

HUMAN IDENTITY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

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Summary

This concluding section of the Theme level writing— ‘Philosophy and World Problems’— lays bare the inner logic of a comprehensive range of theories of human identity and the meaning of life to complete life-value onto-axiology as a universal philosophy of personal, social and planetary existence.

13.1. Beyond the ‘Right-to-Life’ Confusion

A stubborn block against understanding life value has been deep confusion on the concepts of “pro life” and “right-to-life”. The confusion lies in their confinement to a narrow case of life, if a life at all - the embryo within a woman’s body and its first period of gestation. Life-value analysis recognizes what is elsewhere unexamined, the invalid restriction of ‘right to life’ to an early reproductive moment of it, and the categorization of this position as ‘pro-life’. That all other ‘pro life’ and ‘right to life’ positions are thereby blocked out, including the life of the pregnant life host herself, is a fallacious structure of assumption. This is why the pregnant woman’s claim to a right to *her* life – to discontinue the pregnancy she is carrying - is falsely implied to be both ‘anti-life’ in nature and against the ‘right to life’ of human beings; while this very ‘pro-life’ and ‘right to life’ advocacy itself may be perfectly indifferent to young people’s lives in the wider world. These contradictory meanings are not confined to the rhetoric of a political sect, but have been normalized across public and professional discourses. For example, we do not hear of the ‘right to life’ of the tens of thousands of children who die daily from preventable lack of clean water, nor of the concept of ‘pro life’ applied to the social advocacy which condemns this mass human sacrifice. Ironically, those most outspoken about alleged ‘mass killing of babies’ show no evident concern to protect poor infants and children.

So widespread is this standardized inversion of the concepts ‘pro life’ and ‘right to life’ that when the author first introduced life-value theory to the Canadian Philosophical Association’s Annual Meeting in 1998, a well-known feminist philosopher repudiated the idea as ‘pro-life’ advocacy against woman’s choice. The author reports this event to illustrate the metaphysical stupefaction around this issue. When even a distinguished feminist philosopher cannot tell the difference between life-value understanding and opposition to women’s choice, and the other side cannot either, the muddle reveals just how life-value blind received positions can be even on the issue of life value itself. Life-value onto-axiology thus faces a hostile context in more ways than this study has so far explained – here as a downstream operation of the ruling syntax of value which is indifferent to life value by its nature. So it is worthwhile examining this dispute more

deeply, enlisting as it does governments, social movements and moral philosophers arguing on both sides. What has not been seen by any is that the concept of ‘*pro-life*’ itself *excludes almost all of life from its referent*. A rupture of confusion on the nature of life itself thus distorts both public and expert fields of meaning.

13.1.1 Applying the Method of Life-Value Analysis to Re-Ground Human-Life Meaning

As it stands, the issue which is seen poses “woman’s right to choose” as in ultimate conflict with “the right to life of the unborn human being”. Legions of people, states, activists and rights theorists adopt one side or the other in sustained elaboration of the one or the other position. What is in common among them is that all ignore the ultimate life-ground of value which life-value onto-axiology starts from – that is, that life is good, and is better the more coherently inclusive its thought, felt being and action (i.e., the more it satisfies the primary axiom of value). In contrast, virtually all disputants on the issue adopt the standard standpoint of exclusive rights in either-or opposition. As elsewhere, life-value understanding moves to a deeper and ultimate plane of analysis. It unpacks these unseen stacks of assumption into seven steps of the *life-value logic of resolution* which applies across domains of dispute. That is, this life-value logic:

- (1) Moves underneath all either-or exclusions to the common ground of life value to
- (2) Apply an impartial life-value test to both sides. Thus,
- (3) The normalized circle of sterile conflict in which each side obscures the underlying principle of life value in attachment to one aspect of it is re-set
- (4) To identify exactly what is at stake in life-capacity gain/loss in any conflict, so as
- (5) To establish the extent to which each position stands for or against life value; and so
- (6) Exposes false partialities masking or distorting the underlying life-value issue that ultimately counts, with
- (7) One ultimate criterion of life-value/disvalue applied as standard and measure throughout, the formal axiom of life value and its converse.

With respect to the woman’s “right to choose” whether to continue bearing an embryo or fetus, it follows, life-value analysis recognizes that the principal life value and capacities exist in the person who actually bears the organic life. Gain or loss of life-value and decision on how to live is hers by the objective life coordinates of life itself. For she alone in the world is the direct experiencer and carrier of the life. This is not an argument for private property, as the woman’s right has been often reduced to. It is a life-value diagnosis which explains and limits right claims. At the embryonic stage, all concept and image thought is borne by her. The felt side of being within is carried by her. She not anyone else lives the action of the one organism. All of these facts are undeniable – that is, they cannot be life-coherently denied – and all are basic to the ‘*right to life*’ of the pregnant woman herself and the fields of life she organically bears. The embryo bears little or none of them. Yet it gradually so qualifies in growing through the ontogeny of embryonic existence to fetal differentiation to eventually the stage when an organic human being has developed: that is, when it is no longer only “part of the woman’s body”, but a self-organizing unity capable of independent fields of life learning, sentience, affect and body action (i.e., the fetus could be delivered), however infantile these fields of life value still may be.

Thus in accordance with this development by life-value measure, the embryo/fetus within the woman's organism *is* of intrinsic worth insofar as it realizes and bears these life fields and value – beginning with intra-uterine movement, feeling side of being, and image thought in early form. Yet conversely, in proportion to non-existence of these fields of life value, the embryo or fetus is correspondingly lower in life value – not only, as Aldous Huxley clinically observes in *Point Counter Point*, “a potential fish”, but also an eventual human being. Life-value analysis does not validate the imagined future of someone who never exists any more than it values the image of a future full-grown fish at this stage. Yet it recognizes that projective imagination and its embryonic referent have life-value in their own right. In short, analysis is brought to ground by life-value standard. It therefore affirms the right of bearing mother and embryo/fetus as life value to the extent of fields of life borne – not by mere projection, which in this age has also revealingly conferred rights of super persons on lifeless corporate stocks. Moving beneath false projection of person rights onto non-persons, life-value understanding also recognizes what has been lost by this projection – that *together* woman and her gestation have compounded life value in *one* life, the pregnant woman. Here they incorporate in their unity opposing life values only by conceptually constructed reification of a non-person as a person. This is a metaphysical conceit which has oppressed the world at different levels. The passionate certitude with which such false reifications are proclaimed is long familiar in totems and cults, but now has many political legs. Imposing the rights of fabricated persons onto real-life persons is the problem. What is morally deranged is that the rights of non-persons and their interests override the life interests of real persons in the name of life.

At the most general level, life-value understanding stands for an opposite onto-ethic. It stands for what takes into account all sides from one common life ground of meaning: that is, what coherently enables life at all levels - *the life coherence principle*; and what upholds the value of life to the most inclusive level possible without life-value loss - *the life compossibility principle*. Life-value research finds that in fact almost any case of life-sacrificial trade-off is preventable beforehand, including abortions: although one would hardly know this in the endless of the “necessity” of pesticides, prisons, lay-offs, environmental destruction, foreign wars, and so on, all of which sacrifice human and fellow life in vast swathes at various levels. Revealingly, all of these are led or condoned by those ascribing person rights to non-persons.

13.2. From Human Life as Absurd to the Ecology of Life Value

The famous words of Ecclesiastes in the *Old Testament* testify to a long-haunting idea of the human condition. “Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I spent doing it, and, behold, all was vanity, and a striving after wind, and there was nothing new under the sun”.

Certainly the rule of the non-living over the living is not new in ruling structures of power. Yet this is a disorder philosophy is apt to avoid. The absurdity of human life itself is preferred. Thomas Nagel so prefers in his resonant article “The Absurd” (1968). He claims that human life is absurd from a reflective standpoint which recognizes the contradiction between a person's commitment to life's continuous tasks of work, family and so on as what really matters, and the known fact that “nothing we do now will matter in a million years”. Nagel argues that it is absurd for anyone to go on *being* so

committed when rational reflection teaches us we “will eventually vanish without a trace” and there are always “unsettlable doubts regarding any larger purpose that encourages the sense that life is meaningful”. One is confronted with a “detached amazement”, he says, that we could so live the absurd life. Yet, he concludes, this does not “really present us with a *problem* to which some solution must be found”. Rather it allows us to be fully human – to “transcend ourselves in thought” and “to approach our absurd lives with irony instead of heroism or despair”.

Nagel distinguishes his position from that of the existentialist Albert Camus whose famous *Myth of Sisyphus* published in 1941 is concerned with the issue of suicide as “the ultimate philosophical question” in the face of an “indifferent and hostile universe” where one is condemned to death in any case. Camus rejects suicide, and finds in the mythic Sisyphus a philosophical model to explain why. Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to roll a heavy rock uphill only to have it fall all the way down again so as to imprison him in this useless round forever. (Sisyphus was according to the story a deceitful murderer, but neither Nagel nor Camus pay attention to that.) Instead Camus reasons that human commitment to a task with nothing but the committed doing of it is a defiant human meaning which “uplifts from strength to strength”. “I picture Sisyphus as happy”, he concludes. These eminent philosophers both agree in conceiving human existence as absurd. But Nagel sees absurdity in the contradiction between our commitment to what we are doing in life and our “unsettlable doubt” about any wider frame of meaning to justify it when we step back to reflect on our condition. He does not share Camus’ anguish about, an “indifferent universe” which “fails to meet our demand for meaning”. And he does not with Camus find nobility in “contempt for the gods” or existential defiance of man’s condemned lot. Nagel’s affirmation, rather, is of our uniquely human capacity to “transcend ourselves in thought” above our mortal and limited condition.

13.2.1. Opening to the Ultimate Choice Space of Human Life

Life-value onto-axiology can agree with both philosophers. It can agree with Nagel that that humanity’s capacity to move to a non-positional consciousness *of* our life condition is of utmost and uniquely human value, indeed of infinite value as explained in analysis of this non-positional “thought field” in chapter The Primary Axiom and the life value Compass. It can also agree with Camus and his irreducible existential bravery in the face of an indifferent universe to choose to live fully and with commitment in felt being and action no matter *how* rigged against the human vocation it is by external powers – the lot of most impoverished people in the world today. Life-value understanding affirms these stands of human life identity and meaning within a universe that does indeed swallow individual lives indifferently. Yet it is on these accounts that life-value onto-axiology insists on going beyond the resolutions of ironic detachment in a “view from nowhere” (Nagel) and unbreakable defiance of one’s imposed lot in existential commitment (Camus). The problem once again is the atomic trap of human identity and meaning to which these positions are confined. However life-value understanding may agree with their pathways of resolution *from* this condition, a life-grounded onto-ethic requires one’s contribution to better the condition itself, an obligation of its *ecology of life value*. Neither philosopher nor indeed most philosophers appreciate that every moment of their lives depends on and is borne by this wider ecology of life value they

are enjoyers of and participants in. Nor does either, or any contemporary philosopher we are likely to know, recognize the uniquely human life capacity to *contribute life value to it* for as long as this wider social and natural life host evolves, and that could be effectively forever. One's individual organism may dissolve back into this eco-social life host, but *it* is changed forever in some small or significant way by one's life – even at the physics level of the fourth dimension of time.

Herein lies the ultimate choice space of human life and its meaning. Life-value understanding conceives the nature of the choice as choosing through every moment towards enabling or disabling the human and ecological life support systems out of which one came and returns to as better or worse by one's life - most particularly now as these life support systems are allowed to be cumulatively depredated by a man-made system of despoliation. While the underlying civil commons analyzed in the prior sections of this study are the macro human host and agency of this evolution, Camus and Nagel, typically of the age, disconnect from this life-ground dynamic and each person's life function within it. They do not recognize the fateful choice space between leaving the world as indifferent to life value as before and contributing to humanity's civil commons advance. The larger world in which one's life span is embedded is assumed as an indifferent maw in which no trace of people's lives ultimately remains. This is a reductive simplification which abstracts out the individual's ongoing role within this dynamic life host which is, in fact, influenced, however imperceptibly, by each one's lifetime within it. This is what the human identity identifies with.

13.2.2. Under the God of Tolstoy and Kierkegaard: The Meaning of Life in the Lost Infinite of the World

The great writer, Leo Tolstoy, holds also that human life is meaningless in itself, but does not cope with it, as Camus and Nagel do, by understanding and resolution at the individual level. "My question", the one which led me, at fifty years, up to suicide," explains Tolstoy, "was the simplest kind of question which is lying in the soul of every man - - The question is: 'What will come of my whole life?'" It is revealing to life-value understanding that Tolstoy only confronts this question after "being surrounded on every side by what is considered to be complete happiness - - beloved wife, good children, a large estate - - in full command of my physical powers - - and more than ever was praised by strangers and, without any self-deception, could consider my name famous" (*My Confession*, 1905). The "meaning of my life was still always, 'you are a temporal, accidental conglomeration of particles'". The "meaning of my life", Tolstoy concludes, "is *None*".

Only, Tolstoy continues, "by the relation of the finite to the infinite could there be an answer". The next and ultimate step he takes is somewhat familiar, but certainly different from the secular understandings of Camus and Nagel. He says: "No matter how I may put the question, 'How must I live?' the answer is 'According to God's law - - [and] the only "meaning which is not destroyed by death [is] – the union with infinite God, paradise". Life-value onto-axiology recognizes Tolstoy's account as well-known in professional philosophy as well. The one which comes to mind most clearly is the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard which we encountered in Section 7.4. Yet there is a radical difference within Tolstoy's and Kierkegaard's turning from the finite to the

infinite for a meaning to life. Kierkegaard, does not as Tolstoy, *bridge* the finite to the infinite by “union of the individual soul with God and paradise”, but rather the opposite. The individual is made prostrate in awe and trembling in his finitude by the purely transcendent power of God where “only the truth of the Incarnation of Christ” is accessible to experience.

Life-value analysis takes issue with the first step of argument which decouples from this world to find ground and meaning in the transcendent infinite of God. The central claim is that life in this world is essentially worthless in its finitude. For Tolstoy, human life without the otherworldly infinite is in the end merely “a temporal, accidental conglomeration of particles” which in death “destroys every possible meaning of it”. Life-value onto axiology recognizes, on the contrary, that an infinite is implicit *in* humanity’s life. It is not *merely* “the bourgeois mawkishness, torpor and sloth of the establishment” (Kierkegaard) or “a temporal, accidental conglomeration of particles” (Tolstoy). The implicit infinite of the embodied human condition already lies in its prior physical and cultural evolution which through infinite possibilities becomes physically encoded in human genes which eventually ensure in innumerable stored adaptations that almost every disease or carcinogenic sequence is recognizable by the body’s over three-billion-year development of immune system which began out of an estimated pre-life history of 13.7 billion years. Then there is the cultural evolution of humanity and civil commons over recent thousands of years which has developed every kind of social life support system to organize and create universal human life goods from language, arts and ever-advancing knowledge stocks to common water, waste cycles and modern electricity sources which are all governed by social rules systems which, in turn, manifest the unseen universal moral operators formulated by the primary axiom of value.

As we have seen in the prior five sections, these long-evolving community bases of life-enabling powers of human being form a this-worldly creation *across death* on which all rely to exist as human, and are more than ever at a turning point of their advance or regression – hardly a temporal, accidental conglomeration of particles or a bourgeois deadness of spirit. These comprehensions miss the underlying and cumulative infinitude of humanity’s ecological and civil commons developments over aeons and epochs, the omnipresent life host of possibilities which has been almost everywhere blinkered out. Herein lies humanity’s ultimate project and life-value meaning, a this-worldly infinite in process. It is remarkable that this infinite fabric of uplifting human life into which people are born, contribute to or not, and pass on within as the common life host of all could be so screened out. In the case of someone like Tolstoy whose ‘soon-dead’ life has, on the contrary, become a living field of sensitivity and voice to world society long after his passing, a precisely non-finite process is disclosed. Indeed the cumulative field of human life consciousness in which his life is a participating presence is an ongoing evolution of god-like consciousness powers through time, a deathless human subject which all benefit from as they become one with and extend it by their lives. When one considers as well that Tolstoy himself became through his crisis of death confrontation founder of a community of Christian-communist belief which lives on into the present in Canada thousands of miles away from his home in another country and long after his organic dissolution, the dualism he presupposes between the finite insignificance of human life and the divine infinite is rebutted by his own place in this wider human life

process. It is not the “extra-temporal, extra-causal, extra-spatial meaning of life” he claims in the onto-ethical schism of modernity he expresses. Rather, Tolstoy reveals what life-value onto-axiology recognizes as the collective *life unconscious* seeking expression in a life-disconnected form. While mainstream society continues to worship its atomic order as totem, the evolving life-grounded infinite is repressed and displaced onto an inscrutable and otherworldly God. Life-value onto-axiology instead re-grounds – not as Feuerbach does in God as an inversion of Man, but, more deeply, in the *lost infinitude between boundless consciousness within and civil commons evolution without*. God in some sense – for example, William James’ “mother sea of consciousness” - may be behind both, but as such is bridged to humanity, not alienated from its process of becoming.

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Biographical Sketch

John McMurtry holds his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Toronto, Canada and his Ph.D from the University of London, England, and has been Professor of Philosophy at the University of Guelph for over 20 years and University Professor Emeritus since 2005. He is an elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and his many articles, chapters, books and interviews have been internationally published and translated.