

Entropic Stochasticism and Human Value: A Reconciliation

My existence is deeply disturbing and contradictory. Sometimes, when I think too much about myself, I'm truly bothered. That I'm self-aware bothers me even more. Like Dostoevsky's *Underground Man*, I am sick, spiteful, and unattractive, and my self-consciousness is, at times, nauseating.¹ I'm pathetic as well. I can't decide if the cold outside feels good or not, or if I genuinely enjoy school, different types of food, or really anything at all, for that matter. I often feel as the Roman poet Catullus when he penned:

I hate and I love. Why do I do this, perhaps you ask.
I do not know, but I feel it happening and I am tortured.²

As a human I experience such a variety of emotions and naturally I question them and myself. Over time, seemingly unanswerable questions regarding my existence and consciousness become torturous. I believe this innate confusion regarding and repulsion against my self-awareness and existence stems from a deeper issue. In fact, it is not only my existence but yours that bothers me as well. *Why* do we exist? And why and how do we experience our existence? Consciousness of oneself is a cruel, tormenting illness.³ To make matters worse, I've been told again and again that the statistically-improbable entropic fluctuation of energy and matter that I call myself has some measure of intrinsic *worth*. How do I possibly reconcile this with my understanding of the basic activity of the universe, governed (as far as we can tell) by a collection of relatively simple laws which don't seem to value me any more than any other organized collection of matter? Entropy increases, time moves forward, and gravity pulls me and every other object towards each other at the same, perfectly-proportional, steady rate. On what grounds are claims made of human uniqueness and value beyond the potential and kinetic energy

¹ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, et al. *Notes From Underground*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.

² Puchner, Martin, et al., editors. *The Norton Anthology of Western Literature*. Vol. 1, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.

³ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, et al. *Notes From Underground*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2004.

contained in structure of our organisms? It seems it would be difficult to tenably argue that we are intrinsically worth more than any other portion of the physical systems which we observe but over which we have no control. And if we're "worth" just as much as any other collection of atoms, what is the point of attempting to measure or even discuss human value? Should such a concept even exist?

I've decided that, difficult though this might be, I need to come to a working definition of value. Merriam Webster's dictionary gives several definitions of value, including "something desirable" and something of "relative worth, utility or importance."⁴ I will primarily utilize the second definition, at least for the purposes of this essay.

Naturally then, this definition being understood, I ask: am I valuable? Are you? In other words, do we have any discernible value because of a unique worth, utility or importance? And relative to what? I believe, generally, when we describe the value of members of the human race we imply a higher plane and flavor of value than we would associate with, say, a silver coin. Many of us would assume that we are relatively more 'important' and therefore more valuable than this piece of shaped metal. But do you really, truly, deeply believe that you are worth something more than that coin? That there is some perceivable, measurable difference in your valuation in contrast to that of the earth or in the heavens, from whom originated the products that now constitute this coin and yourself? That your independent, homeostatic condition and sustained self-awareness constitute something special, something of unique, intrinsic value? Why? Dig deep. What truly makes you or I different than any other entity in the universe? Or, could it possibly be that we are nothing more than "a savage race, that hoard, and sleep, and feed,

⁴ "Value." *Merriam-Webster*, Merriam-Webster, 2017.

and know not” how to value ourselves because we have no intrinsic worth beyond that of a silver coin?⁵

If we potentially have no unique value, why even pursue an accurate derivation of human worth? More specifically, I wonder, why is this question of human value so important to me? I believe it is because the most disturbing and emotionally wrenching scenes I have ever become aware of have involved an implicit measurement of the value of human life, aided by faulty and incomplete systems of human valuation that drove consequential and disastrous decision making. These include the Holocaust, where roughly 17,500,000 of our homeostatically-successful brethren had their biological feedback loops cut tragically short.⁶ They include Stalin’s purges, which prompted the poet Akhmatova to describe with horrific lucidity the sickening screams of “a hundred million” suffering humans.⁷ More recently, it was generally decided to attempt to end a human valuation system in the United States that emphasized the color of an individual’s skin and their heritage as value drivers. Americans have since become acutely aware of how obstinately our species clings to such conceptualizations of human worth. These dramatic examples of genocide and racism are certainly not unique to the 20th century. Other implicit devaluations of human life have occurred throughout much of recorded history.⁸

Alternatively, potential misunderstandings in this area may also prompt us to overvalue ourselves or others. I pay more attention to people whose opinions I value more than others, and I observe that these same individuals are more easily able to sway my opinion of things and tweak the methodology through which I value ideas, people, and other entities. Because the way

⁵ Tennyson, Lord Alfred. *The Norton Anthology of Western Literature*. 9th ed., vol. 2 2, W.W. Norton, 2014.

⁶ “Documenting Numbers of Victims of the Holocaust and Nazi Persecution.” *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*, 2018.

⁷ Akhmatova, Anna Andreevna, and D. M. Thomas. *Anna Akhmatova: Requiem and Poem without a Hero*. Elek Books, 1976.

⁸ Rosner, Max, and Mohamed Nagdy. “Genocides.” *Our World in Data*, 2015. Joshi, Nikul. “Caste System in Ancient India.” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 20 Nov. 2017.

in which we value others affects our human experience I believe it is absolutely critical that we come to an understanding of how to more accurately assess the value of human life. In doing so we may better understand ourselves, and, perhaps, the reason for our existence, if there be one. As Petrarch so eloquently stated, “...what is the use of knowing many things if, when you have learned the dimensions of heaven and earth, the measure of the seas, the courses of stars, the virtues of plants and stones, the secrets of nature, you still don’t know yourself?”⁹

I wonder, if I were to assume that an individual has some level of intrinsic worth beyond that of any other discrete entity, how would I measure or otherwise assess it? What form of measurement would I use? Physiological measures, such as height or weight? An individual’s economic worth, in a currency of their choosing? The number of morally correct (whatever that may mean) decisions they have made over the past year? Or perhaps a ratio of the aforementioned decisions against the morally incorrect decisions they have made during the same period? This might give me a more standard and comparable measurement. How about how fast they can run or how many pull ups they can do? Perhaps that isn’t incredibly relevant, my thoughts protest; what if the individual under examination has a desk job? Then perhaps I should value them based on how fast they can type? Should I assume that an individual’s worth changes based on their occupation? Should I include IQ in my valuation model? How about collegiate GPA? And will the measure be conducted relative to peers or independently? Do these act as a barcode, accurately signifying the individual’s value to some corporate scanner upon their redemption from university?

While examining these questions my mind interjects: “This is absurd!” To attempt to gain an accurate assessment of the value of a life from a grade point average or other single variable

⁹ Puchner, Martin, et al., editors. *The Norton Anthology of Western Literature*. Vol. 1, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.

seems obtuse. But why so? We value so many other items based on a few metrics and multiples; why not each other? In today's western political climate, you and I are well aware that were I or anyone else to publicly propose valuing another human, especially relative to another, it would likely cost the guilty party their career and social standing, if not more. Since the Enlightenment, many western leaders have postulated that humans have some measure of intrinsic worth and that it is a relatively similar value, regardless of any of the potential systems of measurement proposed above.¹⁰ Everyone matters and each is worth what a human is worth, regardless of race, height, weight, background, IQ, or GPA. Where did this strain of 'enlightened' thinking derive from, and why do some other cultures have such drastically different opinions on the value of life?¹¹ Perhaps, as Kant expressed, this idea of a similar, intrinsic and uniquely human value comes from our ability to reason, which presupposes an existentially self-aware state.¹² No other entity but a human uses the level of conscious, non-instinctual reason we possess to direct the majority of their actions. Perhaps it is this torturous state of self-consciousness and our ability to reason that gives us unique value?

I'm well aware that I'm not the first to grapple with the issues of self-awareness, my existence, or human value. You have likely had similar thoughts and have experienced a comparably agonizing comprehension of your own existence. Other thinkers, groups, and cultures have wrestled with these issues for ages, and have, in many cases, found models through which to approach them. Virtually all Christians derive an image of their value from the creation story, which poses humans as the lineage of God. This divine heritage places humanity in a

¹⁰ "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, 2018. King, Martin Luther. "I Have A Dream..." Speech Copyright 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr." *National Archives and Records Administration*, National Archives and Records Administration, 2018.

¹¹ Dumont, Louis, and Mark Sainsbury. *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications*. Oxford University Press, 2010.

¹² Kant, Immanuel, and Lewis White Beck. *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals: and, What Is Enlightenment?* Prentice-Hall, 1997.

superior position to almost all other entities in the universe due to our unique relation to our creator. In this model, however, individual value is further derived from the moral correctness or incorrectness of a person's thoughts, desires, and deeds. Other thinkers have proposed different models of human valuation. Nietzsche's Apollonian and Dionysian principles present us as dichotomous entities, both individual in the sense that existence manifests itself as such, but also connected by a natural force capable of "overwhelm[ing] the appearance of stable boundaries between objects."¹³ In this case, Nietzsche suggests that we are not unique in any way except for the space that we occupy, or in other words, our true value must be calculated as a collective mass of consciousness, and not as individuals, or our measure of worth fails to account for the unity of these dichotomous, human characteristics. Beyond this, the differences between humans and non-human entities dissolves further, debasing any potential argument for humans possessing any unique, intrinsic value.

However, if we take a more Jungian view, we exist discretely and desire to value ourselves as independent entities simply because a multiplicity of I-positions (independent, unique space we ourselves can occupy) exist within our minds, that is, the fact that you and I are able to conceptualize different participants in a relational dialogue or setting. These I-positions, although independent and unique, may or may not have intrinsic value.¹⁴ Alternatively, if one subscribes to the Boltzmann Brain Paradox, we may not really exist at all, because it is far more probable, according to the laws of thermodynamics, that you (or I?) are a disembodied self-aware entity formed from a stochastic fluctuation of space-time existing for a fraction of a second in an imagined reality.¹⁵ Does the fact that you and what you see around you is statistically improbable

¹³ Seigel, Jerrold E. *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009.

¹⁴ Jones, Raya A., and Masayoshi Morioka. *Jungian and Dialogical Self Perspectives*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

¹⁵ Carroll, Sean. "Richard Feynman on Boltzmann Brains." *Discover*, Discover Magazine, 28 Dec. 2008.

and therefore more likely imagined and of little worth not make you exquisitely uncomfortable? It certainly makes me squirm.

Our various explanations of existence and models of human valuation appear to be highly correlated and, in many cases, dependent upon each other for substantiation. They are variable over time, as are our views of ourselves. So how, I have often wondered, do I arrive at a concrete, non-fluid assessment of my value? Is that even possible? It would appear that one must pick a previously proposed model or attempt to amalgamate several models of human valuation to arrive at a relatively concrete estimate of their worth. However, this does not fully satisfy my goal of finding a non-fluid method for self-valuation, because my value changes based on whether I am valuing myself as a Boltzmann Brain, a student on the Marriott School's Dean's List, a son, family member, member of a religious organization, etc. Only within these valuation models do I find some semblance of concrete and calculable self-worth. But who is qualified to say which is correct? How would we judge one worldview relative to another? Each of these methods fall short of giving an objective, universally acceptable assessment of human value. And thus I arrive at a fundamental, seemingly unconquerable weakness in this essay. My valuation of myself and humanity at large may only be true for me. At some level, assigning value to humanity will force me to make assumptions which are highly personal and may not be objectively treatable. This is not to say that the essay you are reading will not be useful to yourself or others, but you may find that you disagree with my assumptions at times and may need to adjust them for your own valuation of humanity. In fact, it is my hope that you are able to learn from my personal questioning and assumptions and may be able to better understand any potential value I have through this process.

Where should my valuation of humanity begin? Perhaps I should start by examining how I value myself. This, to me, is where the torture of Dostoevsky's self-awareness occurs. I exist and others can judge me, make measurements of me, and come to conclusions about my being and value, in large measure independent of my influence. I am all too aware that, considering almost every possible measurement of my worth, others exist who should be deemed more valuable than me. Others are faster, stronger, wealthier, or more intelligent, aggressive, patient, pious, driven, charitable, or accomplished than I am. However, these comparisons still don't help me arrive at a fundamental understanding of my own value or human worth. The sun, for instance, is far more valuable than I in terms of energy production. Gold conducts electricity far more effectively than I do. It would appear logical that if I were attempting to assess any potentially unique value humanity possesses my analysis must be constrained to uniquely human characteristics. Is there anything about humanity that truly makes us different? Perhaps these differentiating characteristics will provide the fundamental drivers for my valuation model.

The first unique aspect of the human experience that comes to mind is art, and specifically poetry. Written language, in its full, brilliant complexity, is a uniquely human gift. How, I wonder, do human writers, unique among the cosmos, value themselves and others? Walt Whitman's famous poem "O me! Oh Life" provides thoughts on the issue:

O me! O Life! of the question of these
recurring
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill'd
with the foolish...
...The question, O me! so sad, recurring-What
good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer.

That you are here-that life exists and identity,
that the powerful play goes on, and you may

contribute a verse.¹⁶

Why does it matter that we exist, at least in relation to our value? Even if I truly am nothing more than a Boltzmann Brain and you are simply an imagined reader I cannot empirically prove this and may as well assume life does exist and identify with it. I can also assume, therefore, that unresolvable issues surrounding the reality of my existence and experience have no material bearing on an assessment of my value. These assumptions are critical because they provide a foundation for my valuation. You and I exist and can contribute in our unique way to the great, dramatic play of human life. Walt Whitman would likely argue that this is where the unique value of humanity is derived from; our ability to contribute to the experience of others.

However, for me Whitman's position is weakened by the fact that non-human entities can contribute as well, and therefore contribution is not an entirely unique human characteristic. Take Napoleon's failed 1812 invasion of Russia as an example. A particularly early and ruthless winter led to one of the most accomplished generals in history leading one of the largest armies ever assembled to be defeated in spectacular fashion.¹⁷ In 1588, the Spanish armada attempting to invade Britain suffered a similar defeat after being shattered by intense storms in the North Atlantic.¹⁸ Examples of non-human developments changing the course of history are numerous. How do we account for these non-human contributions to the human experience? T.S. Eliot seems to articulate this painfully obvious lack of understanding with his more nihilistic view:

What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,

¹⁶ Whitman, Walt, and David S. Reynolds. *Leaves of Grass*. Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁷ Greenspan, Jesse. "Why Napoleon's Invasion of Russia Was the Beginning of the End." History.com, A&E Television Networks, 22 June 2012.

¹⁸ Johnson, Ben. "The Spanish Armada, 1588." Historic UK, 2015.

You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
And the dead tree gives no shelter...¹⁹

Further complicating the issue, is what we think we observe and understand nothing more than a heap of broken images? If the human experience is something more, what is the fundamental root that gives us consciousness and self-awareness and allows us to rise from the stony rubbish of the unorganized universe? Eliot withholds his answer, if he has one, but implies that we cannot ascertain our value because we do not understand our existence. He then pours salt in the wound he identifies, accentuating our helplessness by stating that shelter from our eternal misunderstanding does not exist; all humanity must suffer an exquisite comprehension of our lack of understanding. Lord Tennyson, writing in an age predating modern existentialism, argues that there is a more specific, identifiable characteristic that makes humans uniquely valuable:

As though to breathe were life! Life piled on life
Were all too little, and of one to me
Little remains; but every hour is saved
From that eternal silence, something more....
...And this gray spirit, yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought...
...We are not now that strength which of old days
Moved earth and heaven, that which we are, we are -
One equal temper of heroic hearts,
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.²⁰

Tennyson gives us a simple understanding of ourselves: That which we are, we are. You are what you comprehend, and therefore deem yourself to be. Does this basic comprehension

¹⁹ Eliot, Thomas Stearns, and Michael North. *T.S. Eliot, the Waste Land: Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism*. Norton, 2006.

²⁰ Preyer, Robert Otto. *Victorian Literature*. Harper & Row, 1967.

give us value? He suggests that one way in which we are uniquely valuable is simply our state of being alive, as each hour we live we save experience and consciousness from the abyss of eternal silence. He also suggests that human worth can be fundamentally derived from our will, which is another, specifically human, trait.

Although these writers have given us ideas of what characteristics might underlie a potentially unique value that humanity may possess, they have not yet identified a method of human valuation that is specific enough to settle my questioning. My feelings here are likely heavily influenced by my field of study. In the fields of finance and law, all ambiguity must be done away with, so far as we can possibly realize. We have very specific methodologies through which we value assets in the financial services industry. In connection with my search for unique, human attributes, finance and valuation are uniquely human activities. Assigning calculable values to discrete entities is not something that any non-human can achieve independent of human interaction. Perhaps we can learn something about valuing humans from the way in which humanity values non-human entities?

Basic financial theory states that the intrinsic value of an asset is equal to the sum of the future cash flows it is expected to generate, discounted to an equivalent present day value at the cost necessary to generate those cash flows and taking into account any expected changes in the purchasing power of those cash flows (inflation or deflation).²¹ In theory, any asset's unique, intrinsic value can be derived from this methodology, known as a discounted cash flow analysis.²² These types of analyses are used to value hundreds of trillions of dollars worth of assets and transactions each year in the derivatives, equity, debt, and real asset markets. The

²¹ Koller, Tim, et al. *Valuation: Measuring and Managing the Value of Companies*. 6th ed., John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015.

²² Hitchner, James R. *Financial Valuation: Applications and Models*. John Wiley & Sons, 2006.

intuition behind discounted cash flow analyses may provide a better idea of how humanity thinks about assigning items value. Perhaps we could even value a human using a DCF?

Using this style of intrinsic analysis, could we value a human life in Whitman's terms of contribution? Or in Tennyson's terms of will? Or will our attempts break down in the face of Nietzsche and Eliot? Theoretically we could arrive at some quantitative value of an individual by taking in to account any expected future actions they will take that will benefit others. The will required to do so consistently, as described by Lord Tennyson, is a uniquely human attribute. To complete our valuation, we could discount the number of future, expected beneficial actions, weighted by their impact back to the present, based on the risk that these actions will not, in fact, materialize, and then sum these. If we wished, we could also subtract from this the present value of all negative actions that the individual will take during their lifetime. The derived formula is fairly straightforward, and we would calculate the value of a human life value as:

$$V_H = \sum((A_{G1})(e^{-RT1})+(A_{G2})(e^{-RT2})+\dots+(A_{GN})(e^{-RTN})-(A_{B1})(e^{-RTN})-(A_{B2})(e^{-RT2})-\dots-(A_{BN})(e^{-RTN})) \quad 23$$

Wonderful! I can now calculate and compare the value of multiple individuals! Even better, this valuation methodology takes into account free will, reason, contribution to humanity, and incorporates some of humanity's tried and tested financial valuation methods. These uniquely human attributes must be included in any valuation methodology attempting to ascertain what gives us unique worth, if we have any.

Alas, even in financial valuation discrepancies and ambiguities exist. While the valuation of a factory, a vehicle, or even an employee (measured as a unit of economic output) is a fairly straightforward exercise, the valuation of certain assets, such as goodwill or other intangibles, is

23 Where V_H is the value of a human, A_G is an expected future good act, A_B is an expected future negative act, and e^{-RTN} is the functional discount rate accounting for the uncertainty of the realization of the act and the time at which the act takes place relative to the present.

typically not. Goodwill is an asset on a company's balance sheet that takes into account the value that investors are willing to pay for a company that cannot be attributed to any objectively identifiable asset.²⁴ Typically this includes the value of the company's brand, employee cohesion and effectiveness, supply chain relationships, or any other of a number of intangible competitive advantages. What would the human equivalent of goodwill be? Perhaps the value of our relationships and our own enjoyment of life, or our good (or not so good) looks or our abilities to concentrate, retain information, or otherwise utilize our corporeal structures? Maybe whether we cause others to experience positive or negative emotions, sometimes independent from our actions? None of this is directly taken into account in the previously derived formula. Human 'goodwill' certainly would make the inputs to our calculation more ambiguous. It seems that I need to refine my valuation methodology further. What else makes humans uniquely valuable and could make the above formula more comprehensive?

Epistemology is a uniquely human concern. We are self-aware, and so much so that we not only wish to know, but wish to know *how* we know, and typically to validate our process of understanding the world around us, if possible.²⁵ Could we value a human based on their epistemological system of choice? Whether they choose to receive 'truth' and 'knowledge' from whatever sources they may find on the internet, or their pastor, various scriptural texts, or their own intuition? We may choose to value others based on whether the epistemological system of their choice matches well with ours. Personally, I tend to value the opinions of those with similar epistemological preferences to mine, whereas I may tend to devalue the opinions of those who subscribe to a different epistemological preference than my own, and even (typically by unconscious extension) value these individuals less because of it. These same tendencies are

²⁴ Averkamp, Harold. "Goodwill Definition." *Accounting Coach*, Accounting Coach, 2018.

²⁵ Truncellito, David A. "Epistemology." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017.

observed prominently in some religious, scientific and academic communities. For instance, a scientist might value the opinion of another scientist more highly than that of a pastor, even if the subject being deliberated is not a scientific topic. We can more easily connect with those who receive, process and validate information in the same way we do. However, even with a plentitude of available research and writing on the subject of epistemology, one is still left in want of objectively established connection between an individual's intrinsic value and their epistemological system(s) of choice.²⁶

This troubles me because, as with the other imperfect methods of valuation mentioned above, momentous decisions have been made regarding the value of human life based on epistemological preferences. Take the crusades or the reactions to the Protestant Reformation for examples. Alas, although deliberations of epistemology are a uniquely human activity, an individual's epistemological preferences may be somewhat unknowable and ambiguous and will likely not aid me in objectively understanding human value.

So let me backtrack. I believe that this subject, human valuation, is of great importance. I believe this because calculations regarding the worth of individuals have caused, at times, an increase in human suffering. I care for these individuals and want to help avoid these potential miscalculations in the future. Why is it that I have these feelings? It seems taboo even to articulate this question, but why, fundamentally, do I care that ~17,500,000 people died in the Holocaust? Why do I care that anyone died recently in a school shooting in Florida? Why do I experience such incredible emotional responses to these occurrences which involved people I have never and will never know?

Perhaps these responses are purely instinctual. Perhaps I react negatively to these events simply because evolutionary forces would have me feel this way. Darwin would have argued that

²⁶ Alcott, Linda. *Epistemology: The Big Questions*. Blackwell, 2008.

my “instincts are as important as [my] corporeal structure for the welfare of [my] species.”²⁷ Because I care, I am more likely to act to prevent these sorts of occurrences in the future, and in so doing contribute to the continuation of our species. However, Darwin also gives further depth to this idea, stating that, “No complex instinct can possibly be produced through natural selection, except through the slow and gradual accumulation of numerous slight, yet profitable, variations.” If caring is instinctual, and Darwin is correct, then these variations leading to my present instinctual state must have sprouted from some more fundamental instinct or emotion. What is that fundamental instinct? Freud proposes that it may be simply mastering the multitude of stimuli we each experience by reducing excitation from such to a minimal level that reduces the unpleasantness of overstimulation.²⁸ Perhaps the reason I care strongly for the individuals caught in the most destructive events in history is not really because I am a ‘good’ or morally conscious individual, but simply because my mind is an extension of my nervous system and is therefore regulated by the pleasure principle. This principle articulates the natural avoidance of what Freud calls unpleasure and the achievement of a state of pleasure.²⁹ The aforementioned atrocities are intensely unpleasant, and even though they did not occur to me I still react to them negatively due to this principle, which could potentially be the fundamental instinct that I am searching for. But do I really feel that my only potential value can be summarized by the mitigation of stimuli? I agree with Freud’s definition of instinct as a constant, internal, and inescapable condition within an organism, but I certainly don’t feel as though I *always* avoid stimuli, which to me makes this less useful in understanding my primal instincts and unique value.³⁰ The pleasure principle also doesn’t fit our criteria of being a uniquely human

²⁷ Darwin, Charles. *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.

²⁸ Abel, Donald C. *Freud on Instinct and Morality*. State University of New York Press, 1989.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Fletcher, Ronald. *Instinct in Man*. Unwin, 1968.

characteristic, as most organisms avoid unpleasant situations such as pain or stress, and therefore I do not believe that it is solely responsible for my feeling of care for others. It must be something else, a more fundamental, unique aspect of the human experience.

One issue in attempting to logically discern primal human instincts and emotions is that reason, which I am attempting to use, is intrinsically connected to and heavily influenced by our evolutionary past.³¹ Our evolutionary past influences our reason, emotions and instincts. Therefore, a combination of emotion and reason must be used in any hopeful attempt to accurately assess this primal instinct that is also a uniquely human characteristic. The only way I feel that I could potentially discern this in myself is through examining what I've experienced most strongly through my life, in the hopes of finding what is most fundamental to my being and in doing so come to a better understanding of myself and my possible value.

As I compose this essay I wonder: what is this torturous self-examination and desire to understand myself leading to? Seneca answers through Agamemnon:

Wisdom comes through suffering,
Trouble, with its memories of pain,
Drips in our hearts as we try to sleep.³²

Wisdom does not come easily. But why this fate, that I and others must suffer to understand our value? The rocks, hills, trees, insects, birds, animals, and all other objects, to the best of my knowledge, do not feel this way. Is our exquisite suffering what makes us unique and gives us intrinsic value?

I freeze and burn, love is bitter and sweet, my sighs are tempests and my tears are floods,
I am in ecstasy and agony, I am possessed by memories...and I am in exile from myself.³³

³¹ Winston, Robert M. L. *Human Instinct*. Bantam Books Ltd, 2008.

³² Puchner, Martin, et al., editors. *The Norton Anthology of Western Literature*. Vol. 1, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.

³³ *Ibid*.

Petrarch doesn't seem to know how to feel or comprehend himself either. But his writing gives me comprehension! What is it that Petrarch, Dostoevsky, Whitman and others claim to experience? Ecstasy and agony: the full range of emotion, from one intense end of the spectrum to another. What other entity besides humans are capable of such emotional comprehension?

In my search for a fundamental and unique instinct or emotion, no one item stands alone, apart from all others, as the most sincere, discernable experience this particular entropic fluctuation has ever encountered. I experience and comprehend all emotions in their full, relishable intensity. Love, hate, fear, loss, despair, joy, rage, ecstasy, anticipation, stress, embarrassment, and so forth. Each has played a vital role in shaping my experience and who I am today, which would also imply that these emotions have impacted my value. Whether I am a Boltzmann Brain or not these emotions are real to me, and the ability to comprehend and experience them makes all members of the human race unique. What gives us value then? I believe it is the fact that we may comprehend these emotions, in their full range and intensity, and more specifically that we may influence the emotional experiences of others, for better or for worse. This uniquely human attribute is where our intrinsic value derives from. We experience life through these emotions, and in so doing avoid the eternal, emotional silence described by Tennyson. Further, our ability to influence the lives of others (and the emotions they experience) allows us to "contribute a verse" to the grand human experience of another.

In arriving at this understanding, I (somewhat painfully) realize that I must be accepting of some measure of ambiguity in my model of human valuation. How does one quantify the contribution of one individual to the experience of another? For that matter, how does one even describe emotions objectively? With this understanding it seems futile to attempt to value the intrinsic worth of an individual or humankind objectively or quantitatively, which makes

comparisons difficult. In fact, this fundamental incomparability may be foundational to the oft-articulated claim that each of us is just as valuable as the next.

Although we may be able to articulate our feelings to different degrees, the vast majority of humans experience life through a relatively similar set of emotions. Understanding that we are uniquely valuable because of our ability to experience such ranges of emotion gives us each a relatively similar worth. I accept this, realizing as well that my understanding of my value and others' will evolve over time. Perhaps someday a BYU honors student will read this essay, be motivated to find the appropriate method for quantitatively valuing a human life and derive what I could not. Until that time, I'm content with my thoroughly qualitative understanding of what truly makes humans unique and gives us intrinsic value. If I do not experience and relish emotion, what higher value can I claim than that of any other inanimate object, plant or beast? My ability to comprehend the unmeasurable and willingly, consistently contribute to the emotional experience of others constitute the fundamental drivers of my intrinsic, human value.

The past and present wilt—I have fill'd them, emptied them,
And proceed to fill my next fold of the future.

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

I too am not a bit tamed, I too am untranslatable...³⁴

³⁴ Whitman, Walt. "Song of Myself (1892 Version)" *Poetry Foundation*, Poetry Foundation, 2018.

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