

The Objective Morality of Transcendent Experience

by Acyutananda

People have known for thousands of years that meditation offers tremendous relief. Some say that what it offers goes beyond mere relief. Some say that meditation is a path to infinite and eternal bliss. Besides various possibilities of what meditation results in on the subjective side, interpretations of what it results in physiologically, neurologically and cosmologically also vary. One model that would be plausible for the atheist or agnostic would be the idea that meditation is made possible by an accident in the shaping of the brain through evolution. The theory would be that evolution, though favoring a strong sense of self, accidentally left a door through which a human being, by directing his attention in a certain way, can escape for more or less prolonged periods from that sense of self and the suffering it entails (the idea will be further explained a little later).

I will first and mainly try to show that there can be objectively-correct moral principles grounded on the attainment of transcendent experience, and that an example of one is “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself.” I will argue as follows:

- 1. Many think of transcendent experience as the highest good possible for humans, and it is something empirical, and in principle measurable through advanced brain imaging. So reasoning tells us that a moral principle that can help lead to transcendent experience is an objectively-correct moral principle.**
- 2. The principle “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself” can help lead to transcendent experience.**
- 3. Therefore, according to reasoning, the principle “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself” is an objectively-correct moral principle.**
- 4. An objectively-correct moral principle is not fully established by reasoning, but only if it is supported by a correct moral intuition.**
- 5. The research of Paul Bloom and others indicates that the seeds of beliefs supporting principles similar to “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself” are inborn in us. The seeds that are inborn in us will “sprout” into specific beliefs once we have enough information about the world and free ourselves from psychological weaknesses, so the specific beliefs are in effect inborn in us. Being inborn in us, they are intuitions. Their correctness is established if we have successfully established the correctness of the principles that they support, and such objectively-correct moral intuitions exist not only in theory, but in reality.**
- 6. But we have established the correctness of the principles only through reasoning, and they can be *fully* established only through intuition.**

7. If one has an intuition supporting the correctness of a correct moral principle, one will automatically intuit also that the intuition is correct. But that would be a circular proof of the correctness of an intuition. Yet when we try to establish the correctness of an intuition based on the correctness of the principle it supports, we run into 6. above.

8. So the correctness of a moral intuition cannot ultimately be established in any cognitive way. We can, however seek to eliminate, through meditation, and a selfless lifestyle, and a willingness to change, and sometimes psychotherapy, all the mental weaknesses that would cloud our intuitions, and thus find unclouded intuitions. It stands to reason that they will be correct intuitions. If according to this reasoning, added to the reasoning in 1. above, the moral principle “You ought to serve others . . .” is correct, then the intuition supporting it must also be correct.

9. I will also try to explain what a correct moral intuition is ontologically.

Between here and the heading “4. what do right and wrong actually consist of . . .,” I have sometimes paused to explain, in red, the significance that the immediately-preceding text has for the above 1-9 sequence. Thus by reading only the above points 1-9 and the below red sentences A through J, a reader will get a clear outline of the argument in this portion of the article.

Whatever one’s views of what occurs physiologically and neurologically, or one’s metaphysical views of what happens cosmologically (that is, whether we speculate about meditative experiences in the way that materialists do, as purely the functions of neurons, or in the way that spiritualists do, as a deepened apprehension of a non-material soul, or communion with a non-material higher power), those who have experienced the deep peace of meditation usually consider transcendent experience (or some final culmination thereof) to be the highest good possible for humans (“good” in the sense of “benefit” – the highest good being the most positive human experience).¹ And the experiences some people have of the highest good, which I offer as a standard for the determination of morality, are something empirical and measurable (at least theoretically measurable, perhaps through advanced brain imaging). Moreover, those people accept that some meditative technique or other is the best means of attaining such experience.

A step that follows from that is to ask what auxiliary behaviors can create the most conducive conditions for progress in meditation – what behaviors, what lifestyle choices, in terms of diet, hygiene, exercise – and in terms of morality? I think we can identify certain moral principles, adherence to which will best lead us to transcendent experience – that is, they will lead at least the individuals who practice them to transcendent experience. There can be broad agreement that if a moral principle leads a person to the highest good possible for any human being, sustained over a sufficient amount of that person’s life (without somehow simultaneously doing an amount

¹ http://interfaithradio.org/Story_Details/Sam_Harris__The_Full_Interview 01:06: “Spirituality really relates to the far end, the far positive end, of the continuum of human experience, so the deepest states of well-being, personally or collectively, that we can experience. I think that the project of finding out what those are and how to access them can be called spirituality. So we’re talking about experiences like self-transcendence, unconditional love, etc. Bliss, rapture . . .”

of harm proportional to the good that will result), that moral principle can reasonably be defined as an objectively-correct moral principle, and there is such a thing as objective moral truth. The consensus will be even stronger if that moral principle not only leads its adherent to the highest good, but also leads to *many* attaining that highest good. (Further defense of this “broad agreement” idea later.)

A. So objectively-correct moral principles *can* exist, and if a principle that can lead toward transcendent experience for anyone (without somehow simultaneously doing an amount of harm proportional to the good that will result) *does* exist, it is an example of an objectively-correct moral principle.

(In thinking about transcendent experience as the highest good possible for humans, we should not make what atheist meditation teacher Sam Harris [calls](#) “one of two mistakes”: “Scientists generally start with an impoverished view of spiritual experience, assuming that it must be a grandiose way of describing ordinary states of mind—parental love, artistic inspiration, awe at the beauty of the night sky.”²)

I wrote, “The consensus will be even stronger if that moral principle . . . leads to *many* attaining that highest good.” The personal good of some individuals cannot be the *absolute* highest good, objectively the highest good of all, so though a moral principle that leads toward transcendent experience for any individual is an example of an objectively-correct moral principle, its correctness is not as strongly established as a principle which, if any individual adheres to it, will lead toward transcendent experience for many. However, it turns out that attaining that highest good of transcendent experience for oneself positions one to help others also attain that highest good, and in most cases if not all, those who have attained it *will* go on to help others attain it (and to some extent will automatically help others simply by their example of having attained it using particular methods). Thus if adherence by an individual to a certain moral principle will lead that individual to transcendent experience (without somehow simultaneously doing an amount of harm proportional to the good that will result), that will be an example not only of an objectively-correct moral principle, but of one of those objectively-correct moral principles whose correctness is most strongly established.

B. Those who have attained transcendent experience will likely go on to help others attain it, so if a principle that can lead toward transcendent experience for anyone (without somehow simultaneously doing an amount of harm proportional to the good that will result) *does* exist, it will be an example not only of an objectively-correct moral principle, but of one of those objectively-correct moral principles whose correctness is most strongly established.

Let’s ask a number of related questions together that will help us get a full picture of objectively-correct moral principles and how they are identified and established:

a. can we identify objectively-correct moral principles in advance (that is, other than by trying them out) – and also apart from identifying them through reasoning – and if so, how?

² Sam Harris, *Waking Up*, first chapter.

b. how can one explain the efficacy of those particular objectively-correct principles that lead to transcendent experience – how do they do that?

c. if they are identified in advance by correct moral intuitions, how did those intuitions originate, how to explain their existence?

d. what do right and wrong, the presumed freight carried by those principles, actually consist of – what are they metaphysically or ontologically?

My answers to questions a.-c. will be so intertwined that I will take those questions together.

a. Can we identify objectively-correct moral principles in advance (that is, other than by trying them out) – and also apart from identifying them through reasoning – and if so, how?

b. How can one explain the efficacy of those particular objectively-correct principles that lead toward transcendent experience – how do they do that?

c. If they are identified in advance by correct moral intuitions, how did those intuitions originate, how to explain their existence?

Suppose our moral intuitions support a moral principle “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself.” (The value of X need not be decided right now.) Since our intuitions exhort us in that way, we will have to follow that principle to get peace of mind, and more importantly, that principle will force us to experiment with selfless actions. We may initially follow that principle only to get peace from our nagging consciences, but then following the principle will become an experiment in which we learn about the further peace that comes from forgetting to worry about ourselves. That lesson will reinforce our intuitions about the principle, but not only that – that newfound calming of the choppy waters on the surfaces of our minds results in our seeing deeper into that “lake” than we had been able to before. As we lose identification with our normal mental ongoings and the “choppiness” they cause, that detachment enables us to see those thoughts, emotions, and perceptions (including our sense of self) as objects that are not really what we *are*. And then automatically we will want to lose even further our identification with those objects, and we will begin to learn to orient our minds, point our attention, in ways that will further that project – even if we have no meditation teacher. That is, through following that altruistic principle, experimenting with putting others first, we will learn that we can escape from our evolution-given sense of self, and will begin to understand the rewards of doing so. Adherence to that moral principle is one of the auxiliary behaviors that will create the most conducive conditions for progress in meditation.

It is well-known that worrying about oneself makes one unhappy, while self-forgetfulness constitutes a liberation from those worries. As the abstract of a 2008 psychology study said,

. . . we hypothesized that spending money on other people may have a more positive impact on happiness than spending money on oneself. Providing converging evidence for this hypothesis, we found that spending more of one’s income on others predicted greater happiness both cross-sectionally (in a nationally representative survey study) and longitudinally (in a field study of

windfall spending). Finally, participants who were randomly assigned to spend money on others experienced greater happiness than those assigned to spend money on themselves.³

We so often hear, correctly, that the main recipe for happiness in life is to lose oneself in a greater cause.

So self-sacrifice leads toward transcendent experience.

C. Behavior that will follow from the intuition “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself” will lead toward transcendent experience, and thus the moral principle is an objectively-correct moral principle, and one of those objectively-correct moral principles whose correctness is most strongly established – according to reasoning. According to reasoning, objectively-correct moral principles do exist.

We have just found, through reasoning, an example of an objectively-correct moral principle. Another way, apart from such reasoning, to know whether any such moral principles do exist (and thus that an objective morality exists) is to identify one or more of them by trying to live such principles and observing the results. But it would be better if we can identify such principles in advance of trying them out. And if we can in any way identify such a principle, that principle will be priceless for us because it will help us attain transcendent experience. So is there any way that we can identify objectively-correct moral principles other than by trying them out – and also apart from identifying them through reasoning?

Moral Intuitions: I subscribe to an intuitionist view on moral issues, and think not only that moral intuitions are a way that we can identify objectively-correct moral principles in advance, but also that ultimately, correct moral principles of any kind (not only leading to transcendent experience) can be known *only through correct moral intuitions* (at the link, see especially Appendix B). The example we have given of a moral intuition is the feeling supporting the principle “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself”. “Right” and “wrong” are feelings, and reasoning, rational argumentation, is not a vehicle that can carry feeling. A moral intuition, correct or incorrect, is a pre-logical and pre-verbal sense of right or wrong that comes out of our unconscious, as a form of qualia, in some way we cannot understand. When we experience a feeling supporting a principle such as “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself,” we certainly can’t fully understand the origin introspectively, and the world can’t yet understand it neurologically. Our unconscious were likely influenced by the rational arguments we have heard, but ultimately we don’t know what shaped or influenced our unconscious. “Yes, through moral intuitions” is the answer to **a.** above.

D. Objectively-correct moral principles do in fact exist if we can identify some of them, and we would be able to come close to identifying some as meeting the reasoned criteria that I have

³ *Science* 21 March 2008: Vol. 319 no. 5870 pp. 1687-1688. DOI: 10.1126/science.1150952. <http://www.sciencemag.org/content/319/5870/1687>

given, but as I have now explained, ultimately we would be able to identify them only through correct moral intuitions.

Now regarding the origins of correct moral intuitions, I think that their seeds are inborn. Psychology researcher Paul Bloom, author of *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil*, said in [an interview](#)⁴ that while some moral ideals “are the product of culture and society” and “not in the genes,” “there also exist hardwired moral universals – moral principles that we all possess. And even those aspects of morality . . . that vary across cultures are ultimately grounded in these moral foundations.” Even if Bloom overestimates the role of the genes in the “hardwired” moral senses, and underestimates the role of culture in those moral senses, and overestimates how universal those moral senses are across cultures, it would be safe to say that most of us do have senses of right or wrong that come out of our unconscious in ways we cannot understand. Those senses are also sometimes called moral intuitions, or simply a conscience. And as Bloom shows, the principles identified by those moral intuitions are often altruistic in nature. And we have already seen that behavior proceeding from an altruistic intuition such as “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself” will lead toward transcendent experience.

E. There are good scientific reasons to think that the seeds of moral intuitions (including any that support objectively-correct principles) are inborn and include some that support altruistic moral principles. And we have already seen that behavior proceeding from an altruistic intuition such as “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself” will lead toward transcendent experience, the highest good.

The most obvious explanation for any universally-inborn moral intuitions of any kind would be Neo-Darwinian: that such intuitions are, or at one time were, of value in humans’ survival, or more specifically are or were of value in certain individuals’ propagating their genes (propagating all their genes, not only those behind all kinds of intuitions). Evolutionary success alone might not mean the success of any persons other than one’s own descendants, but in fact as we have seen, our inborn intuitions often identify principles that are altruistic in nature. Yet Bloom only seems to argue for altruistic principles or any principles that might promote the mere *survival* of others, and does not discuss the possibility of principles aimed at what I have called “the highest good possible for humans”, transcendent experience. I think our inborn moral intuitions of all kinds are indeed of value in humans’ survival, and it seems that some of them support principles that are altruistic in nature, but are there any intuitions that are also of value in the maximization of transcendent experience? Inborn intuitions programmed in us by some Neo-Darwinist process might largely answer the questions “how can we identify in advance principles that will lead us to live longer, more fertile lives” and “how did those intuitions originate,” but what about the questions “how can we identify in advance principles that will lead us to transcendent experience” and “how did *those* intuitions originate?”

We have seen how self-sacrifice teaches us new things about our minds that lead toward transcendent experience. And it’s reasonable to think transcendent experience, even if humans first only stumbled across it, is evolutionarily adaptive (in terms of natural selection operating at

⁴ <https://www.samharris.org/blog/the-roots-of-good-and-evil>

the group level, which we will get to), primarily because it serves as a reward for altruistic behavior, whose value Darwin defended (and perhaps secondarily because of the presence of beatific individuals in the society, offering moral guidance oriented toward altruism).

Researcher Bloom opens his book with:

a writer living in Dallas heard that an acquaintance of hers was suffering from kidney disease. . . . Virginia Postrel . . . flew to Washington, D.C., and had her right kidney transplanted into Sally's body. . . . Virginia and Sally were not even close friends. . . . while I admit that I retain both of my kidneys, I have sacrificed to help others and taken risks for causes that I felt were right. In all of these regards, I am perfectly typical.⁵ [I quote this for the sake of the examples it provides of altruistic moral intuitions that we *do* have, not necessarily of those we *should* have.]

But were those moral intuitions inborn? In Bloom's experiments, three-month-old babies, for instance (too young, he suggests, to have learned the attitudes from their parents), show a preference for a cartoon character who is serviceful (and automatically to an extent sacrificing) over one who hinders.⁶ For myself, I have had such intuitions for as long as I can remember, coming out of my unconscious in some way I could not understand – even if I have often not been good at listening to them. There is a very good basis for believing that many or all of us are born already with the seeds, for instance, of “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself.”

So we are likely indeed to have intuitions and genes for self-sacrifice that will lead us to seek and eventually find transcendent experience, which is the highest good, the grounding for an objectively-correct moral principle.

I am trying to show not only that the intuition supporting “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself” would be a correct moral intuition if anyone had it, but that it is a correct moral intuition that is actually to be found within each of us, or at least most of us. (I think it is to be found in seed form within everyone who has the altruistic intuitions that Bloom speaks of). Above I have spoken of the “seeds” of correct moral intuitions, and Bloom in his book says that his experiments “suggest that babies have a *general appreciation* of good and bad behavior” (italics added). Below we will refer to Jonathan Haidt; Haidt speaks of “moral foundations”, and, quoting Gary Marcus (*The Birth of the Mind*), uses also the term “first draft”. There is very good reason to believe that some general moral senses – generalized moral intuitions – are inborn in us. But “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself” is more specific as a moral principle. I have said “ultimately, correct moral principles . . . can be known *only* through correct moral intuitions,” and though there may be very good reason to believe that some generalized moral intuitions are inborn in us, I have not yet shown that there is good reason to believe in the specific moral intuition supporting that principle. Yet I think there is good reason to believe in it.

⁵ Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (Broadway Books, 2013), p. 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

In fact, I am not arguing that that specific moral intuition is within each of us fully formed from the start, but I think that it is present as a seed that is sure to sprout given the inborn foundation, the general intuition, supporting altruism, and given that a person will eventually understand that “You ought to serve others . . .” will lead toward transcendent experience for many in society.

Haidt quotes Marcus as saying, “Nature provides a ‘first draft’, which experience then revises.” Since people’s experience is different, their later drafts are different. But I think that given that common general foundation, then if any two persons were both free from what I will below call “psychological weaknesses” and had the same information about the world, they would both find within themselves that specific intuition. So everyone would be able to find it if they were able to go deep enough in themselves, and had enough information about the world. (See below under ii. where I discuss the role of psychological weaknesses, and also see ii-D. where I say “their moral intuitions will increasingly converge.”)

F. So since scientific research indicates that inborn in us are seeds of correct intuitions – correct intuitions identify in the best way, better than reasoning, moral principles that lead one to the highest good – and since such seeds will sprout when we free ourselves from psychological weaknesses, we have established that there are in fact such principles. Such principles are objectively-correct moral principles. Objectively-correct moral principles do in fact exist.

A few objections or questions might arise.

First, if some of our inborn intuitions are as I have described, then they will indeed “identify in advance” principles that will lead us to transcendent experience. But why, in the first place, would our evolutionarily-constructed inborn moral intuitions tell us to adopt behaviors (such as “You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself”) that would seem actually to jeopardize our survival? Such behaviors on the part of individuals might indeed jeopardize the survival of those individuals, but natural selection might more importantly be operating here at the group level. Yaw (Mike) Amanpene [has written](#):⁷

Darwin’s reasoning for the existence of altruistic behaviour could be conceptualised as follows. Given two groups, one comprised of selfish individuals and the other consisting of altruists, the latter would prosper better than the former – that is, they would be favoured by natural selection operating at the group level. This view is intellectually captured by Darwin (1981, 166) as follows:

“There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to give aid to each other and to sacrifice themselves, would be victorious over other tribes; *and this would be natural selection.*”

⁷ Yaw (Mike) Amanpene, “Is Developmental Systems Theory a Better Way of Seeing Evolution Than the Selfish Gene View?”,

[https://www.academia.edu/40858025/Is_Developmental_Systems_Theory_a_better_way_of_seeing_evolution_t
han_the_selfish_gene_view/](https://www.academia.edu/40858025/Is_Developmental_Systems_Theory_a_better_way_of_seeing_evolution_than_the_selfish_gene_view/)

Reminder: “selected” means that tribes which accidental mutation had endowed with few if any such people were more likely to die off (if they survived, it was because they had other good genes).

G. But the question will arise why our evolutionarily-constructed inborn moral intuitions would tell us to adopt behaviors that would seem actually to jeopardize our survival. The idea of natural selection operating at the group level answers this question.

Another question: I have said “it’s reasonable to think transcendent experience . . . is evolutionarily adaptive” (helping to establish that moral intuitions leading to it are inborn). As mentioned earlier, most people who have attained transcendent experience will go on to help others attain it. And they will do so partly by teaching them altruistic moral principles that Darwin considered adaptive. But even if transcendent experience in a sufficient number of members of a group were *not* evolutionarily adaptive, our inborn intuitions might support moral principles that would be conducive to transcendent experience, due to an evolutionary mistake (not the same as the possible evolutionary accident I have also referred to): One might expect *prima facie* from basic natural-selection theory that an evolutionarily-programmed moral intuition goading one toward choices to act “for the common good” would goad one to act for the common good defined as the common survival, and the general fitness of people’s reproductive systems. But it seems clear that in terms of one’s individual survival and health, natural selection has provided us a steering mechanism designed for the attainment of those goals, and that steering mechanism is happiness. Overall it seems to be true that what tastes good will also be healthful for us (though there may be some serious pitfalls in relying on this). One eats a bunch of grapes thinking not “I must do this in order to survive,” but thinking rather “I’m sure getting a lot of fun from the taste of these grapes.” In short, the steering mechanism consists in assigning happiness as a “placeholder” for survival, a placeholder for “evolutionarily successful”.

So it seems quite likely that our innate moral intuitions goading us toward choices to act for the common good would interpret the maximum happiness, overall, of the tribe as the common good of the tribe – maybe even in situations where it did *not* represent the common survival good of the tribe. And “those who have experienced the deep peace of meditation usually consider transcendent experience (or some final culmination thereof) to be the highest good possible for humans,” the most positive human experience, the greatest happiness. So our innate moral intuitions would interpret the maximum transcendent experience of the tribe as the common good of the tribe.

H. Even if transcendent experience in a sufficient number of members of a group were *not* evolutionarily adaptive, our inborn intuitions might support moral principles that would be conducive to transcendent experience, due to happiness functioning as a “placeholder” for survival.

A third question: We may have shown that some moral intuitions lead toward the highest good for humans, but is that enough to show that such moral intuitions are necessarily philosophically correct? I claimed to have shown that they are through the *reasoning* “there can be broad agreement that if a moral principle leads to the highest good overall for living beings, that moral

principle is indeed an objectively-correct moral principle, and there is such a thing as objective moral truth, and I added “Further defense of this ‘broad agreement’ idea later.” I will now first present that defense, which is also of a reasoned kind, and then get back to the topic of the limitations of reasoning.

There is and can be no scientific proof that happiness is morally better than misery. Though everyone may value their own happiness, at least, over their own misery, values are not a subject of science. So on what would a philosophical claim that happiness is morally better than misery rest? What we can say is that there is no one who subscribes to a philosophical school of skepticism or nihilism who manages to really live their beliefs. A nihilist is forced by his own beliefs to say there is nothing really good about being a nihilist, but he obviously thinks that it is good. No one can prove that a society abounding in transcendent experiences is morally better than a society of unending misery, but if we have to assume anything, we can assume that. So however our intuitions came to assert that maximizing happiness is good, which may have been due to the evolutionary “placeholder” mistake that I have posited, I think we should consider those intuitions correct.

Should the idea that intuitions promoting the maximization of transcendent experiences in society are correct intuitions be categorized as utilitarianism? I don’t think so. Utilitarianism may trip up because happiness of a kind, even a happiness widespread in society, can come about in very dubious ways, but transcendent experience is a kind of happiness that does not depend on any thing or event that is of the external world, and hence could not be attained by seeking anything in the external world

So if our unconscious, as constructed by evolution, consider happiness a good value and generate moral intuitions accordingly that support moral principles that lead to happiness and transcendent experience, I think it would be a cerebral academic exercise to debate with them. There is indeed an objective morality, and the compass as to that morality that we are all born with – our moral intuitions, a sense of right and wrong, a conscience – is correct.

I. Our early proposition “If a moral principle leads to the highest good overall for living beings, that moral principle is indeed an objectively-correct moral principle, and there is such a thing as objective moral truth,” until now supported only by the “broad agreement” idea, stands up to further philosophical examination.

And now let’s get back to the topic of the limitations of such philosophical examination, of reasoning, in answering the question whether I have adequately shown through reasoning that moral intuitions are necessarily philosophically correct if they lead toward the highest good for humans. I think that everyone is, most fundamentally, correct to follow their intuitions to seek happiness, but a *kind* of happiness can result for different people in very diverse ways. So though we have found there to be an objective morality, there is rampant imperfection in the actual expression of it when it comes to the many specific moral decisions we have to make, and there are dramatic disagreements among people about some principles that I would call objectively-correct. How to explain this? Let’s think about three factors.

i. We are still largely animals. Evolution hasn't overcome the animal tendency toward selfishness. We have only begun to develop self-sacrifice.

ii. I have been referring to correct moral intuitions, our moral compass. But humans are certainly not endowed with correct moral intuitions only – many humans have incorrect ones. To get at our real compass for moral principles leading to **transcendent experience**, or even just to get at our most correct intuitions for the success of the species, we may have to peel away layers of ego protection in the forms of [various psychological weaknesses](#) – tribalism, projection, neurotic emotional needs, denial – in order for our consciences to emerge. Only those who are free from such weaknesses can have the really high level of moral sensitivity inherent in a really healthy mind, that we need to apply to any situation in life that may arise. (Ideally, our moral intuitions should operate and guide our decisions unique-situation-by-unique-situation.) We realize, not surprisingly, that peeling away those layers and moving toward transcendent experience go hand in hand. And in fact it will be impossible to fully abandon those mental mechanisms, which keep our cherished egos intact, until we start to taste the transcendent experiences that are the rewards for that abandonment – so that our own physical security, worldly pleasures, and self-congratulation come to seem cheap by comparison.

But this is the tough part. It may be that transcendent experiences can be explained entirely by certain patterns of synaptic firing in the physical matter of our brains, but nonetheless, such experiences are notoriously hard to come by because they require an escape from ego, an escape most reliably brought on by “a lifetime’s death in love, ardor and selflessness and self-surrender.” Meditation is the first part of the solution, but psychotherapy is often a more direct way than meditation to correct the downstream effects of childhood traumas, which both damage us psychologically and distort our perceptions of practically everything – right and wrong being not least among those things.

The developmental framework I have used here is the framework used by depth therapy, that is, a kind of psychodynamic therapy that tries to help the person reconnect with and thus get substantially free from childhood traumas. But though I have described this issue using this framework, I will not weigh in here on whether some form of depth therapy, or some other psychodynamic strategy, or some directive strategy, might work best for most individuals.

We can summarize as follows a path to find within ourselves, and to live out, the most correct moral intuitions:

- ii-A. Correct moral principles are the principles supported by correct moral intuitions.
- ii-B. The most correct moral intuitions are the moral intuitions of the most morally-developed people. Only a moral person can deeply understand morality.
- ii-C. Anyone can develop morally through a determination to do so and a willingness to change, and constant thinking and discussion about morality, and a selfless lifestyle, and meditation, and psychotherapy. If there are no confounding factors, one’s moral development will proceed hand in hand with progress toward the deepest transcendent experiences.
- ii-D. Morally-developed people will tend to recognize each other, and their moral intuitions will increasingly converge as they develop.
- ii-E. Morally-developed people will not be reliably able to convince others through any rational process. The only way to the surest kind of knowledge of moral truth is as in ii-C. above. Knowledge of moral truth does not require philosophical dexterity so much as it requires character.

My proposal has some strong similarities with virtue ethics, but also some dissimilarities. I won't elaborate on this here.

iii. Evolution hasn't always brought about specific, well-defined moral intuitions, therefore much depends on upbringing. According to moral psychology researcher Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Righteous Mind*, we are all born in innate agreement with six moral judgments which he calls, because of their lack of specificity, "moral foundations". Two examples are, in my words, "Care is good and harm is bad," and "Fairness is good and cheating is bad." (Note that those two principles may sometimes work against each other.) So at bottom, the foundations, as I understand them, are a source of agreement of opinion among people, rather than a source of disagreement. But then what happens, Haidt says (as at 7:51 of [this TED talk](#)⁸), is that the first, inborn – and unifying, not dividing – "draft" of any child's moral foundations gets "revised" by parental and community influences that differ from other parental and community influences into a new "draft" that will differ from those of other people – resulting in disagreement, division, and discord.

J. Having looked at the fact "there are dramatic disagreements among people about some principles that I would call objective" and shown that it does not undermine our argument, we can take stock as follows –

Questions **a.-c.** have now been answered (how to identify objectively-correct moral principles, how to explain the principles' efficacy, and how do the moral intuitions supporting them originate), and we are ready to get back to our original conditional proposition ("if a moral principle leads a person to the highest good possible . . . that moral principle can reasonably be defined as an objectively-correct moral principle . . .") and conclude that there are indeed moral principles that lead to the highest good overall for living beings, and that therefore those moral principles are objectively-correct moral principles, and that there is such a thing as objective moral truth:

If I am correct that attainment of transcendent experience is the highest good; and correct that a moral principle that leads to that attainment by many in society is an objectively-correct moral principle; and correct that "You ought to serve others at the cost of X degree of hardship for yourself" leads to that attainment; then that principle is an objectively-correct moral principle – according to reasoning – and by definition an intuition supporting that principle would be an objectively-correct moral intuition, also according to reasoning. If I am correct about the foregoing and correct that an objectively-correct moral principle is not fully established by reasoning, but only if it is supported by a correct moral intuition; and correct that scientific research shows that the seeds of beliefs supporting principles similar to "You ought to serve others . . ." are inborn in us; and correct that a seed that is inborn in us will "sprout" into the specific intuition once we have enough

⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vs41JrnGaxc&list=PLFeEchalQAKqi_TOmK_IS6_luN8SWVAQm

information about the world and free ourselves from psychological weaknesses; and correct that the correctness of an intuition is established, to the extent reasoning can establish it, if we have successfully established the correctness of the principle that it supports (and if we have in fact established, in the previous sentence, such correctness for the principle “You ought to serve others . . .”); then the “You ought to serve others . . .” intuition is an objectively-correct moral intuition that exists not only in theory, but in reality. But if I am correct that the correctness of a moral intuition cannot be fully established through reasoning nor through intuition about the intuition, then it cannot ultimately be established in any cognitive way. We can, however seek to eliminate, through meditation, and a selfless lifestyle, and a willingness to change, and sometimes psychotherapy, all the mental weaknesses that would cloud our intuitions, and thus find unclouded intuitions. It stands to reason that they will be correct intuitions. If according to this reasoning, added to the reasoning in 1. above, the moral principle “You ought to serve others . . .” is correct, then the intuition supporting it must also be correct.

I think that the moral intuitions of those who make the effort to acquire enough information about the world and to free themselves from psychological weaknesses will increasingly converge, and that such people will recognize each other, regardless of their ability to convince others about the correctness of their intuitions.

A thought that is related but not necessary in order to arrive at the above conclusion:

“One model that would be plausible for the atheist or agnostic would be the idea that meditation is made possible by an accident in the shaping of the brain by evolution.” The idea would be that evolution favored the survival and success of humans who had a strong sense of self. Such a sense, though the self is illusory in terms of corresponding to any actual unitary brain function, would have an obvious survival value; and yet mystics have long understood that that sense of self is simultaneously the source of all our suffering. The theory would be that evolution accidentally left a door through which a human being, by directing his attention in a certain way, can escape from that sense of self for more or less prolonged periods – or maybe natural selection favored those in whom that door had been left open? It is undeniable that we can point our attention in ways that cause us to lose our identification with our mental objects, especially our sense of self.

d. What do right and wrong actually consist of – what are they metaphysically or ontologically?

I wrote above, “by following the principles we learn about the further peace that comes from forgetting to worry about ourselves.” I think it’s an empirical fact that selfishness is both the root of all wrong, and the root of all mental confinement and impoverishment – two aspects of the same thing.

I would argue that all human actions fall within a binary framework: some actions help us escape from the sense of self, some increase the sense of self. We all continually long for happiness. We

all have a sense that there is a perfect and enduring and fulfilling happiness that is just out of reach, that just eludes our grasp. When our inborn moral intuitions or some other factor cause us to experiment with self-sacrificing actions (as discussed under **b.** above), we learn that such actions nudge us toward the attainment of that happiness. This creates in us a desire to escape from the sense of self, while at the same time most of the instincts from our animal pasts tell us to look out for number one, thus increasing the sense of self. I think that that binary is a fundamental dynamic of our minds. So there is in us this constant tension or tug-of-war. And within that binary, our moral intuitions, our moral compass, as discussed under **b.** above, tells us that the selfless actions are also morally right actions. Escaping from the self correlates with good, moral actions. Falling within a tighter grip of the self correlates with selfish actions. Selfish actions are at best morally neutral actions that strengthen the ego and sustain our suffering, and at worst, when they are harmful to others or confining or degenerating to ourselves, are bad, immoral actions. Thus actions which help us escape from our egos are right actions, and those actions which strengthen our egos AND also harm others (or confine/degenerate oneself) are wrong actions.

The instincts that tell us to look out for number one, and the motivations for self-sacrificing actions, are both forms of qualia proceeding from our unconscious and presumably underlain by certain neural mechanisms, certain patterns of synaptic firing. Those neural mechanisms have not yet been identified, but they are in principle identifiable and measurable.

So right, I think, is a multiplicity of natural phenomena – all those phenomena that consist of mental objects, objects that 1) are forms of qualia underlain by certain neural mechanisms that are in principle identifiable and measurable; 2) are caused by the force of selflessness, also underlain by certain neural mechanisms, operating within human minds; 3) can be characterized as psychically liberating and enriching, and 4) can be recognized by one’s own conscience, also underlain by certain neural mechanisms, or by the consciences of others (to some extent) – or (as an abstract noun) the concept of all that.

The idea that there is such a thing as objective moral truth is a view of moral realism, and the idea that right and wrong are natural phenomena is a view of moral naturalism.

And wrong, I think, is a multiplicity of natural phenomena – all those phenomena that consist of mental objects, objects that 1) are forms of qualia underlain by certain neural mechanisms that are in principle identifiable and measurable; 2) are caused by the force of selfishness, also underlain by certain neural mechanisms, operating within human minds; 3) can be characterized as psychically confining and impoverishing, and 4) can be recognized by one’s own conscience, also underlain by certain neural mechanisms or by the consciences of others (to some extent) – or (as an abstract noun) the concept of all that.