

A DEVELOPMENTAL NOTION OF THE ETHICAL SELF

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As Pater said all art seeks the condition of music, so we have come to believe that all responsible talk seeks the condition of numbers. Thus even the life sciences have been reluctant to take the concepts of form and organic functioning as integral and irreducible, and not merely short-hand abbreviations awaiting translation into the more ultimate script of DNA. This worship of the immaculate conception of facts has not only limited the subject matter and methodology of science, but has made the emergence of value into a mystery of virgin birth: man as ethical agent can have no natural ancestors in a world so conceived. All of this is reflected in the stubborn dualism of our ordinary language, where the mental/moral terms still have an honorific echo, but the causal terms have all the bite. And "cause" here means the push and pull of matter that is at best disconnected from, and more usually hostile to, any notion of human action as free and responsible.

I think this view is a cultural lag. It may indeed be true that in a mechanical universe the ethical self is at best a ghost in the machine, but it is increasingly clear (I take this as given¹) that mechanical models are simply not adequate, especially in the biological sciences. And this opens up the possibility--on behalf of which I shall offer some arguments--that our developmental ways of thinking about ontogeny and phylogeny can make sense of the ethical as an emergent stage, not a mysterious intruder.

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It will follow from this that action in its distinctly ethical sense is a necessary subject of scientific inquiry, and that the natural history of the ethical self is an essential part of ethical thinking. To paraphrase Kant, ethics without science is empty, science without ethics is blind.

The key is in taking form seriously. After all, as G. H. Mead pointed out about Darwin's book, the word "species" is simply the Latin word for "form," and an unavoidable task is to try to come to grips with the "origin of forms."² This means, in Paul Weiss' terms, that there are at least some fundamental processes and behaviors that cannot be understood as ...

...group performances in which the courses of all components are rigidly predetermined in such a manner as to yield automatically a collective product of pre-designed orderliness; this would connote 'macrodeterminacy through microdeterminacy,' characterizing mechanisms in contradistinction to systems.³

Here a system is characterized precisely by its "essential invariance beyond the much more variant flux and fluxuations of its elements or constituents."⁴ In other words, the language in which we talk about form, and about the functional aspects of process, is not even in principle translatable into a series of statements about ultimate and isolatable particulars. But if we must take form non-reductively at each level of phylogenesis and ontogenesis, then we must see to it that our language reflects the specific web of elements and relations that characterizes each level. It will be disastrous to talk about any level of form simply in terms that are appropriate either to the substrate out of which the form emerges, or to some other level of form--usually one further down the scale of complexity. For the result will be a language which is

systematically barred from getting at just what is distinctive about that level of form. Specifically: one of the things distinctive of man--and one which depends on, or has implications for, all the other ways he is distinct--is that he can act as a moral agent. So any language, however explanatory rather than evaluative its intent, that leaves this out, will weave an explanatory net through which man himself will slip unnoticed. My contention is that the animal can be snared, for the emergence of man as agent is simply the emergence of one more form in the process of development. In terms of value it is supremely and irreplaceably important, but in terms of the kinds of thinking through which it is to be understood, it involves no radical jump from reason to "intuition," or from responsibility to caprice. Methodologically, it is no big deal.

Central here is the notion of development, the insistence that form is constituted through a process of interaction: to make sense of self, we need some account of the cooperation of processes through which the basic genetic potential is actualized in specific structures and behaviors, of how the genetically coded fetus in the intra-uterine environment enters the process through which it will become a person. Although it is difficult to say just precisely what is wired-in to the neonate, it is clear enough that it does not come into the world naked of instincts and schemas of behavior. Yet all these built-in action patterns, like grasping or sucking, or a tendency to fixate on certain kinds of visual patterns, must be coordinated and shaped in experience before the infant can in any sense be said to be aware of a world, that is, minimally, to have a sense of an object or a person--himself or another--as enduring through time. Since

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the notion of an object enduring through time logically presupposes the idea that its earlier states are connected either through persistence or lawful change to its later states, the infant can come to the notion of such objects only so far as he builds up the habit of treating them as graspable, suckable, see-able, that is, as being a set of dispositions that can be counted on in anticipatable and memorable ways.⁵ But it is equally clear that the infant builds up his own self as lasting through time only insofar as he has a sense of past and future, the very pasts and futures that are articulated through his dealings with enduring objects. He comes, then, to a sense of his own relatively enduring selfhood only within a matrix of relatively enduring others, and in this sense the shape of self and other are reflections of one another.

Let me put this in a more linguistic way: After Kant and Strawson and Kuhn, it is a commonplace that the central terms of any organizing framework are intelligible only in relation to one another. What it means to be "an object" is inseparable from the kind of space and time through which the object is thought to move, and from the kind of causality that governs its changes and interactions as it does move. So it is simply nonsensical to talk of Newtonian objects, lumps of matter characterized precisely by their indifference to change in place and time, as moving through Einsteinian space/time, itself defined by reference to mass and velocity. The same is true for the notion of self. Different meanings of "self" (or "organism") will be correlated with, and unintelligible apart from, different means of "space," "time," "object," "other," "action," and so on. When Wittgenstein, talking about language games

and chess games, says that "The meaning of the piece is its role in the game," he is reminding us that the meaning of the piece is bound up with the moves it can make in the spaces of a specifically ordered board: change the board and you change the meanings of the piece that moves over it; eliminate the piece and you change the meaning of all the other pieces and of the world through which they move.⁶ Analogously, what we mean by the "self" of the neonate at one week is inseparable from the world through which it moves, and from the rules, here still essentially biological rather than social, which govern the movement. And so on for each level of self-in-a-world, for each complex set of meanings of "space," "time," and "action." There is even a fair agreement in the literature about what is involved at each level--until, that is, one reaches the emergence of the ethical self. For here people tend to balk at the proposal that the person as self-determining agent is simply a further form which emerges out of, and changes the significance of, what went before it.

Think back for a moment on the earlier, less controversial stages: the newborn, already the emergent of earlier interaction between his genetic code and the intra-uterine environment, is the material out of which any further developments become actual. One is not talking--a parody of Skinner aside--about a pure potentiality which can be shaped in any random way, but of a material which already has a certain form, specific powers and specific lacks, whether one is talking about the lack and limit inherent in finitude itself, that is, in the possession of just this specific organ or genetic program and not another, or about pathological

detriments, such as Mongoloidism. Negatively, these things determine what cannot come to be, for there are certain actualities, certain forms, that a biological or a social substrate cannot take on. Positively, the material underdetermines what comes to be, i.e., the kind of neonate the fetus becomes, the kind of person the child becomes. To understand, for instance, how the child comes to be as one who organizes a world of enduring objects under rules, we must go beyond the genetic and biological, and look to those cultural and linguistic factors which can differentially develop the same biological substrate in humanly significant ways.

What this means for the ethical becomes clear if we consider what is involved in achieving a selfhood defined not merely in terms of a world of persistent objects, but of persistent other selves. I can come to be someone who acts in and moves through a world of other people only to the extent that they exist for me as calculatable, manipulatable entities. Only then is there "a world" within which the past of my memories is intelligibly connected to the present of my activities and the futures at which they aim. It is a significant point in the life of a child when he cries, not automatically, but in anticipation of his mother leaving; for then she is beginning to exist for him as a continuous source of nurture and affection in terms of which he himself can come to be as one who remembers past events and seeks future satisfactions. The child's persistence through social time makes no sense apart from the patterns of behavior, the rules and roles that make up the institutions of feeding and caring. In general, then, a condition of the child coming to be as a calculating and prudential being is the recognition of others as making up a world within which calculation is itself possible.

So far, not much that I have said is (given Piaget, Bruner, Cassirer and Mead) controversial, but I want to extend the logic of the developmental process a step further, and claim that these self-conscious, enduring, prudential individuals can come to be ethically responsible and free, that is, persons, only to the extent that they recognize others not merely as calculatable means, animate objects in a world where goals can be fulfilled, but as other persons. This, too, is an old theme: Kant put the conditions for the existence of this world as an elegant imperative, "Act so as to treat humanity, in your own person as well, always as an end, and never as a means only."⁷ And Martin Buber says that the "I" of personhood is always spoken with the "Thou" of personhood.⁸

It is my claim, however, that a scientifically grounded language not only can but must take account of this dimension of experience. As an emergent level of form, it involves the same sorts of structural elements as the earlier stages, that is, the taking on of a new dimension of systematic organization; and structure comes about here, as there, through a re-definition of the relation of the self to the other, to the world which is co-determinate with the self. Thus recognizing others as centers of dignity and self-determination means recognizing that, simply as being who they are, persons set limits on my use of them as objects to be subjected to my will.⁹ Thus they constitute, together with the institutions through which they are articulated, a world which defines an ethical level of space and time and lawful regularity, a matrix within which my own existence as ethical becomes intelligible.

Consider, for instance, the institution of promise keeping. At the pre-ethical level I can use the speech act of promising as an instrument

to manipulate someone as an object of my will: I promise to do X if he will do Y first, but when the time comes to keep the promise, I do so only if it suits my advantage. This could include, of course, all sorts of "enlightened" calculations of long-range interest (If I don't pay off now I won't be trusted in the future), but essentially the other is, in Kant's terms, a "means only" to my interest and not an "end" in himself. But if I were to keep the promise not simply under the hypothesis that doing so would serve my interest, but out of respect for the person to whom I have promised, then I have changed the shape of the world I live in, and of what it means to be myself in it.

Forget for a moment ghost tales of noumenal selves and transcendent egos, let alone eternal and non-corporeal souls, and consider what this means in developmental terms. There are trivial promises ("I'll have the exams marked Monday") as well as fundamental ones that involve a commitment of one's whole being. To break the latter, to fail a child whose care is my own, is to become a different person. For insofar as the continuity of oneself is determined by a constancy of rule-governed behavior toward an other, the constancy is broken.¹⁰ Compare: only insofar as I can determine and recognize a world of persistent objects can I come to be as a persistent self-who-perceives; only so far as I can determine and recognize others as centers of dignity and agency can I come to be as an agent who has persistent identity in a world of agents.

Coming to have this kind of identity means, of course, coming to be the kind of agent for whom moral reasons "have weight", are action guiding.¹¹ This comes about only by participation in what Stephen Toulmin calls "'the rational arts'--moral reflection, practical deliberation, intellectual

calculation--which are inculcated in us through education and experience."¹² It is obviously morally important to understand these developmental processes of education and experience in order to improve moral education, make sense of mitigating and excusing factors in action, and evaluate social and political institutions.¹³ But it is equally true (Toulmin again) that "our capacity to recognize features of the situation in which we have to act as providing 'reasons' for acting in one way or another, and to act accordingly, is something that cannot be ignored, even in a complete causal account of our actual behavior."¹⁴ In other words, that someone holds certain things to be moral or immoral is a fact without which the action would not come about--that certain reasons have weight for him is one of the things that causes him to act, and which must be included in any account of his act (this is just what the sociobiologists leave out). But the holding of something to be a moral reason, while it does not come about without conditions, is not "nothing but" the sum of these conditions: its significance as choice is to bring into being (or re-affirm) a distinctive level of agency, a distinctive way of being in a world now defined in significantly different ways.

Put this in terms of the familiar linguistic point about the systematic interconnection of meanings among the fundamental concepts that define a paradigm: the meanings of "self," like the meaning of a piece in chess, will not only be displayed but constituted by the rule-governed moves on a certain board. It is not pushing the metaphor to say that the spaces and order of the board for the moral self are laid out precisely in the institutions like promise keeping, family roles, citizenship, the requirements of informed consent, and so on, that define the

world within which choices are made at a given point and place in history. To be related to one child as father, and to others as uncle or friend or fellow citizen, or simply as fellow human being, define different relationships of distance and proximity in moral space: whatever my relations to an unknown child are as a fellow person, the space of my action is more strictly bound and more finely worked out by my relation to my own child; similarly, in terms of time, my past as a moral being is not fully separable from my role as a father, nor can any of my futures be consistent with my present self except in that they are consistent with this commitment. To the extent that this relationship is constitutive, decisions that change it will be, literally, existential. They define a new level of agency and development.

There are, of course, no a priori grounds on which one can specify just what it means to have a caring relationship to a child, to treat him as an end and not a means only. And this point is quite general. The structural principle that says one comes to be a specific kind of agent only by treating others as agents in specific ways, is a formal principle. This is not to say it is "empty" in some pejorative sense, but that it is "procedural" rather than "substantive," for it cannot, by itself, specify in all times and places what counts as treating another as a person--any more, one might add, than the formal principle that sees all level of self as involving the interaction of nature and nurture can by itself predict the course of ontogenesis or phylogenesis.¹⁵ But it does tell us how to proceed, what questions to ask: if you want to understand any particular form of self, ask not only about the substrate out of which it emerges, but about the ways in which its structure is co-determinate with the structure of its world.

It is my central contention that this question--What are the conditions of the matrix out of which this level of self emerges?--is one with which science is inextricably involved. For some purposes, not all, it is a mistake to describe the child only in terms of its biological structure, and leave out the ways in which these potentialities are actualized through the child's functioning in a world of continuing objects and others. For other purposes it is equally a mistake to describe the ways in which habit and social role have shaped the biological inheritance into "character," but leave out the ways these roles and structures are integrated through the self's instantiation in a world of moral others. For part of the significance of each stage is clear only in terms of what it blocks or facilitates at the next stage (the criterion for a separate stage is easy to state in principle, difficult to apply: one looks for continuity of macro-behavior along with variation in the elements and the conditions of the behavior).¹⁶

A parallel point can be seen at a different level of evolution; in Tinbergen's studies of certain adaptive responses of the Black-headed gull, he was puzzled by the fact that during periods of heavy predator pressure the gulls leave their broods exposed while they remove empty shells from the nest; he determined that empty egg shells are salient for predators, and that the behavior, while leading to some immediate losses in the brood, is functional in terms of species survival. He then notes:

The study of egg shell removal illustrates not only how functional studies guide research in causation, but also that the two approaches are mutually inspiring. The discovery that failure to remove the empty egg shells was penalised by predators made us turn to the stimuli that control the gulls' responses to egg shells. We found ... that the gulls distinguished an egg shell from an intact egg ... mainly by its showing a thin edge. This opened our eyes to a new functional problem: what prevents the

gulls from removing a newly hatched chick together with its egg shell when it is still half inside? ...It is ... this continuous alteration between the search for survival value and the analysis of mechanisms that gives biology, at every level of integration, its particular flavor. The discovery of each particular achievement inspires one to find out 'how it is done'; conversely, the student of mechanisms derives satisfaction from understanding how the achievements of these mechanisms contribute to the animal's success.¹⁷

My point about ethics is an extension of Tinbergen's methodology: unless we start from the "particular achievement" of treating others as persons, we will fail to see the significance of the "mechanisms" that block or facilitate it (a point about the incompleteness of science without ethics); but unless we understand the conditions out of which it emerges, we won't understand morality of how to achieve it (a point about the incompleteness of ethics without science).

But is acting ethically a "particular achievement"? Or is it simply a rhetorical and misleading way of describing (or emotively evaluating) activities that can be perfectly well understood in other, non-ethical terms? Are we left with a situation in which I assert the existence of a kind of experience which must be explained and not explained away, and my opponent simply finds nothing unique and non-prudential that needs explanation?

This is methodologically messy, but not unique. Consider the parallel argument between the sociobiologists who claim all behavior can be understood in terms of gene maximization strategies, and those who argue that culture is an independent variable in at least some (mostly human) activities. Marshall Sahlins sees the possibility of a decisive battle: "If kinship is not ordered by individual reproductive behavior, then the

project of an encompassing sociobiology collapses."¹⁸ His test case, an analysis of kinship on the atoll of Rangiroa, quite convinces me (which, given my assessment of the reductionist enterprize in general, is not surprising), but must it convince the convinced sociobiologist? I fear not, for any proposed counter-example can always in principle be dissolved in some mixture of more complex calculations (delayed reciprocal altruism), evolutionary lag, or as the incompleteness of a story "to be continued" with further research.

Similarly for ethical phenomena. In his essay on the question, "Why Ought I be Moral?", F.H. Bradley points out that while any answer to the question in moral terms ("You ought to do it because it is your duty") is in some sense circular, any explanation in non moral terms ("You ought to do 'moral acts' because it is in your long-range self interest") simply misses the point that morality consists precisely in doing an action because one ought to do it, and not for some other reason, however compelling.¹⁹ And, indeed, 2500 years of philosophical controversy will testify that any claim that a particular act is done out of respect for the other, not on a calculation of self-interest, however enlightened, can always be met with talk of motives more devious or needs more amiable ("She ran into the burning building to save the child because the pain in her life without the child would outweigh the pain and loss of her possible death", etc. and etc.).

So how, in general, does one argue for the indissolvability of any "particular achievement," given that the core concepts are constitutive in one model and do not occur in the other? I think that all we can do (and it is enough) is to move back and forth between the functional analysis

of the macroscopic behavior and the analysis of the mechanisms that make it possible, and hope that this (in Tinbergen's terms) "continuous alteration" will indeed be "mutually inspiring", that is, that the activities of moral behavior (keeping a promise even when it is not in one's own interest) will send us to the conditions which make it possible (overcoming the ego-centric perspective of early childhood) with new questions and insights; and that understanding "mechanisms" (bonding between Mother and neonate) will suggest new ways of understanding moral phenomena (like trust) that they help to make possible.

Sometimes putative "achievements" are illusory, not necessarily in the sense that they do not exist, or even are not important, but that they don't "work out": taking "possession by demons" as an irreducibly significant level of functioning does not suggest fruitful questions about the mechanisms of possession, and an analysis of the bio-physical and psycho-social phenomena seems quite able to account for macroscopic phenomena without residue or reference to a special level of spooks.²⁰ And, somewhat more controversially, naturalists like John Dewey argue that religious experience, unlike moral experience, does not represent a particular achievement, for its categories do not refer to an emergent level of behavior that cannot be made sense of in some combination of talk about moral insight, poetic form, and social control; we can perfectly well make religion intelligible without talking about God--as, I have been arguing, we cannot make sense of moral behavior without talking about actions between persons who treat each other as ends and not as means only.²¹

I have done almost nothing here about detailing the interactions which show that the "continuous alteration" between moral behavior and mechanisms

is indeed "mutually inspiring" in the requisite sense (though the philosophic tradition is rich in insights on this matter)²² but have concentrated on the more modest preliminary job of arguing that there are no methodological oddities in such an inquiry, but that it is, on the contrary, simply an extension of accepted developmental principles which are central both for explanatory science and normative ethics. I add only a brief point having to do with science not as explanation, but as a technique of intervention.

If medicine and psychology, for example, are to make sense of such notions as "health" or "maturity," then it is essential that they deal with all aspects of the person. While it is clearly necessary to talk about the health of the individual as an organism, it is the notion of the person as agent that is, in the end and as an end, our concern. It is not the existence of the organism, even of the socializable organism, that is the key to the arguments over abortion and euthanasia, but the existence or potential existence of the kind of being who can bear and claim moral rights and responsibilities. And the maturity and health we seek to foster through nutrition and education and social arrangements, or through political institutions of freedom, or economic structures of unalienated labor, is the health and maturity distinctive of the kind of being who can act at the level of moral agency. If my earlier argument is correct that the legitimate language of scientific explanation includes these same notions of the self as agent, then the inevitable move from

explanation to intervention and evaluation will be, as John Dewey has argued so well, more a change in emphasis than an attempt to make a heroic (and probably fatal) leap across some epistemological abyss.

Footnotes

1. An excellent summary of arguments against the adequacy of mechanical models can be found in Arthur Koestler and J.R. Smythies, eds., Beyond Reductionism (New York, 1969).
2. George Herbert Mead, "Evolution Becomes a General Idea," in Mead on Social Psychology, ed. Strauss (Chicago, 1956), p. 7-8.
3. Paul Weiss, The Science of Life (Mt. Kisco, NY, 1973), p. 58.
4. Ibid., p. 41.
5. P.F. Strawson, Individuals (London, 1959), Chapter I, "Bodies;" Neil Bolton, Concept Formation (Elmsford, NY, 1977).
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations (London, 1958), paragraphs 563, 31.
7. Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (pagination of the Royal Prussian Academy of Berlin), p. 429.
8. Martin Buber, I and Thou (New York, 1958), Chapter I.
9. Kant, op.cit., p. 428.
10. Milton Mayerhoff, On Caring (New York, 1971).
11. See Steven Toulmin, "Reasons and Causes," in Borger and Cioffi, eds., Explanation in the Behavioral Sciences (Cambridge, 1970), p. 17.
12. Ibid., p. 21.
13. Cp. the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. Board of Education, which can be read, in essence, as holding that separate is not equal in that institutions of segregation block rather than facilitate treating others as persons.
14. Toulmin, op.cit., p. 17.

15. Henry David Aiken, Reason and Conduct (New York, 1962), pp. 81-82.
16. Weiss, op.cit., pp. 40-42.
17. Niko Tinbergen, The Animal in Its World (Cambridge, Mass., 1972), p. 210.
18. Marshall Sahlins, The Use and Abuse of Biology (Ann Arbor, MI, 1977), p. 18.
19. F. H. Bradley, "Why Ought I Be Moral", in Ethical Studies (London, 1962).
20. For a general discussion of the conditions of "reducing" one level of explanation to another, see Ernst Nagel, "The Meaning of Reduction in the Natural Sciences," in Danto and Morgenbesser, eds., Philosophy of Science (New York, 1960).
21. John Dewey, A Common Faith (New Haven, Conn., 1934).
22. The question is, What blocks and what facilitates the treatment of others as centers of dignity? See, for example, Plato's argument in Republic that the person of disharmonious soul will be enslaved by a particular passion, and be unable to see others as persons; see Aristotle on habit as a disposition toward the means as a condition of moral action; Spinoza on "raising passion to the status of an idea;" Hume on the disinterested spectator; Hegel on the Master-Slave relationship; Marx on alienation; Piaget on the ego-centric perspective; Mead on relations to "significant others:" and so on, indefinitely.
23. John Dewey, Experience and Nature (New York, 1958), esp. Chapters IX and X.