

On The 'Good Life' And Perpetuation Of The 'Self'

Andrei Li

On life, Mahatma Gandhi remarked that “morality is the basis of things”. What, then, is this moral basis? An individual’s values are determined by their subjective experiences. However, it is apparent that the definition of good lives is objectively determined by some fundamental value common to all humans. I will argue that good lives take preservation of the ‘self’, or who we identify ourselves to be, as principal objective. The things to which we attach the concept of 'self' determines the good lives which exist.

What is the defining attribute of life? In *What Is Life? The Physical Aspect of the Living Cell* (1944), physicist Erwin Schrödinger argues that life is any system preserving itself in opposition to entropy. He states that “a living organism . . . tends to approach the dangerous state of maximum entropy, which is of death” (71). To prevent this from happening, “an organism maintains itself stationary at a fairly high level of orderliness . . . [by] continually sucking orderliness from its environment” (73). For instance, when a cat digests a salmon, the fish’s orderly tissues are downgraded into a more chaotic form. The order from the fish’s tissues is 'transferred' to the cat’s cells, allowing the cat to maintain internal order. This process can only repeat for so long: the cat must thus reproduce, passing information about itself to its descendants. As any attributes hindering this process hinder said being’s probability of survival and reproduction, they would not be observed in subsequent individuals. I conclude that all

actions taken by evolutionarily successful living beings optimize their self-preservation and perpetuation.

One may consider these arguments as proposing that all living beings have awareness of this purpose. One may also interpret the existence of this shared goal as implying that there is a divine being directing all living beings. Although these may be true, awareness in all living beings or the existence of a higher entity are unnecessary. A geranium need not know that the healthiest individuals are the ones most likely to pass on their genes to future generations; nor does a divinity have to coerce the flower into following this rule. The living beings we see in the present day are those whose ancestors best accomplished this goal.

In the context of individualistic species, interpreting self-preservation is straightforward. For example, all of a male stag beetle's actions are oriented toward the perpetuation of its 'self': its physical form, encoded within its genome. To achieve this, the beetle may go to the extent of harming other male beetles. The only exception to this disregard toward fellow beetles is in the instance of one's own mate and offspring: the beetle will value their partner and their offspring's lives as highly as their own, as it is the only way they will be able to perpetuate their 'self'.

Although individualistic species directly fit the proposed pattern of self-interest, the selfless behaviour of social species, and of humans in particular, appears to challenge this conception. This said, as long as one properly defines 'self-interest', I argue there is no contradiction. One definition of self-interest is selfishness, where one's actions are entirely oriented toward biological gain without consideration for others' needs. One may alter this by broadening the meaning of 'self'. Through natural selection, human communities which cooperated and valued each others' lives were better able to handle the challenges of their

environment than their individualistically-minded peers. As such, our successful ancestors expanded their idea of 'self' to include their fellow humans. In their minds, this expanded the biological being from the 'self' valued for preservation.

The premise that humans evolved to value their fellow kin in order to benefit themselves begs the question: are altruistic actions truly oriented toward the betterment of others? Or are we actually performing 'egoistic altruism', where one benefits others in order to be later benefitted in return? From an evolutionary standpoint, it is more advantageous to perform the latter, as the community would then increase one's chances of biological self-perpetuation. Although these behaviours may apply for many people, and may have originated with this purpose, it decidedly does not apply to modern 'good lives'. Take the bystander who runs into a burning building to save the stranger inside. The bystander is not genetically related to the person in the building: in spite of this, they are willing to risk their life and their chance of self-perpetuation. Within the ego-altruistic framework, these actions appear foolish; however, within the context of a 'good life', these actions are noble. The bystander is not saving the other person because they predict they will yield a return: rather, the bystander considers the other person as part of their 'self'.

What if the methods which two individuals take to perpetuate their 'self' are conflicting? For instance, one person may advocate for more freedom, and another for more stability. It is evident that both values are in conflict to a degree: in order to have greater stability, one must sacrifice part of their freedom to an arbitrating authority in order to resolve conflicts, and vice versa. In these circumstances, I am inclined towards a utilitarian solution, where the needs of the plurality determine the course of action: if the plurality decides that stability is more important than freedom, or vice versa, then so be it. This solution has been demonstrated empirically to be

the general consensus, notably with the famous 'trolley problem', where a majority consistently chose saving five lives over one (Bourget et Chalmers, 2013; Navarette et al., 2011).

What are the limits of the 'self' that we take as goal to preserve? I propose that 'selves' can be divided into three general 'levels', and in turn 'categories' of good lives. The 'self' including fellow human persons is the first level: the associated good lives are based in altruism toward others. The next 'level' of 'self' includes objects which humans may physically interact with. This 'level' encompasses those who devote their lives to studying and safeguarding these mediums. The last 'level' expands the meaning of 'self' to objects beyond human influence. Those who devote their lives to contemplation on subjects beyond the first two levels (philosophical, religious, scientific, artistic) are those who fit in this category. I clarify that a good life classified at a 'higher level' is not superior to a good life classified at a 'lower level'. Rather, the latter only focuses more intensively on a smaller field.

It may seem that one living a good life in the 'highest level' cannot literally perpetuate the 'self' they value. This is resolved by including representations of these things as being part of the 'self'. By recording one's thoughts for future preservation, one is preventing this piece of ordered information from descending into chaos (being forgotten). Similarly, by recording information about the Universe, one is conserving ordered information about it to some extent. The actions of savants are compatible with the defining attribute of life.

One may further argue that valuing our Universe in a truly altruistic light, while noble, does not seem to directly benefit humanity's own struggle against entropy. It would follow that such actions would not benefit biological self-perpetuation, and are thus not likely to be developed. However, it is an observed fact that these sets of good lives do exist. I argue that

there is no contradiction: it rather implies that the urge for self-preservation transcends the realm of what is traditionally considered life. This suggests that fundamentally, the 'selves' of living things are not a set of individual entities: rather, it is a part of a greater, universal 'self', sharing the purpose of self-perpetuation. Schrödinger comes to the same conclusion, that “there is only one thing . . . what seems to be a plurality is merely a series of different . . . aspects of this one thing” (Schrödinger 89). All human good lives thus consist of actions, in some form, undertaken toward this universal purpose to self-perpetuate.

All good lives take root in life’s battle against entropy. In humans, what constitutes this ‘self’ has expanded beyond the biological being to encompass varying degrees of our surroundings. The preservation of this ‘self’ is the central purpose of all good lives. Its transcendence beyond the individual also suggests that the human is only an aspect of a universal ‘self’, where humans play a steward-like role.

Works Cited

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