intimate interrelationships among genes-environment-culture, and the mechanisms, *matter* when it comes to many questions—and are also immensely interesting to try to understand. That said, it’s helpful to note that, when it comes to the actual question I’m trying to address in my work and to discuss herein—a vitally important question at the “30,000-foot level”—the precise answers to the question of how genes-environment-culture dance with, and influence, each other are not relevant. (If a reader doesn’t see this quite yet in the progression of discussion, it should become apparent as we move through the argument.)

“But,” one might ask, “how can a precise detail about the dance among genes-environment-culture *not* be relevant on this matter, even to a question at the ‘30,000-foot level’?” The answer to this question comes from the facts that all

views mentioned in the list share some fundamentals in common; that we can readily glean the essence of what they hold in common; and, that it is this commonality that is relevant for purposes of the present matter.

**Note 2:**

It's interesting to playfully imagine what life might be like if the universe somehow worked in such a way that individual longevity was the final basis of "selection", or that truth and justice were the final bases of "selection", or that "personal happiness" was the final basis of "selection", or even that basketball prowess was the final basis of "selection".

For example, if individual longevity were the final basis of "selection", people might live to be thousands of years old and then (if they were squashed accidentally) rise up again like the Phoenix or, at least, spontaneously reproduce at the last minute before death.

Or, if truth and justice were the final bases of selection, I wonder if "evolution" would have resulted in people who, if they tell lies or cheat, grow Pinocchio-like noses in order to draw the attention of honest and just beings, who would then promptly do away with them? (Did I get that right?)

Or, if personal happiness were the final basis of selection, and if it weren't coupled to behaviors that, on average, lead to reproduction, I'm not quite sure what life would be like. Would beings be blissfully happy—but extinct? (This would almost certainly be the case in the present universe if beings spent all of their time being content and happy and avoided the troubles of reproduction and self-preservation.)

Or finally, if basketball prowess were the final basis of selection, we might have some people who were thirty feet tall, others who were as fast as bullets, and others who could shoot baskets successfully from 50 yards. Now *that* would be quite a game to watch!

**Note 3:**

Consider the following two back-to-back passages that appeared in a major article in the Tuesday *Science* section of *The New York Times* regarding the work of

Frans de Waal, titled “Scientist Finds the Beginnings of Morality in Primate Behavior”, by *Times* science reporter Nicholas Wade (March 20, 2007):

Philosophers have another reason biologists cannot, in their view, reach to the heart of morality, and that is that biological analyses cannot cross the gap between “is” and “ought,” between the description of some behavior and the issue of why it is right or wrong. “You can identify some value we hold, and tell an evolutionary story about why we hold it, but there is always that radically different question of whether we ought to hold it,” said Sharon Street, a moral philosopher at New York University. “That’s not to discount the importance of what biologists are doing, but it does show why centuries of moral philosophy are incredibly relevant, too.”

Biologists are allowed an even smaller piece of the action by Jesse Prinz, a philosopher at the University of North Carolina. He believes morality developed after human evolution was finished and that moral sentiments are shaped by culture, not genetics.

For additional context, consider also this passage from a summary by the highly-respected scientific journal *Nature*, titled “Evolution and the brain”, which appeared in the 14 June 2007 issue:

Moral philosophers often put great store by their rejection of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, the belief that because something is a particular way, it ought to be that way. Now we learn that untutored beliefs about ‘what ought to be’ do, in fact, reflect an ‘is’: the state of the human mind as an evolved entity. Accepting this represents a challenge that few as yet have really grappled with.

Finally, consider the following helpful—and open-minded—comment from the noted philosopher Peter Railton:

[The] ‘is’/‘ought’ gap, and the naturalistic fallacy are perhaps better seen as warnings than as outright barriers, reminding us of ways in which the project can fail, and indeed often has failed. But they should not warn us off the project altogether, since the need to ask how morality fits with our best empirical understanding of ourselves and our place in nature and history arises from within normative moral thought itself.

**Note 4:**

It's interesting to wonder what "evidence" might look like that might tell us that we humans ought *not* to live or ought *not* to strive to continue our species from generation to generation.

If, on a large scale, we heard a voice or received a message in one of our own human languages telling us one, or both, of these things, we would either find it to be "unconvincing" or, perhaps, we might struggle to avoid the pronounced sentence. In any case, for present purposes, we have ruled out this scenario by assumption. That is, for present purposes, we are assuming that we can't count on the existence of an independent absolute authority.

But what if *Nature itself* offers us empirical evidence of the sort that science can understand and that reasoning can process and interpret? What if Nature itself provides evidence that humans ought *not* to live, or that humans ought *not* to strive hard to continue the human enterprise from one generation to the next? What would such evidence look like and feel like? Could such evidence possibly provide conclusive certainty that we humans shouldn't live or, instead, provide independent authoritative "justification" for our ongoing existence?

Of course, Nature provides evidence to us *all the time*, and sometimes very forcefully. Nature tells us, as far as we know, in its own way, that we humans cannot survive without oxygen. Nature tells us that we can't survive at the center of a black hole. Nature tells us that there is only a narrow range of conditions within which we *can* live, but that within those conditions, we can live fairly well, at least for a while.

Of course, many people do *not* reproduce, either because of their situations or because of what their own natures tell them or allow them to do. And, some people commit suicide, and some others "give up" because of deep depressions or other factors. So, Nature's principles are sending us "signals", allowing us some things, and prohibiting us from other things, every day.

Of course, there is (by definition) "nature" and there is "supernatural". For present purposes, we have agreed not to count on the "supernatural", by assumption. When it comes to Nature, on the other hand, Nature is precisely what science tries to understand. In other words, our best understanding of Nature comes via careful observation, empirical evidence, and the scientific quest.

The reason I mention these things, that might seem so obvious, here, is this: Given our agreed assumption to rule out, for present purposes, an expectation of finding an independent absolute supernatural authority, it is *very, very hard to even imagine* what sort of future “evidence” would convince us with certainty that we ought *not* to live or that we ought *not* to try to continue the human species. Indeed, the only way for Nature to “speak” with such certainty to us would be for it to wipe us out, for example, with a huge asteroid or with some sort of natural disaster, whether instantaneous or slowly-evolving. But, and it’s interesting to note, that even if this were to occur, we would then conclude that we *can’t* survive (under those circumstances), but we would still not really interpret this in a moral sense as if Nature were telling us that we *ought* not to survive or at least to try. This in some ways is related back to the matter of “ought implies can” and to the differences and relationships between what “is” and what we mean when we say “ought”.

We humans understandably don’t interpret things like intense fire, or black holes, or oxygen-starved vacuums, as if they are empirical evidence that Nature is telling us that we can’t, or shouldn’t, live under *any and all* circumstances. Instead, we see these things as if Nature is merely demonstrating to us that we can live within certain conditions but that we can’t live in situations that don’t meet those conditions or within which we can’t manage to meet those conditions ourselves.

#### **Note 5:**

I thought I’d try to reduce this portion of the argument to keywords and key phrases. They would be: Situation. Question we face. No assumption of, or reliance on, any genuinely independent absolute authority to decide *for* us or to “justify” ourselves *to* us and *for* us. Available resources of human thinking and empirical evidence that we humans find and interpret. Three *macro* options. Reasoned, comparative, and coherent choice. Context of Nature’s universal fundamentals.

Indeed, much of the matter can be boiled down even further into: *situation, options, response.*

And indeed, by seeing the matter in this simple, conceptual, but very real fashion—as *situation, options, response*—one can learn a lot, I would argue, about morality and about many aspects of the philosophical quest more broadly.

The natural universe (including ourselves within it) can be understood in this way, of course—that is, as *situation, options, response*—at least within our region of space-time, as far as we know. And, *life* (broadly speaking) can be seen in this way. And, *human life* can be seen in this way. Many of the main differences, of course, have to do with sensual experience, degrees of freedom, degrees of awareness and self-awareness, reproduction (e.g., rocks don't reproduce), emergent abilities, and the notion that Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out in his own way in The Serenity Prayer.

As one example, it seems reasonable to suggest that we shouldn't let our own historic paradigms blind us, mis-channel us, or tie us into knots trying to find "certainty" in situations when doing so eliminates more well-reasoned options or needlessly delays more well-reasoned responses—e.g., when doing so causes us to dangerously delay implementing that of which we already have a high degree of reasoned confidence.