

Dissecting Human Social Purpose

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Abstract:

The concept of purpose used to be central to science, but has faded away because of the successes of materialist reductionism and of the failures to understand consciousness and freedom. The concept is still important, and new technology, data, and social developments present opportunities to make progress.

Science is remarkably successful on many fronts, but has failed miserably on matters of freedom, consciousness, and purpose. Maybe these matters are outside the scope of science, but they are essential to finding meaning in our lives, so we ought to look seriously at what science can do. Perhaps science can help explain how individual agents can contribute to collective purpose, and in particular how personal decisions can lead to human social purpose.

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Introduction

Science is remarkably successful on many fronts, but has failed miserably on matters of freedom, consciousness, and purpose. Maybe these matters are outside the scope of science, but they are essential to finding meaning in our lives, so we ought to look seriously at what science can do. Perhaps science can help explain how individual agents can contribute to collective purpose, and in particular how personal decisions can lead to human social purpose.

Reductionism cannot explain freedom

Scientific reductionism has made dramatic progress in nearly all areas of study, but it has failed to explain human personal freedom. Most people believe that they are rational beings with the agency to make personal choices in their daily lives.

Science has sometimes shown that personal choices are constrained by non-obvious factors, or are misinformed, or are correlated in unexpected ways. Physics predicts the future by setting up time-dependent differential equations. But ultimately people make decisions that do not feel like just the time evolution of the solution to a differential equation.

A barrier to understanding human decisions is consciousness. People collect data through their senses, and we can analyze that. The data enters the brain, and there is some progress in understanding that. But at some point the data enters into a human conscious awareness of possible choices, and the conscious brain makes a decision on its own. How that happens is a total mystery to science.

There is not even a good definition of consciousness, nor any agreement over whether animals and computers are ever conscious. They certainly do not appear to be conscious in the way that humans are, but without a sharp definition, we cannot say.

Maybe some day there will be artificially intelligent computers that are obviously conscious, and maybe there will be a good understanding of what makes a computer conscious, but maybe not. We are not even sure that other people are fully conscious.

Is Hillary Clinton conscious? She was widely regarded by intellectuals as being the most qualified person for the most important job in the world. Surely a top requirement would be for a fully conscious person who can make good decisions. And yet she also appeared fully programmed and predictable, and there was no way to be sure that she ever made any conscious decisions.

It is not even clear that it makes any sense to have a scientific explanation of freedom. Science is all about reducing observations to deterministic sequences of events. Scientific ideas are demonstrated by doing repeatable experiments.

Freedom is all about not being determined by previous events. Freedom is demonstrated by doing something that no one can predict.

Some people respond to this dilemma by denying that freedom exists. They might say, "I have a rational scientific outlook, and freedom cannot have a scientific explanation, so therefore there is no such thing."

Or they might argue as follows. There is no god or human soul, so the brain is just a wet computer following the laws of physics. We don't know how the brain works, but just knowing that it obeys the laws of physics tells us that it is a programmed automaton with no free will of its own because the laws of physics are deterministic.

The laws of physics are not even really deterministic, because of uncertainties from chaos, quantum mechanics, and unknown effects, but that does not faze the people making the anti-freedom argument. Their conception of science and freedom are mutually exclusive, and they would say that freedom is unscientific no matter what the laws of physics are.

Thus explaining freedom is completely intractable. Those who believe in freedom get stuck on the problem of consciousness, and the others get stuck on the problem of scientific repeatability.

Freedom is experienced by everyone who gives a rating to this essay. You can readily find detailed explanations on video display, internet communications, muscle contraction, digital computer processing, electrical power transmission, optics, and everything else related. But when it comes to actually deciding on a rating, science has almost nothing to say.

The importance of purpose

The notion of purpose is crucial to our civilization. It is central to how we understand people and things.

I buy a clock because a clock has a purpose of telling time. I buy a phone because a phone has a purpose of communication. I work for the purpose of making money. My employer

hires me to fill a purpose stated in the job description. You read this essay for the purpose of improving your mind.

Money exists for the purpose of enabling commerce. Government has the purpose of allowing millions of people to live together. Police have the purpose of keeping us safe.

Our system of criminal justice assesses purpose all the time. To be convicted of some serious crime, like murder, a jury has to decide that you had the required *mens rea*, or criminal purpose.

Informal judgments of another's character often hinge on purpose. If someone has a good purpose, then he usually gets a free pass on whatever harm he causes.

Science used to explain things in terms of purpose. Aristotle described the natural world in terms of causes and purpose. He might say that the purpose of a rock is to go in a straight line or fall to the Earth, or the purpose of a celestial object is to travel in circles. A tree's purpose is to get more light and water.

Aristotle's view took a beating in the Newtonian era, but Darwin revived the use of purpose for natural explanation. He would say that a bird has wings for the purpose of flying, and has eyes for seeing. A woman's purpose was to bear children, and to obey her man. Natural slaves also served a purpose. He did not know the specifics of how wings or eyes grow or evolve, but clearly saw the bigger picture where the vast majority of observable traits of plants and animals have a recognizable purpose.

Today evolutionary biology professors like Jerry Coyne commonly "teach that natural selection, and evolution in general, are material processes, blind, mindless, and purposeless." The late Stephen Jay Gould said similar things.

Purpose has been whittled away by reductionism. It is no longer fashionable to say that the purpose of wings is to fly, because that leaves atheistic scientists with the queasy suggestion that God has a purpose for birds.

To many, this is progress. Science is all about eliminating supernatural causes, and replacing them with down-to-earth mechanisms that can be analyzed step by step.

The notion of purpose is still useful informally. Neuroscientists ask, "what is the purpose of sleep?" This question is clearly understood, even if purposes are denied.

Analyzing purpose scientifically is notoriously difficult. For example, dog behavior is very well understood, but researchers hotly debate whether dogs have a theory of mind. A dog will do tricks to get food, and apparently to please its master, but does it really form a mental image of what its master is thinking, and behavior accordingly? Some researchers say dogs, chimps, monkeys, and ravens do, but others doubt it.

There are lots of clever animal experiments, but there are usually rich and lean explanations for the animal behavior. Sometimes researchers will give some rich explanation as the animal having its own theory of mind and sense of moral justice, and others will give a lean explanation in terms of the animal just doing what seems likely to get a treat. Humans seem to have evolved to have a preference for rich explanations. Leftists are especially prone to concocting fanciful theories for the motives of others.

There used to be a popular branch of psychology called *behaviorism*, which minimized considerations of consciousness and purpose. Humans were just like a rat in a maze, only a little smarter. While this view has fallen out of favor, it was taken seriously by Harvard professors and other intellectuals. If it was so difficult to convince professors that humans are free and conscious beings, then it is more difficult to convince them about dogs and monkeys.

Even in humans, such judgments are tricky. There is a world-famous moral philosophy professor who has done ground-breaking global justice work on inventing new arguments for blaming white people for various perceived ills. He is a white European himself, so what is his purpose in this work? Is he a self-hating white? Is he a profound and honest moral thinker? Is he just doing what he is paid to do? Is this his way of satisfying his craving for professional status and respect? He is also well-known for seducing his non-white female philosophy grad students, so is it all just a ploy to fuel his extramarital affairs? It is impossible to say.

Bill Gates has put most of his vast fortune into a foundation whose motto is “Guided by the belief that every life has equal value.” Does he really believe that, or is that just a way of buying respect from leftists? He recently got the Presidential Medal of Freedom, but the award did not even mention his accomplishments at Microsoft.

There is a place for nonlocal physics

Any discussion of consciousness or purpose makes physicists worry that mysticism has crept into science. Physics is all about local analysis.

There is no proof that there is any action-at-a-distance, but there are many phenomena that are more easily understood with nonlocal explanations. For examples in quantum mechanics, the double slit experiment and spin entanglement experiments have nonlocal explanations.

There are many other useful nonlocal explanations, even in elementary classical mechanics. For example, a simple pendulum problem is often best explained using center-of-mass, gravitational potential, and energy conservation, and these explanations are often nonlocal.

Presumably all these experiments have purely local explanations also, even if they involve exchanging virtual gravitons at the speed of light.

For another striking example, you can put dozens of metronomes on a slightly wobbly table, and in a few minutes they will all self-synchronize. Watching this will give you the impression that the purpose of a metronome is to synchronize, and that they are nonlocally conspiring to behave in an orderly manner.

The metronome behavior can also be explained in terms of each one causing tiny vibrations in the table that alter the timing of nearby metronomes. Nobody truly thinks that there is any action-at-a-distance here. But the local theory is so much more difficult and tedious that I doubt that anyone has detailed it.

Scientists, who see the metronome demonstration for the first time, usually think that it is some sort of magic trick. It looks as if inanimate objects are communicating with each

other to coordinate their activities. This violates their sense of what is scientifically possible, like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. They do not want to believe that objects can have a purpose.

The concept of (Lagrangian or Hamiltonian) action also gives nonlocal explanations. The evolution of a system is a stationary point of the action integral. Minimizing the action relies on a nonlocal analysis.

Thermodynamics also makes use of nonlocal explanations. It is based on local theories of heat energy, but then predicts that the entropy of the system increases. Sometimes a system will seem to have a mind of its own as components conspire to reach thermal equilibrium.

You might say that the purpose of inanimate objects is to conserve energy. At the simplest level, motion can often be explained as objects doing what they can to conserve energy. Likewise, you can say that the purpose of life is to exploit past low entropy. The entropy of a system is always increasing, and living beings, if present, are always searching out low entropy and making use of it. Life can be seen as an attempt to postpone thermal equilibrium by finding sources of low entropy and extracting useful energy. When an organism dies, its purpose also dies, and it decays towards equilibrium conditions.

Human social purpose

How can goals be amenable to reductionist scientific analysis? Maybe we can find it in animals, and do controlled studies on them. Maybe neuroscience and brain scans will find a mechanism in the brain.

Another approach might be to look at human societies with goals, and analyze them in terms of individuals and their personal goals. Religions, political empires, corporations, and social groups have group character/consciousness/goal that seems greater than the sum of the individual purposes.

The two most striking and poorly understood human characteristics are consciousness and collective social purpose.

Ants and bees seem to have social purpose because colonies cooperate to build nests and retrieve food. But these are programmed instincts to propagate their genes. Humans will cooperate with unrelated strangers, and work towards other goals.

Aristotle said that man is by nature a social animal. An individual who can escape the common purposes of our society must be either a beast (if fully programmed) or a god (if free and conscious).

Studying human social purpose presents an opportunity to analyze what purpose is, because it can be divided into the intentions and actions of individuals.

Religions give good examples of social purpose. The Catholic Church has a purpose. So do the Mormons, and the Israeli Jews. Their purposes are written in books, and are also evidenced by the collective behavior of the members.

Academic critics of these religions often point to peculiarities in their sacred books, and wonder whether the followers really believe the official doctrines. They miss the point. The followers have gained a purpose to their lives.

One of the biggest selling books of recent decades was *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. It has an inspirational Christian message. It is also incomprehensible to the atheist professors who believe that science has shown that life has no purpose.

The Islamic world has a purpose also. Unfortunately it does not believe in free will, and it is incompatible with western civilization.

Political movements provide more examples of social purpose. Donald Trump just won the American Presidency by redefining the purpose of the office to represent Americans first. He had a coherent and principled vision, and he restored a sense of purpose to conservative Republicans.

Trump's candidacy was a big mystery to the leftists who dominate universities and news media. They still cannot accept it, and blame the election on fake news and Russian hacking. The problem is that they have all been brainwashed by Marxist thinking about the inevitability of historical trends. They do not believe in Christian ideals, and they do not believe in an American national character and purpose. They are like the people who see the metronome demonstration and still do not believe it.

Libertarians are similarly blinded. They believe in freedom, not Marxism, but they deny that any social purpose is worth defending.

Some leftists are like the Borg on the TV show *Star Trek* (The Next Generation). They don't really have any character or purpose, except to parasitically assimilate and equalize everyone else. They only tolerate what they subjugate, and freedom is meaningless to them.

To the Left, their political progress follows a Marxist inevitability, just as increasing entropy follows a thermodynamic law. They see no sense in fighting it.

For those with a sense of purpose on the political Right, leftist progressivism is the symptom of a dying and decaying society. Yes, everyone accepts the laws of thermodynamics, but one of the purposes of life is to exploit low past entropy, not to hasten thermal equilibrium. The leftist is like someone who says death is inevitable, so we should just let it happen.

Currently we have an irreconcilable political divide between what some call the *Alt-Right* and the *Ctrl-Left*. They are opposite like the keys on your keyboard. The Alt-Right has a nationalist purpose, and is like those who tried to save the Roman Empire from barbarian invaders. The Ctrl-Left is fatalist, and seeks group-think conformity with their decadent views. The Alt-Right seeks freedom and righteousness, while the Alt-Left seeks assimilation and sublimation. Trolling is the tool of the Alt-Right, while shaming is the tool of the Alt-Left.

Under the *Many-Worlds* interpretation of quantum mechanics, our world occasionally splits into worlds that are mutually invisible and incomprehensible to each other. Maybe the USA is currently going through such a splitting between the Alt-Right and the Alt-Left. The Alt-Right is the living Schrödinger cat, and the Alt-Left is the dead cat.

Whether you live in the Right world or the Left world, it should be possible to analyze cultures and movements that really do have a social purpose, and figure out how that purpose arises.

The truth is out there

The botanist tries to understand trees by studying cells. That works well, but the tree has a purpose over and above the purposes of the individual cells.

In human societies, genes make the man, and men make the nation, but the mechanism is not understood. If you randomly replace genes, the man will malfunction, and if you randomly replace men, the nation will malfunction.

California is a state that once had a healthy middle class, but it is being re-populated with foreigners, and is devolving into rich and poor classes. The rich are profiting from the modern equivalent of the slave trade, and the state has lost its sense of purpose as the modern robber barons have sold out.

Economics has long used the metaphor of the “invisible hand” to describe markets. When scrutinizing individual trades, free markets in economic goods and services look like just businessmen making a few bucks for their own personal purposes. In the large, markets appear to have a purpose, guided by an invisible hand toward efficiency.

Likewise, gases look like just random motion at the molecular level. No purpose is evident, except that the molecules just want to be free like the businessman just wants to make a buck. On a larger scale, gases seem to have purposes of filling the available volume and reaching thermal equilibrium.

We have pretty good theories for how markets and gases reach equilibriums, so we ought to be able to explain how individual human consciousness can contribute to a collective social purpose.

Human social purpose appears to operate on multiple scales. At the molecular level, there are DNA SNPs that correlate with personality. At a larger scale, there is neuron function in the brain. Then there is the individual, the family, the community, and the nation.

A popular TV show in the 1990s was *The X-Files*. It featured FBI agents pursuing unusual cases. A recurring theme was that Earth was dominated by secretive elites that had sold out to extraterrestrial colonists. It was as if we were ruled by lizard people with a doomsday plan.

The show was a subtle way of addressing the disconnect between the purposes of our leaders and our citizens. Our money and our constitution are under the control of unelected elites, and Europeans have also ceded power to unelected bureaucrats. Our major news media falls into line with their agenda, and so does Hollywood entertainment.

We have unelected judges who are dictating who can get married, and who can enter the USA. Their reasoning shows no respect for common social purposes that have been accepted for centuries. They pretend that the issue is the individual rights of those most directly affected by the orders, while they ignore the much broader and more important questions about what is beneficial or detrimental to the interests of the nation. They are sabotaging what could be crucial to the human spirit.

Our society had a sense of noble purpose when it was known as *Christendom*, or Western Civilization. Now these terms seem quaint, as our leftist elites hate what our society once stood for. I don't think that they are lizard people conspiring with space aliens, as that would be the rich explanation. It is more likely that they have just lost their souls.

Opportunity for digital decomposition

Perhaps modern tools can be brought to bear on problems that Aristotle could not solve. We have Facebook, Google, and Amazon spying on billions of people and recording their desires. We have massive cloud computers for processing big data. We have deep learning and artificial intelligence to mimic and predict buying habits and political and religious opinions. We have companies making billions of dollars in profits from these systems, so they are fully invested in perfecting them. We have big data brokers who make sure that your innermost thoughts are available to whoever can exploit them.

Soon freedom can be defined as defying the expectations of the big data processors. The data marketers will know who has it and who does not.

Political campaigns will tailor their messages to the free men, and to those who can be controlled by triggering a programmed response. Perhaps this has already happened. Clinton's 2016 campaign was almost entirely directed at demographic groups who could be relied on to have knee-jerk responses to slurs against Trump.

Trump's campaign was in a higher dimension. He appealed to fully conscious voters who had the freedom to realize that we needed a realignment of our political parties in order to renew American social purpose and to drain the swamp in Washington. Furthermore, he understood that the news media were infiltrated by lizard people who could be trolled with Twitter. They were not conscious enough to realize that they were being trolled, so they could be kept distracted while he gets his real message out to those who accept his purpose.

We are also sequencing everyone's DNA, and soon this will be integrated with the other databases. When Trump makes America great again, we have the potential to learn which genes contribute to greatness, and which do not. Perhaps we will finally have an understanding of how molecules lead to consciousness, and how millions of conscious beings lead to a national purpose.

Conclusion

Consciousness and social purpose are emergent phenomena that resist analysis. We need to examine political and religious movements to make progress. Scientists are in denial about the Trump phenomenon. We can use big data to help restore our national purpose.

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