

Discussion Paper: Identity, Determinism, and the Moral Consensus

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If there are no *objective* moral facts, that is, no *objective* moral prescriptions, indeed, no categorical imperatives—figuratively, written-large on the aether—then what of *moral import* can be reconciled with the consequent state of being?¹ What of *moral import* can be salvaged from the ashes of *realism*? In particular, is there a context in which *meaning* can be ascribed to notions such as *moral virtue*, *moral duty*, or indeed, *moral agency*?

A denial of *objectivity*—implicit and explicit representations of *objective* moral facts—arguably, precludes as the *origin* and foundation of an *emergent* moral prescription both *divine purpose* and a *collective consciousness*, specifically, a *particular* genetic-endowment from Nature (as *state and process*) to sentient beings.² Indeed, if Nature is, in essence, an *autonomic process* of ubiquitous change in *state—physical state*—then Nature is without purpose, both moral and functional purpose—without intent—and, of course, without expectation. An autonomic process characterised by biochemical, biophysical action and reaction initiated by an energy-gradient that (contextually) stabilises or destabilises *composition and configuration*; an energised environment that initiates change and, importantly, facilitates (or not) the development (or evolution) of complexity: for example, the complexity (and diversity) that develops as (chemical) elements associate and disassociate, compounds form ... chromosomes divide, and *cells* and (non-sentient) organisms of varying complexity *replicate*—contingent replication, of course, without intent, without purpose.³ Nature, therefore, is amoral. Nature would neither confer moral rights, nor confer moral responsibility.

Of course, *moral action* demands intent, and intent necessitates *cognitive capacity*, and if Nature is merely an autonomic process of change, what then is the *genesis* of that intent, indeed, what then is the *genesis* of that cognitive capacity? Arguably, it may be conjectured that the *genesis* is *non-primitive* complexity. The *function* of a purpose-designed and finely-crafted analogue watch is not *within* the individual isolated-components of the mechanism but *within* the synergic complexity of that mechanism. Comparably, it may be conjectured, that the *genesis* of intent, and cognitive capacity, is *within* the synergic complexity of the sentient organism.

¹ In this context, *objectivity* should not be confused with the *collective subjectivity* that informs consensus.

² *Consciousness*: in the inclusive sense of *thought* and *feeling*.

³ The qualification *non-sentient* implies that *intent* necessitates cognitive capacity.

If purpose gives meaning to life and Nature is without purpose then is existence, as such, without meaning? If complexity engenders *consciousness* and a cognitive capacity that initiates the *perception of desire*, perhaps *hypothetical imperatives*, then it may be conjectured that the purpose of life is the satisfaction of desire; and that the pursuit of desire's satisfaction is what gives meaning to life. Desire informed by genetic-endowment, experience, reason, nonsense, and the imagination. Furthermore, if one acknowledges that sustained benefit to the individual is afforded, most effectively, by the common endeavour—the *rational* recognition of the pragmatic value of co-operation—then a foundation for *morality* can be established.

A *moral construct*, a *moral code*, therefore, is (in this context) an *artificial framework* representative or expressive of rights and obligations for the purpose of securing advantage for *select-beneficiaries*: committed individual-members of a group or a community. Arguably, a social contract of mutual obligation and mutual benefit—the obligation of the individual to the benefit of the community, and the obligation of the community to the benefit of the individual—ideally founded on an acceptance of difference measured by goodwill: the goodwill of *natural disposition* or the goodwill that issues from the *rational* recognition of the pragmatic value of co-operation. (The diversity of preference—*difference*—present within a *multi-cultural* community, arguably, is both a wellspring of inspiration and enrichment, and a problematic source of tension and conflict.) Furthermore, it is important to note the *focus* of the moral construct, the individual: not a particular individual or group of individuals but *the individual*. And this emphasis on *the individual* highlights a stark contrast between traditional utilitarianism and the subsequently advocated moral construct.

In this context, *ethics* is expressive of the ideal against which *morality*, the pragmatic, is measured. And the *moral consensus* may be characterised as a *dynamic equilibrium between the desires of the individual and the needs of the community*: the ideal with its emphasis on the individual—as moral agent—in constant tension with the machinations of community.

Coherent action may be delineated, such that: to act upon one's desire is to act *coherently* regardless of whether the desire is *informed* by reason or *ill-informed* by nonsense; that is, to *not* act upon one's desire is to act *incoherently*.

If the purpose that gives meaning to life, the life of *the individual*, is the *satisfaction of desire* then it may be conjectured that a *first principle* of the moral construct is that a *sentient entity* has the *incontrovertible right* to pursue the satisfaction of its desire; or derivatively, that a *sentient entity* has the *incontrovertible right* to determine the *fate* of its being. Or alternatively, the principle may be

expressed, derivatively, as the fundamental tenet: *no one individual or group of individuals has the right to imperil the sanctity of another (individual being) in either mind or body*. Indeed, the fundamental tenet of ethics; the ideal against which the moral code, the pragmatic moral-consensus, is to be measured.

The perpetration of an unprovoked violent act against an individual or group would clearly represent a transgression of the fundamental tenet. And, arguably, the perpetration of a responsive violent act by a victim to defend against an attack would also represent a transgression. However, confronted with violence, if strict adherence to the tenet is observed only by the *meek* then the viability of the community may be undermined by the disruptive actions of the dysfunctional. Therefore, noting the premise that sustained benefit to the individual is afforded, most effectively, by the common endeavour, the community may countenance an appropriate and measured *violent* response exercised in self-defence by those who would otherwise seek to observe the tenet.⁴ Consequently, the *codified* moral-consensus, while measured against the ideal, may tolerate transgression of that ideal, indeed, in some circumstances may expect or even demand transgression.

Furthermore, a *passive interpretation* of the fundamental tenet may sanction the *inaction* of a non-complicit witness to an impending transgression, or the threat of danger, toward a third party; if an individual is exposed to jeopardy, a non-complicit witness (not party to the transgression) need not take action to assist the individual in jeopardy. A passive interpretation, arguably, follows readily from the first principle of the moral construct, namely, that a *sentient entity* has the *incontrovertible right* to pursue the satisfaction of its desire. Conversely, an *active interpretation* of the derivative, the fundamental tenet, may sanction, or prescribe, that if an individual is exposed to jeopardy a non-complicit witness should take action to assist that individual, certainly where such action would mitigate the harm, perhaps irrespective of the danger to the witness as a consequence of their (altruistic) act; arguably, in this context, to not take action would be considered an *indirect* act of transgression. However, if one asserts the first principle, a passive interpretation, then inaction would not represent a transgression of the tenet; though the moral consensus may prescribe otherwise premised on *collective* viability.

Traditional utilitarianism seeks to maximise the benefit to the maximum number of individuals. However, despite its simple expression and beneficent intent, the principle or moral construct prompts several, arguably, undesirable consequences. A *classic* example from the literature, consistent with

⁴ It could be argued that capital punishment is never an appropriate and measured *violent* response noting that: fact and evidence are precarious creatures, dysfunction is an indicator of genetic disorder and or environmental trauma, and importantly, how we regard and manage transgressors is ultimately a measure of our own humanity.

the utilitarian principle of *maximised benefit*, is the (hypothetical) case of one otherwise healthy-individual sacrificed, by having their organs harvested, for the benefit of many other individuals with otherwise defective-organs requiring an organ transplant to sustain their life. In contrast, the advocated moral construct asserts, by consequence, the *maximised benefit to the individual* not the *maximised benefit* to the maximum number of individuals. Those in need of an organ transplant, through misfortune or folly, will have to manage the *perils and perversity* of life: the risk of living.

Therefore, the representation of the ideal within a moral code reflective of the established (contemporaneous) consensus may be characterised as a tension between the *categorical ideals* of ethics and the *pragmatic conciliations* of morality; *subjective* conciliations, of course, in need of careful and vigilant review to counter the ubiquity of ignorance, malevolence, and poor judgement, and timely review to moderate the ubiquity of change in desires and needs.⁵

To reiterate, the individual's obligation is to the community; an obligation delineated by the moral consensus. The pragmatic moral-consensus (or moral-code) is measured against the ideal(s) of ethics; where sanctioned by the consensus, the individual may transgress the ideal but should not transgress the pragmatic. For example, the appropriateness of deception is contextual. However, arguably, in general the truth—the veracity of utterance and intent—indeed trust, is critical to the viability of community; and the viability of community is critical to the sustained benefit to the individual. Though (at times) the benefit may be compromised, in general, where there is an expectation of truth, a consequence of mutual consent and obligation, then one *ought* to be truthful.

If it can be asserted that all acts—including voluntary or involuntary acts of empathy or sympathy—are reductively acts of *self-interest*, such acts, nevertheless, may be considered acts of *moral worth* or *moral virtue* as a consequence of an incidental mutually-beneficial outcome: an outcome consistent with the moral consensus, consistent with expectation. In contrast, a *selfish* act, in its simplest manifestation, would be an act of self-interest that, by its nature and its extent, *significantly* contravenes the moral consensus and, potentially, undermines *community* and its capacity to benefit

⁵ A similar *matter of interest* may be noted: a *statutory* or a *constitutional bill-of-rights*? A statutory bill-of-rights—which documents policy (content)—is arguably more amenable to change, indeed, amenable to nuance through the accountability of limited-term legislatures: responsive to the currency of the will and capacity of a generation. In contrast, arguably, a constitutional bill-of-rights—which may otherwise function to treat matters of procedure, jurisdiction, and institutional stability—would be less amenable to change and, therefore, less responsive to the will of a (future) community.

the individual. An *action* of moral virtue, therefore, is simply an act contingent on the moral consensus regardless of *motive*; and *moral duty* is simply a contingent obligation that one owes to another—individual or community—by reason of mutual consent.

If motive is immaterial to the determination of the moral virtue of an action⁶, and since action (in this context) presupposes *agency*, is motive immaterial to the evaluation of *moral agency*, in particular, can *meaning* be ascribed to notions such as *praiseworthy* and *blameworthy*? Two important considerations of agency are *identity* and the *freedom to act*.

From infancy to maturation to death, change is ubiquitous and without release. Clearly, I am not the same person now that I was yesterday; indeed, I am not the same person now that I was twenty-years ago. Of course, the notion of *same* is not without qualification. Yet despite all of the changes that I have experienced—some fleeting, some lasting, some subtle, some palpable, some gradual, and some abrupt and disconcerting—throughout, I have held steadfast to the pervasive perception of an *enduring personal identity*; an *identity* that would appear to transcend the mere collection of attributes or characteristics that could be summoned to describe my being; the *present* physical- and psychological profiles: mutable.

Arguably, present and past (antecedent) profiles are important elements characteristic of an identity; however, it is the *connectedness* of these profiles that renders a unique characterisation of *persistent identity*.

This relationship of profiles forms a unique chronicle or *existential narrative* of an entity: an *existential connectedness* of uniquely differentiated, and evolving, profiles.⁷ The profile differentiation, and uniqueness, may be trivial or otherwise; indeed a profile, or collection of profiles, may be shared (vis. cell division), and yet individual entities will, nevertheless, possess unique narratives.

Of course, there is a sense in which everything is connected. However, by a process of reductive taxonomical-classification, an entity can be sufficiently delineated or isolated and, therefore, uniquely identified.

⁶ Of course, motive is not immaterial *per se*; an individual who exhibits a lack of compassion towards animals, indeed, is demonstrably cruel, is arguably *dysfunctional* and should, in the least, be held in *suspicion*.

⁷ A *narrative of connected existential-facts*.

And this narrative may include a discontinuity or a dislocation, accompanied by a temporary or permanent change in taxonomy (vis. the metamorphosis of a butterfly), or may even result in the demise of one entity and subsequent creation of one or more other entities (vis. cell division). One's identity, therefore, is congruent with one's existential narrative: a narrative informed by experience.

At the moment of conception, a nascent being, a *nascent identity* is delineated by its *genetic endowment*: an endowment that determines its physical and, in the case of a sentient being, its psychological *potential*.

Though a sentient individual cannot select their nascent identity, nevertheless, at that moment in time, that *kernel* is their *identity*. Furthermore, the endowment is *informed by antecedents*. The *informed endowment* is intrinsic to *being*: inseparable. And that endowment, whether a benevolent blessing, a benign legacy, or an insidious remnant of *external-agency*, that endowment is *who* that individual is at that moment in time.

From the moment of conception, to the moment of one's passing, an individual is *exposed* to their *environment*: a state, or process of interaction, aptly portrayed as one of competing demands and mutual influence. The individual is *conditioned* by the interaction and, reciprocally, *transforms* their environment. That is, once *sufficiently mature*, the individual *selectively appropriates* from their environment and develops. The *selective appropriation* from environmental externalities—the nature of what is appropriated—is determined by the individual's *state-of-being*: their *identity*. The individual has little or no control over the *environment of experience* or the *parameters of choice*, which of course may be influenced by external-agency, however, it is nevertheless the individual that is being *selective*. And the individual *selects* according to their physiological or psychological *state*: delineated by their existential narrative.

That which we appropriate is conditioned by who we are; and that which we appropriate conditions who we become.

That which an individual *appropriates* from *experience* becomes an *intrinsic* aspect of their *existential narrative*: an *intrinsic* aspect of their *identity*. That which is appropriated ceases to be *extrinsic* to their *being*. Since the individual determines or conditions *what* is appropriated, as a consequence, the individual (consciously or subconsciously) determines or conditions their development.⁸ And

⁸ The *subconscious* is an important determinant of character; an important *facet* and determinant of *identity*.

importantly, a failure or refusal, by theorists, to acknowledge the integration of *appropriated experience* into the *narrative* is a *denial of identity*; indeed, the classification and consequent exclusion of *appropriated experience* as external-agency may, in effect, render the *residual narrative* void, that is, render *identity* nondescript: an illusion.

The individual, as an *agent-of-choice*, selects and appropriates from experience. Irrespective of duress, hypnotic suggestion, or intoxication—conditions indicative of a present state-of-being—the individual selects and appropriates. *We experience, we appropriate, and we evolve.*

“Liberty consists in doing what one desires.”⁹

“[Others] ... define freedom as [the] condition when [one] is behaving under non-aversive control ...”¹⁰

Therefore, it is in the context of *identity* and *existential determinism*—an *existential narrative* informed by *appropriated experience*—that the notion of *internal-* or *individual-agency* receives meaning. If so, then *self-causation* is simply a manifestation of that internal-agency, and the expression of *free-will* or *freedom of action* is simply to act upon one's desire *free* of external (contemporaneous) constraint.

However, the spectre of *mind-control* raises a problematic concern. In the developmental process, *individuality* and its expression, in particular, the *satisfaction of desire*, are often constrained by the need to both *nurture*, and *socialise*. If *individuality* is enhanced by the constraint, in the nature and extent, of the *conditioning experience*, then does the suppression of *individuality* through *excessive indoctrination* render the distinction between internal- and external-agency moot?

Notwithstanding, an individual cannot choose their nascent identity, therefore, it follows that an individual cannot choose their *being, per se*. Figuratively, an individual cannot stand outside of their *being* and *fashion* that *being*. However, an individual—in the context of their state-of-being—can *fashion* who they become through the *determination* of that which is appropriated. Furthermore, arguably, an individual is not praised for choosing their *being*, but rather, an individual may be praised for the virtues that they possess: for being virtuous. Similarly, an individual may be admired for the qualities—for example, intelligence, creativity, perception—that they possess: for being intelligent, for being creative, for being perceptive. Conversely, a dysfunctional individual is not held

⁹ Mill, J.S. 1974, *On Liberty*, Gertrude Himmelfarb (ed.), Penguin, Middlesex, England. p.166.

¹⁰ Skinner, B.F. 1974, *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, Penguin, Middlesex, England. p.36.

in disregard for choosing their *being*, but rather, a dysfunctional individual may be held in disregard for their lack of virtue. Consequently, an individual may be praiseworthy or blameworthy, *morally responsible* or *morally irresponsible* often without concern for motive.

In conclusion, the denial of objectivity, the denial of moral realism, is not an impediment to the contextualisation of action as moral; a contextualisation that ascribes meaning to moral virtue, moral duty, and moral agency.