

On Reason's Relationship to Life—and Implications for Metaethics

(A Recent Abstract)

Jeff Huggins April 27, 2011

What is the nature of the relationship between human reason and the value that life (scientifically speaking) holds and/or demonstrates for its own survival and continuance (i.e., reproduction) from one generation to the next? And what are the implications of this relationship for metaethics? My presentation will address—and my earlier work does address—these vital questions.

Kant helped philosophers understand that if we are to use 'reason'—philosophy's chief tool—credibly, correctly, and in ways we can successfully defend, we must have an informed, correct, and defensible understanding of 'reason' itself. Using a misinformed or otherwise faulty understanding of reason to result in, and support, a claim that "reason supports conclusion X" is hardly better than inventing an imaginary tool—call it 'bling'—and using bling in a claim that "bling supports conclusion X." After all, who cares what conclusions are supported by bling? Similarly, who cares what conclusions are supposedly supported by 'reason' if it's a *faulty* understanding of 'reason' that supports them?

Yet Kant didn't have access to our modern understanding when he developed his understanding of reason. For example, Kant wrote most of his masterworks over seventy years before Darwin published *On The Origin of Species*. If we accept, based on modern scientific understanding, that human reason is an ability and "tool" of the

human cognitive (and related) faculties, and that those faculties are parts of and dependent on the brain and are products of evolutionary development, such considerations are relevant to our understanding of the nature, abilities, limits, credible uses, and potential misuses of reason.

Such understanding leaves intact the majority of our earlier understanding of reason, of course. Regarding one vital matter, however, an informed understanding of reason (based on modern understanding) yields conclusions that are different from those often thought to result from reason. The implications for metaethics and moral philosophy are immense.

Consider this (as well-accepted scientific understanding): A foundational aspect of the nature of life is that life values its own survival and continuance (i.e., reproduction) from the present generation to the next. (Whether with self-awareness or not—usually not—life normally has a strong tendency to value, to seek to do, try to do, or simply do, those things that serve to facilitate its survival and reproduction from the present generation to the next: e.g., cells divide, plants and animals strive to survive and reproduce, and so forth.)

The present question is not whether the scientific understanding expressed above is factually correct. Instead, the question is whether human reason (correctly understood and applied), upon considering the matter, supports or “affirms” the value that life holds for its survival and continuance (reproduction) from the present generation to the next. In other words, when faced with the question and possible choices this matter presents, what response on the part of reason (or of someone using reason well)—using

the scale/measuring-stick of reason, and considering all else “equal” or set aside for the purpose of answering the question—is the best-reasoned response, the response most consistent with reason, and the most reasonable response (etc.)? We must answer this question not on the basis of an *imagined* conception of reason, nor on the basis of a conception of reason that’s *incomplete* or *misinformed* in ways relevant to the question. Instead, we must answer on the basis of an informed, relevant, correct, and defensible conception and understanding of reason. To (try to) answer the question while ignoring an aspect of our understanding of reason that’s relevant to the question would be to answer the question out of ignorance—not something we generally aspire to do.

Some philosophical views hold (or at least seem to hold) that ‘reason’ should be understood to be wholly indifferent to life (including to the aim of the continuation of life) and that ‘reason’ has *only* to do with helping humans discern *truth* and with helping us determine *means* to ends that we have or choose based on different capacities and influences entirely, i.e., *not* based on reason. Such views hold that, if faced with Hamlet’s question—*To be or not to be?*—reason would either not recognize the question or would respond “Don’t ask me!” or “That’s not a question regarding which I have any real interest or say.” Such views misunderstand reason in an important, confusing, and debilitating way.

The ultimate (in the scientific sense of the word) effective function of human cognitive faculties has to do with facilitating the survival and reproduction of human life. In any case, we have these faculties today because they performed this function in our evolutionary past sufficiently enough to develop and persist to the present day.

And if human life ceases to exist—i.e., if human life doesn't continue (i.e., if we go extinct)—then human reason itself will cease to exist. Could it possibly be concluded, then, that 'reason' itself, properly understood, using its own measuring-stick (i.e., scale of assessment and judgment), would find that a response (choice) that results in life's cessation (including its own) and (on the other hand) a choice that results in life's continuation would be equally consistent with reason, equally well-reasoned, equally assessed according to the scale of reason, equally valued in reason's terms, and equally supported by reason? *No*.

The arguments (associated with these considerations and others) are compelling and the implications for metaethics are immense. I'll look forward to sharing them in Wisconsin if given the opportunity.