

Survival Strategies, Value, and the Foundation of Ethics

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“But every man is not only himself; he is also the unique, particular, always significant and remarkable point where the phenomena of the world intersect once and for all and never again [...] We enjoy a common origin in our mothers; we all come from the same pit.”

– Herman Hesse, *Demian*¹

I. Introduction

If ethical principles arise to fulfill needs, and if natural impulses are expressions of such needs, then the most basic natural impulse – staying alive – must be foundational to all other impulses. It follows that ethical principles fundamentally guide behaviors toward sustaining life. This orientation is a pragmatic response to the objective environmental and social conditions in which human beings exist, regardless of historical change. That we remain alive across generations demonstrates the ongoing relevance of these life-sustaining strategies. Value, then, denotes practical orientations toward overcoming challenges to survival and maximizing the fulfillment of this fundamental impulse. Therefore, the only coherent authority on value is the domain of human needs. If staying alive is indeed the most basic and universal natural impulse, it then naturally serves as the ultimate reference point for evaluating ethical principles, moral norms, and any comprehensive axiological system.

The logic of survival grounds ethical life, establishing the conditions from which ethics emerges; yet ethics begins in earnest when it transcends this foundation. As flourishing points where it must go, and thereby defining its true aim, ethics confronts its ultimate question: what makes life worth living?

In this essay I argue for a life-grounded ethic, one which positions survival as the necessary precondition of moral reasoning while advancing flourishing as its normative aim. Grounded in historical materialism, evolutionary theory, and a critique of ideological value systems I offer a universal yet context-sensitive theory. This theory starts with the premise that no ethical system can operate without first addressing the material conditions that sustain life. Marx’s critique of capitalist production (how economic systems prioritize profit over life’s basic requirements,

¹ Hermann Hesse, *Demian: Die Geschichte von Emil Sinclairs Jugend*, trans. W J Strachan (London, UK: Panther Books, 1972), 7-8.

reducing workers to instruments of surplus value²) begins from precisely this premise: the primacy of securing the conditions necessary for survival – access to food, shelter, healthcare, and a stable environment – as the foundation upon which any ethical system must be built.³

However, reducing ethics to survival risks collapsing moral inquiry into merely prolonging existence without enriching it. Survival, in this view, is a means rather than an end. For while the minimum conditions for life are necessary, they are insufficient for ethical life. Here, ethical philosophy must consider what makes life worth living, as ethical systems emerge in response to specific historical, material, and social conditions from which needs manifest. Historical materialism provides the analytical tools to uncover the ways in which ethical norms are shaped by the dominant modes of production and the distribution of resources. For example, feudal systems grounded their ethical justifications in hierarchical, divinely ordained structures, while capitalist systems emphasize individual autonomy and market rationality. Neither, however, adequately integrates survival and flourishing in a way that prioritizes the life-value of all individuals.

The life-grounded-type ethic I propose insists that ethical systems must be historically contingent, adapting to the evolving needs of human societies, such that adaptability does not undermine their universality. This life-value ethics thus resists the abstraction of moral principles from the material conditions that make ethical life possible. For survival is not the *telos* of ethics, it is its precondition, as I have said. Therefore, any ethical system must, as a baseline, ensure conditions of survival. However, ethical deliberation must transcend mere biological continuity, aiming instead at enabling diverse, meaningful expressions of human life. This distinction is critical: survival provides the conditions for ethics, but flourishing defines its content – its *telos*, the realization of life's full potential.

Herein I will explore this dialectical tension through three critical lenses: historical materialism, which situates survival within the socio-economic base; evolutionary biology, which provides insights into how survival imperatives shape value systems; and critiques of ideological constructs, which reveal how flourishing is often subordinated to power structures. Through synchronization I demonstrate that ethical systems – if they treat universality as axiomatic – must ground that universality in survival while adapting to the evolving demands of real-world human flourishing.

Our Basis of Understanding

When investigating value systems through the lens of historical materialism, there are two starting points for exploration and for approaching interpretation: the base and the superstructure. Each starting point has distinct implications for one's understanding of value-origin. My investigation will begin by focusing on the latter.

² “Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour-process, but also a process of creating surplus-value, has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman.” See *Capital Vol. 1* in Robert C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 409.

³ “But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself.” See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 47.

The superstructure plays a role in the shaping of an ethics of value by promoting values and attitudes that serve the interest of the hegemonic class. Keeping in mind that Marx's evolution of the base and superstructure dichotomy is related to the productions of labor, ethical orientations are not autonomous ideals but emerge from and are shaped by the historical organization of productive activity. While the superstructure may appear ideational, its function is inseparable from the shaping of material interests through ideology. In this sense, it promotes attitudes and values that exhibit only tenuous continuity across individuals insofar as such attitude and values are beholden to subjective claims of desire rather than satisfaction of shared needs – such is the logic of superstructural relations. One ought to understand the superstructure, thus, as a removal from conditions of commonality, and instead as a promotion of individuality, competition, and the pursuit of personal ideals.

If one is therefore trying to perpetuate an idea of shared, universalizable, or objective ethics, or better, shared value, the superstructure only provides us with an idealized or “idealistic” understanding of *good* – this a hyper-subjective and self-promoting praxis, “a product of thought,” to one's own end, “in agreement with itself”... “a product of life”, and thus, separated from the end I argue, though still a very *real* albeit abstract condition.⁴ Nevertheless, we are left foundationless, in *perversions*, and without a satisfactory report of value through the framework of the superstructure. Effectively, left in an *infinite regress*⁵ – insofar as there is no beginning nor end, mere repetitiousness – repetitively boasted in relative notions of desired *good* – without, in the words of John McMurtry, a “primary axiom of life-value.”⁶

It is important to note however that moral realism, including my own position, acknowledges that values do *go all the way down* – that is, are foundational to reality. What distinguishes foundational values such as the good of life and survival is their status as material and factual conditions intrinsic to human existence. Not all values hold equal epistemic weight, however: some are rooted in evidence and reality, while others, especially certain superstructural values, can be arbitrary or ideologically contingent, such as particular social or cultural *goods*. Thus, to construct an ethic that genuinely integrates survival and flourishing, we must prioritize material conditions as the foundation of ethical inquiry.

Ethics, influenced by the values and beliefs that people hold about themselves and their relationships with others, must be determined – if the outcome desired is universal or objective – in the material conditions in which people live. Thus, we seek an understanding of value through the base. For while the superstructure shapes subjective ideals, these are inevitably grounded in

⁴ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 98, 263, 266.

⁵ *Infinite regress* as it is used herein refers to an epistemological challenge when ethics are derived solely from the superstructure. Abstract, ideologically mediated constructs – products of thought removed from the material conditions of life – generate values that are self-referential and internally consistent but lack an ultimate external grounding. This justificatory cycle creates an endless deferral with no foundational terminus. This regress problem emerges only if one divorces values from their ontological basis. As individual humans possess attributes such as good, value is constitutive of their very being. Recognizing this ontological primacy of value transforms the infinite regress from a flaw into a diagnostic of the inadequacy of purely abstract derivations. Ethics must be grounded in the ontic facticity of life and survival to establish the “primary axiom of life-value” that McMurtry articulates, thereby providing the necessary foundation that halts justificatory deferral and secures genuine normativity.

⁶ John McMurtry, ed., *Philosophy and World Problems*, vol. 1 (UK: EOLSS Publishers Co., 2011), 320.

the base's material conditions, where survival acts as the immutable precondition for ethical constructs.

In Marx's theory, value is determined by the labor that goes into production, concretized in the historical material organization of society. As he writes, "[the] sum of productive forces, forms of capital and social forms of intercourse which every individual and generation finds in existence as something given is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as 'substance' and 'essence' of man."⁷ The economic base – comprising the means and relations of production – thus shapes conditions in which labor is organized and products are produced. Put another way, these are the material conditions that not only contour lived experience but also inform the phenomenological structures through which the social world is encountered, broadly construed.⁸ Accordingly, the values and beliefs that inform and shape ethics and morality are not independent of these underlying material conditions but emerge from it – that is, "[m]an is born into a specific society which shapes his outlook, capacities and hopes."⁹ From this, we can ground an account of value that is anthropologically coherent, by attending to the material conditions that underlie consciousness and social formation.¹⁰

How To Construct an Ethics

Constructing an ethics and defining its origin are two separate yet connected endeavors. For individual humans, material beings characterized by a stable form or nature, are defined by the possession of attributes such as *good* – thus, value.¹¹ To be human is to embody qualities such as a living body, senses, rational thought, and will, which are, in the words of Eugene Kamenka, "not ahistorical faculties confronting man as the voice of an inner essence or a transcendent truth."¹² And just as Marx writes that "man's inorganic body [...] is not itself the human body," a claim which points to the human being as materially sustained and shaped by a world that exceeds it – so as to say, "[m]an lives on nature" – an ethics must thus be detached, to a sufficient degree, from the mere theoretical contemplation of the abstract superstructure.¹³

While the superstructure initially constitutes a valid notion of *an end*, one of understanding human nature theoretically, our understanding of value must, in fear of incompleteness, extend beyond to explore how human nature can be improved and what it ought to aspire to be (including

⁷ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 62.

⁸ The material conditions of society, encompassing the means and relations of production, shape not only the organization of labor and production but also the broader horizon of meaning through which individuals experience and understand their world. These conditions are deeply embedded in the pre-theoretical structures of shared, everyday experience, mediating how social relations, labor, and production are phenomenologically encountered. Consequently, material realities are not merely external factors but integral to the lived framework that contours human understanding and social organization.

⁹ Eugene Kamenka, *Marxism and Ethics* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1969), 32.

¹⁰ *Anthropologically coherent* refers to that which coincides with the universal characteristics and shared conditions of human existence – applicability to the realities of human life across diverse contexts.

¹¹ Referring to a recognition of the inherent value and dignity of each individual human being, regardless of conventional markers of success or virtue – value or succession of value. Worth, or value, is not determined by hierarchical criteria but is instead attributed to all individuals as a fundamental aspect of their humanity. See note on infinite regress.

¹² Kamenka, *Marxism and Ethics*, 32.

¹³ Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (Moscow, RUS: Progress Publishers, 1982), 76.

certain purposes, needs, and requirements). Ethics, in this sense, must engage with practical aims, addressing not only what human nature is but also what it should strive to become. Marx is always dialectical in expressing man's relation with nature such that man shapes nature as nature shapes man, the two notions are immovable in this way.¹⁴ Therefore, value needs to attain to more than just a theoretical science but a practical one, with aims of discovering how human nature can be perfected. To understand ethics and understand value – situated close to nature – necessitates the provision of a framework for life-activity, thus, a productive life, and therefore, life-engendering value, all through the base construct. Thus, in understanding the complexity of human values through the base construct, I argue we begin with survival.

The origin of human values is tied to survival strategies. This is a fact made more evident when we study early humans in their struggle to live. And therefore, to concretize the origins and nature of human values, it is imperative to consider how these survival strategies have historically shaped and continue to influence our value systems. For it is the historical and material conditions that shaped these early survival efforts which form the foundational context in which human values arise, not from abstract principles but from the lived necessity of sustaining life.

What's more, the evaluation of survival is critical for articulating a comprehensive theory of value, one not limited, however, to the subjective realm, but instead embedded in both subjective experience and the objective material conditions which make survival possible, that is, conditions essential for life. Concurrently, a look at the roles of reason, causation, and theories of generosity and cooperation gives credibility to this investigation in regard to the pragmatics of survival development, and in turn value's articulation throughout time. This will show that human values emerge not only from cognitive abilities but from the historical material conditions that make these cognitive capacities meaningful in the first place.

My assertion that in order to understand human values we must begin with survival challenges branches of philosophical approach, namely those which prioritize abstract reasoning or innate moral principles over the practical. Nevertheless, I am aiming a systematic finger pointed at the genesis of values, one situated foundationally in our survival strategies, both subjective and objective. One can thus understand the full spectrum of human capacities in, and of, ethical systems and how they progressed and continue to do so and how these systems perpetuate grander human flourishing.

II. The Genesis of Value

The Role of Survival

Survival is the *sine qua non* of ethical inquiry: without the material basis of life, ethical deliberation is vacuous. This foundational role positions survival not as an ultimate end, but as the first and most basic precondition for any concept of value – the condition that makes possible the existence of value systems and, with them, the prospect of flourishing. For without life, which survival strategies permit, there can be no value, therefore, no ethical considerations, and what's more, no moral system. For value presupposes a valuer – something or someone to recognize, assess, or assign value, which requires the valuer must be alive to perform this function, as only

¹⁴ Kamenka, *Marxism and Ethics*, 33.

living beings can engage in the cognitive or practical activity required to perceive or generate value. Survival strategies are the mechanisms through which life is sustained, for without these strategies, life ceases, and with it, the capacity for any entity to recognize or generate value. Ethical systems, which articulate principles for right action, presuppose a context where actions and their outcomes matter to living beings. It follows that if there is no life, there is no context in which ethical considerations or moral principles can arise.

Value then begins in material realities, mirroring the notions presented in materialist ethics, rightly situating life-value within the biological and social imperatives for life's continuation – an ethical theory first recognizing the necessity of, and in, life itself.¹⁵ With this commitment we need to understand survival as not just the basis of life but as the generative foundation of ethical systems. Early human values arose directly from the need to secure the means to preserve life in a world characterized by scarcity and insecurity – imminent threats. These values were not metaphysical abstractions but real responses to real conditions.

Life-ground theories bring this survival focus into sharper relief, tracing how specific survival strategies give rise to ethical systems over time. Avoiding previous materialist ethics, often focused on abstract concepts like pleasure, pain, or interest, a life-ground of value shifts the focus towards a deeper consideration of what connects all individuals as living beings with shared needs and potential – “that which is required to maintain and develop life.”¹⁶ Therefore, ethical inquiry must first acknowledge the inherent value of life and its continuation – centering life itself as the foundation of moral reasoning. Life-value ethics critiques the abstraction of ethics from the real conditions of life. This connection between individuals and the natural – “insofar as nature describes the most fundamental conditions of life” and “social self-conscious human life” – enables the development of a specific materialist ethics grounded in life conditions – “the objective basis of life-values.”¹⁷ The good of each individual therein is understood as satisfying their life requirements in ways that also contribute to the broader natural and social environments from which those very requirements – and the resources and practices needed to fulfill them – are derived. From this standpoint, value cannot be abstract concepts floating above material realities but are instead grounded in the fundamental drive for survival, a drive that is inherently historical and material – practices necessary for survival, that is, *contingencies*.¹⁸ For example, we can suppose, the division of labor in early human societies – where roles in hunting, gathering, and food preparation were divided based on skill and aptitude – was not just a pragmatic response to survival, it was also the beginning of ethical reflections on fairness, responsibility, and trust. This is not to suggest that our current survival conditions are those of our prehistoric ancestors. Rather, they have become vastly more complex. Yet even now, the subjective experience of moral agency remains inseparable from the objective conditions of existence.

For while survival – forming the primordial conditions of all life – undeniably provides the understructure of basic human values, that is, the fundamental determinant of actions, the evolution

¹⁵ See Jeff Noonan, *Materialist Ethics and Life-Value* (Montréal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2012).

¹⁶ Noonan, *Materialist Ethics*, 8.

¹⁷ Noonan, *Materialist Ethics*, 30.

¹⁸ *Contingencies* refer to these particular, context-dependent practices that arise out of the necessity for survival, and they determine the values that emerge from them. Thus, values are not universal in an abstract sense but are contingent upon the historical and material circumstances in which human beings find themselves, therefore, rooted in the practical exigencies of survival.

of human societies suggests that values often, and must, extend beyond immediate survival needs. As societies grow more complex, so too do their ethical frameworks, indicating that values evolve to encapsulate similarly complex aspirations such as personal fulfillment, social harmony, and stewardship. Jeff Noonan refers to this notion – value across diverse life requirements and capacities – as all part of the concatenation of causes, termed a “complex ontology,”¹⁹ where “[m]eaning is an element of the material structure of society in so far as meaning is what *matters* to us, and we direct our activity in relation to that which matters.”²⁰ And therefore, while human capacities are rooted in material existence, they do extend beyond mere survival. It is through this retrospective exploration of ethics that we come to recognize value – what matters to us within the evolving structure of our social and material lives.

An argument can be made against this survival-based account of ethics: namely, that higher-order values such as creativity, justice, or beauty do not merely emerge from the struggle for survival but represent a qualitative leap in moral development. On this view, such values cannot be fully explained as extensions or refinements of biological imperatives. Instead, they mark a domain of ethical life that transcends material necessity altogether. Yet this view presupposes what it must prove: that value can emerge independent of the conditions that sustain life. It abstracts moral life from the historical and material processes through which human capacities develop – treating moral insight as if it arrives unmediated, ungrounded in the concrete practices that shape ethical consciousness while acting as a prescriptive to those very practices.

This distinction matters because it determines whether ethics is best understood as a continuous elaboration of material life-requirements or as a fundamentally autonomous domain. If higher values are intelligible only in relation to survival – whether as its extension, enrichment, or long-term optimization – then ethical systems remain fixed in life’s biological and social conditions. But if they arise independently, then moral meaning becomes detached from the conditions that make value possible. While the former position preserves the unity and intelligibility of value within a life-based ontology, the latter risks abstraction, and thereby risks cooptation by power.

What appears as transcendence is better understood as a transformation within immanence. For even those values which appear to transcend survival bear its imprint. Consider the development of aesthetic appreciation and artistic expression, in that the creation of art, music, and literature can be seen as expressions of values that prioritize beauty, creativity, and emotional resonance. These values do not directly contribute to survival but instead enhance the quality of life and foster a sort of *cultural* cohesion. Such expressions of value serve to strengthen social bonds, promote psychological well-being, and provide a sense of meaning and purpose, thereby indirectly supporting the long-term survival and flourishing of human communities. This expansion of values beyond immediate survival needs suggests a dynamic between material conditions and the evolving aspirations of human societies. It points to the potential for ethical systems to adapt and incorporate new dimensions of values emerging within the processes of society’s progress, reflecting an even more complex understanding of what it means to live a meaningful and fulfilling life. Nevertheless, the catalyst for this complex perspective rests with the

¹⁹ Noonan, *Materialist Ethics*, 22.

²⁰ Jeff Noonan, “Historical Materialism as Mediation between the Physical and the Meaningful,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 47, no. 9 (April 22, 2020): 1-17, 3.

primary motivator, suggesting that ethical systems are constructed to ensure the preservation and stability of human life.

Herein we can understand value as such: A consideration of an action, whether physical or psychological, which is driven by its compatibility with the multiplicity of ideals concerning the *good*. This then leads to new ideas of what is good. What was initially rooted in the imperative of survival evolves as humanity transcends mere biological existence – the physical struggle to stay alive – and progresses toward valuing psychological and symbolic achievements. Value thus functions as a normative marker that informs and motivates praxis, with both affirmative and prohibitive dimensions.

The Role of Evolutionary Biology in Understanding Value

Through evolutionary biology we are offered a glimpse into the development of human values – with emphases on survival and reproduction, that is, the primary instincts driving animals and humans – as central to the propagation of behaviors deemed valuable.

Richard Dawkins' concept of the *selfish gene* suggests that behaviors promoting survival and replication are embedded in our genetic makeup.^{21,22} These biological imperatives, shaped by natural selection, provide an understanding of why certain values are prevalent in human societies. However, such gene-centered reductions – by framing them narrowly as evolutionary strategies – delimit what we can understand as morals, ethics, and value systems. In Dawkins' framework are we to understand that morality is merely a function of reproduction? If so, *what is valuable* would be that which merely aided towards reproductive advantages, and actions that promote this simple biological imperative would be seen as naturally consistent with what we ought to do (via. natural compulsion). Would it not then be permissible to reproduce at all costs?

At best, these gene-centered theories offer explanatory insight into the evolutionary origins of behavior, but they often covertly rely on moral assumptions they claim to explain away. By appealing to evolutionary advantage as the source of value, they implicitly treat biological fitness as a normative standard – effectively outsourcing ethics to a naturalistic process that lacks genuine moral authority or normative force. This move smuggles in a kind of spiritual or metaphysical significance where none can be rigorously established. For example, Dawkins' own language sometimes suggests a quasi-teleological purpose to genes – “selfish” or “replicators” – which risks conflating descriptive biological facts with prescriptive moral norms. Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* dramatizes the dangers of this conflation – reducing value to reproductive success can justify morally repugnant social orders.

While Dawkins reduces morality to reproductive imperatives, he overlooks the higher-order cooperative behaviors that extend survival strategies into domains of flourishing such as cooperation and altruism which transcend mere genetic imperatives. We must therefore hypothesize a link between the idea of survival and how we, as early humans, understood and

²¹ See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

²² Similarly, E.O. Wilson's sociobiology posits that social behaviors, including cooperation and altruism, have evolutionary underpinnings aimed at enhancing groups survival. See Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

repeatedly implemented actions to ensure this basic foundation. For these types of reductive naturalist approaches to value systems render ethics all but unimportant.

Where Dawkins' model, fixated on the gene as the unit of selection, strips moral behavior of its normative content and collapses value into utility, Michael Tomasello's work points toward human survival being contingent on the development of shared intentionality. Individuals recognize one another as cooperative partners in joint task, argues Tomasello, and this intersubjective orientation enables the emergence of normativity: not merely behaving cooperatively, but understanding *why* certain behaviors ought to be followed and sanctioned.²³ Early human groups, for instance, developed practices that were not genetically coded but culturally transmitted and rationally reinforced – actions that reflected collective judgments about fairness, obligation, and mutual responsibility. Similarly, David Sloan Wilson's and Elliott Sober's multilevel selection theory reveals that moral systems were not identical to survival but instrumental to it: groups that fostered prosocial behavior, norm enforcement, and cohesion outcompeted those organized around individualistic self-interest.²⁴ This stands in logical contradiction to Dawkins' model, which cannot account for the evolutionary advantage of moral norms unless they are reduced to disguised selfishness – an explanation that fails to capture the diachronic, recursive, communal practice, and meaning-laden nature of moral life.

In short, if survival was not merely a matter of instinct but of reflective, communal practices, then naturalistic accounts must accommodate the normative dimension of ethics rather than reduce it to a genetic byproduct. Ethics, under such a view, becomes foundational to the conditions of human life.

Now take generosity and cooperation and understand that they are not just aligned superficially or subjectively with ethical function but that they are empirically coextensive traits selected for their centrality in sustaining early human social structures. Comparative research in primate behavior and developmental psychology demonstrates that while great apes engage in instrumental cooperation – that is, working together to achieve individual or mutual gains in limited contexts, often governed by immediate utility or reciprocity – only humans exhibit prosocial behaviors characterized by spontaneous helping, equitable sharing, and sustained commitment to “joint goals.”²⁵

This distinction suggests that generosity is not a cultural veneer masking a competitive substrate but a biologically prepared disposition, uniquely human in scope and flexibility, which matures through social interaction and is sustained by shared meaning, affective attunement, and ethical regard.

Archaeological and anthropological records further support this trajectory: early hominin groups that exhibited coordinated hunting, food sharing, and care for non-reproductive individuals

²³ See Michael Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate* (Cambridge, MASS: MIT Press, 2009), 90. Also see chapter 4 in Michael Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), Ch. 4, 85-134.

²⁴ See chapter 3 in Elliott Sober and David Sloan Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 101-131.

²⁵ See Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, 54-55. Also see Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality*, 42-43.

enjoyed higher rates of survival.²⁶ This suggests that selection pressures favored individuals situated in mutually supportive networks. These networks did not rely on kin selection alone but expanded through mechanisms of indirect reciprocity, norm enforcement, and shared intentionality.²⁷ In such environments, generosity is not just an altruistic deviation from rational self-interest but a reliable strategy for ensuring access to shared resources, protection, and reproductive success. Over time, the coordination of cooperative roles, guided by shared values, produced durable forms of social organization – proto-moral communities bound by norms that reinforced mutual responsibility and the recognition of others as agents with legitimate claims.²⁸

These findings empirically ground the claim that generosity and cooperation are not arbitrary moral sentiments but evolutionarily stable strategies that formed the psychological and material basis for value formation.²⁹ Strategies such as generosity and cooperation functioned as adaptive responses to environmental and social complexity and, through recursive reinforcement, laid the groundwork for the moral communities we inhabit today – communities where ethical evaluation is rooted not in isolated rationality or arbitrary preference but in a historically developed matrix of interdependence, shared purpose, and collective survival.³⁰

It is from the fundamental need to navigate and manipulate our environment to ensure survival that the emergent human faculty of reason arose. Causal reasoning was a practical tool developed to solve immediate real-world challenges – as an orangutan connects a short branch and a tree hole brimming with termites. Therefore, reason became, and is still, the means by which we understand and act upon the world to sustain our existence.³¹ Insofar as an understanding of the material conditions that sustain life necessitates rationality itself – that is reason through action, that is, a base understanding of causality – it is safe to conclude it a direct product of survival imperatives.

Noonan's understanding of value is argued as the life-value of any particular practice, and must be judged by its capacity to enable living beings to survive *and* develop, such that, "value [...] must be evaluated concretely, by reference to how well it satisfies [...] life-interests."³² The further contention is that while life-value is objectively determined by material conditions, it manifests subjectively in how individuals and communities prioritize their survival needs. This duality reflects the complexity of human values, which are shaped internally as well as externally – the emphasis being that human beings exist within a complexity of networks (both social and material) meaning survival cannot be understood in isolation but must be seen in relation to the dynamics of these social-material factors. Therefore, one ought to understand value as arising not merely from internal disposition, biological functioning, neural architecture, and so on, but from the material interactions that sustain our experience.

²⁶ In *Unto Others*, Sober and Wilson summarize their argument surrounding this set of ideas quite clearly on pages 191-194.

²⁷ See Wilson and Sober, *Unto Others*, 55-100 (focus on the section, "Kin Selection" on pg. 58-64). Also see Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, 38-46 regarding norm enforcement.

²⁸ See Tomasello, *A Natural History of Human Morality*, 159-160.

²⁹ This is my conclusion from my combining of Sober and Wilson's investigations with Tomasello's.

³⁰ This is largely derived from Tomasello's (2009) line, "These altruistic social preferences are a precondition for the kinds of effective collaboration that humans are so good at" on page 121 and his statements on pages 88-89.

³¹ See John Wild, *Introduction to Realist Philosophy* (New York, NY: Harper & Brothers, 1948).

³² Noonan, *Materialist Ethics*, 113.

A connection then can be made between survival and teleology: despite what can only be assumed as a more binary reactive attribution of values – extending pseudopods, a *die-not-die* imperative – seen in our very earliest ancestors, survival is not merely about living.³³ To substantiate this claim we require an understanding of how more *developed* forms of values – moral, aesthetic, and intellectual – emerge from fundamental survival imperatives, as remains evident today. This continuity shows that survival strategies, when elaborated through consciousness and social interactions, lay the groundwork for transcending mere existence and realizing what Noonan calls a “life worth living.”³⁴

A Vindicating Genealogy of Value Systems: Initial Value Paradigms to Complex Ontologies

I now turn to a genealogy of value, tracing the evolution of value systems from primitive human communities to modern ethical frameworks in order to show how survival strategies form the basis from which complex moral, aesthetic, and intellectual values emerge.

The foundation of human value is survival as postulated herein. From this essential starting point, ethical reasoning evolves toward a normative aim of flourishing. Values originate within the material conditions of survival, emerging first as pragmatic mechanisms for securing life. Over time these survival strategies transform into ethical systems that promote flourishing by integrating the practical and the abstract, the individual and the collective. This progression reflects an ongoing dialectic in human evolution, where each stage transcends and includes its predecessors, integrating survival with increasingly sophisticated moral imperatives.

In the earliest stages of human development, survival required cooperation, mutual aid, and social bonding. These behaviors were not arbitrarily decided *moralities* but necessary adaptations to ensure the group’s continuity. Thomas Henry Huxley points out the evolutionary continuity between humans and other animals: he notes that our moral faculties arise not from divine origins, or in our case superstructural origins, but from the gradual refinement of nature, and natural instincts. Huxley writes: “History shows that the human mind, fed constant accessions of knowledge, periodically grows too large for its theoretical coverings” such that, “the imago state of Man seems to be terribly distant, but every moult is a step gained.”³⁵ This process of ecdysis and renewal points to the evolution of ethicality, morality, and axiology, which in their initial stages were pragmatic, rooted in the immediate necessities of securing food, shelter, and protection.³⁶ As Ken Wilber’s philosophical-evolutionist account notes, early tribal societies exemplified this dynamic, where values such as fairness and responsibility emerged directly from survival practices. These were not idealized constructs but, as Wilber states: “the structure upon which all

³³ Teleology refers to the explanation of phenomena by the purpose they serve rather than by postulated causes. Here, it denotes an orientation toward ends or goals, specifically the flourishing of life as the ultimate aim beyond mere survival.

³⁴ Noonan, *Materialist Ethics*, 132.

³⁵ Thomas Henry Huxley, *Man’s Place in Nature and Other Essays* (London, UK: JM Dent & Sons, 1927), 53.

³⁶ Ecdysis (a term borrowed from Huxley), in its original biological sense, refers to the process by which an organism – typically an arthropod – sheds its outer layer (exoskeleton) to allow for growth. Here, departing from its zoological origin, ecdysis is used metaphorically to describe the discarding of rigid external forms – outdated cognitive or ideological frameworks – in order to permit transformation and the emergence of new stages of thought, thereby enabling the actualization of inner potential.

subsequent human evolution would be built.”³⁷ Survival in these conditions also depended on the ability to navigate symbolic and ritualistic behaviors, such as burial rites or care for the sick, which reflected an early awareness of life-value beyond immediate biological imperatives. Archaeological findings suggest that practices such as burial rites and rituals among early hominins, like *homo naledi*, indicate a burgeoning sense of value concerning life and death.³⁸ These practices represent the nascent stages of ethical systems, signaling a shift from mere survival to an emergent moral consciousness. This shift, as noted, marks the point at which survival strategies begin to take on superstructural significance, laying the groundwork for the *noosphere*'s eventual emergence.³⁹

To understand how this comes to be the case, I argue that human evolution is marked by a process of identification, where individuals and societies align themselves with broader ethical principles as a means of securing existential stability. Using Freud's ideas surrounding identification as an analogue we can extrapolate aspects to pertain to societies. According to Freud, early in life, a child identifies with parental figures to gain a sense of security, coherence, and orientation in order to navigate their environment.⁴⁰ This process allows the child to internalize authority and values, forming the foundation of the superego. Analogously, individuals in society may identify with certain institutions or social functions to achieve a collective sense of belonging and normative stability. These societal identifications perform a similar psychic function: they help individuals to navigate the social world by binding them to shared norms, histories, and aspiration. Just as the child's identification with a parent helps mitigate uncertainty, societal identification functions to contain existential anxieties.

So, as societies evolve, they begin to identify with abstract moral concepts, grounding their ethical frameworks in principles that extend beyond immediate survival. The parental or symbolic figures that once structured social life become sublimated into ideals – justice, dignity, freedom – toward which individuals and institutions orient themselves. This process points towards a fundamental dialectic: survival strategies originating in instinctual life are gradually subsumed under increasingly abstract moral systems. These systems reflect the deepening complexity of human life, in which identification no longer functions solely as a means of securing safety, but as a vehicle for ethical aspiration.

Each stage of moral evolution, however, contains inherent limitations, which act as catalysts for further development. As Wilber notes, “every stage of evolution eventually runs into its own inherent limitations,” prompting the system to transcend itself by integrating a higher

³⁷ Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything*, 2nd ed. (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2000), 43.

³⁸ See L.R. Berger et al., “Homo naledi, a new species of the genus Homo from the Dinaledi Chamber, South Africa,” *eLife* 4 (2015), doi:10.7554/eLife.09560.

³⁹ *Noosphere*: The sphere of human thought, culture, and consciousness considered an emergent layer that envelops the Earth – shaped by human intellectual and social activity. Coined by Vladimir Vernadsky (1938) and later popularized by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1959), it signifies the collective mental and cultural processes that influence and organize societies. See Vladimir Vernadsky, *Scientific Thought as a Planetary Phenomenon*, trans. Jonathan G. Frenkel (Moscow: Academy of Sciences Press, 1997). [Originally published in Russian, 1938]. Also see Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. Bernard Wall (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959).

⁴⁰ See Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, trans. James Strachey (New York, NY: Bantam, 1965) Ch VII, 46-53.

order.^{41,42} The identification with abstract moral principles is not a deviation from survival imperatives but their logical extension. For in advanced societies, this identification fosters objective moral consciousness, where survival is no longer a narrow concern, but a collective imperative enmeshed with the flourishing of life as a whole. Possibly most importantly, the advent of language and symbolic thought allowed for more sophisticated expressions of value. This would be a stage in human development where, not only through direct action, one could articulate ethical praxis, or define for another, say offspring, what is and what is not valuable, and in turn, what is permissible in a normative sense, thereby cataloging value through language – similar to what we have today in social practices and collective norms.⁴³

The transition from foraging to agrarian societies exemplifies how shifts in material conditions shape ethical superstructures. The development of agriculture introduced new survival strategies – such as the building of fences, both figurative and literal: figurative insofar as fences meant the formulation of concepts of property rights, as individuals and families became more invested in the land they cultivated – the value of land ownership, previously inconsequential to nomadic societies, became a central ethical concern in agrarian communities; literal insofar as questions of inheritance, territorial disputes, and the management of resources emerged as ethical issues, for they were directly tied to survival, heritage, and prosperity in this new context. As Marx noted in his materialist conception of history, the economic base, the “real foundation,” that is, the material conditions of production, shapes the superstructure.⁴⁴ These values began to formalize into systems that regulated social and economic life – codifying behaviors that were deemed necessary for the flourishing of communities.

The agrarian stage further entrenched a hierarchical division of labor, yet it also laid the groundwork for the transcendence of those very divisions. With the advent of industrialization, physical labor became less central, allowing for a reorganization of social roles. This shift exemplifies the dialectic of progress, where technological and economic changes redefine the ethical landscape. The movement from agrarian to industrial societies reveals an underlying continuity: survival imperatives persist, but they are continually reinterpreted within the framework of a more complex and inclusive moral order.

Industrialization is characterized by the development of ethical systems that seek to balance survival with flourishing, integrating life-value with technological and economic advancement. The noosphere represents the culmination of evolutionary progress, where survival is no longer an isolated concern, but part of a broader ethical framework aimed at sustaining and enriching life. To borrow a phrase from Wilber, “[f]inally, we know better,” in that the unique capacity of this stage is to confront existential threats with unprecedented knowledge and foresight.⁴⁵ However, this stage is fraught with challenges. The instrumentalization of value under industrial capitalism

⁴¹ Wilber, *A Brief History*, 45.

⁴² The transition from tribal societies to the formation of nation-states illustrates this process: while tribal loyalty was once limited to kin groups, the development of modern citizenship and legal systems expanded moral concern and cooperation to diverse populations within a shared political and legal framework.

⁴³ See Tomasello, *Why We Cooperate*, 92-93.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. S.W. Ryazanskaya (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1859), 2.

⁴⁵ Wilber, *A Brief History*, 51.

subordinates life-value to economic imperatives, threatening the ecological and social conditions necessary for flourishing.

The evolutionary trajectory from survival to flourishing reveals a consistent pattern: each stage builds upon the previous, integrating its values while addressing its limitations. However, “[n]o epoch is finally privileged,” and the emergence of the noosphere – the sphere of reflective reason and shared meaning – calls for an ethical orientation that is not tethered to the contingencies of a single historical or biological context.^{46,47} Survival remains the irreducible foundation of ethical praxis, but within the unfolding of evolutionary logic, it gives rise to forms of cooperation that are not merely adaptive, but norm-generating. Early human communities did not persist by instinct alone; they endured by forming commitments, evaluating behaviors in light of shared goals, and transmitting standards across generations. These practices inaugurated a mode of life in which values are not epiphenomenal to facts, but co-constitutive with them. As cooperation becomes more complex – mediated by shared intentionality, cultural transmission, and group cohesion – the evolutionary utility of prosocial behavior becomes inseparable from its ethical intelligibility. This convergence begins to dismantle the inherited philosophical dichotomy between facts and values, showing that normativity does not float free of life but emerges within its very organization. Ethics, on this view, is not superimposed onto a neutral biological substrate; it is immanent to the relational structures that enable life to persist and flourish. Through this dialectical movement, what begins as a pragmatic necessity deepens into complex ethical systems seeking to harmonize individual and collective well-being. These acts thus constitute what can be termed *moral communities*.

III. Moral Communities and the Development of Complex Value

Moral Communities and The Tension Between Survival and Higher Ethical Values

Charles Darwin posited that cooperation and empathy evolved, for they improved survival chances within groups, such that social behaviors are advantageous for group survival and have been naturally selected as such.⁴⁸ Cooperation and empathy in turn foster a sort of cohesion and support, which I argue are essential for overcoming environmental and social challenges, both primitive and modern. We can, therefore, extrapolate that the concept of communal survival strategies furthered towards more sophisticated value systems.

As human societies evolved, individuals began to value not only their own lives, and those of their immediate group, but also the lives and survival of the greater community. This shift from *intra-communal* to *inter-communal* values marks a significant development in moral philosophy.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Wilber, *A Brief History*, 45.

⁴⁷ The claim that “no epoch is finally privileged” is not a denial of moral progress, nor an endorsement of relativism. Rather, it rejects the notion that any historical moment can lay exclusive or permanent claim to ethical truth. Indeed, certain epochs – through advances in knowledge, social organization, and reflective capacity – have enabled deeper insight into human flourishing and the requirements of justice. These moments mark genuine moral advances. Yet each remains embedded in particular historical and material conditions, and the ethical field continues to evolve. Moral progress, as I am using it, is real but non-final; always subject to further discover, critique, and refinement.

⁴⁸ See Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871).

⁴⁹ *Intra-communal* refers to values and behaviors that promote cooperation, cohesion, and survival within a single group or community. *Inter-communal*, describes values and behaviors that extend beyond one’s immediate group to

What we consider moral behavior today – respect, dignity, cooperation, empathy, fairness, justice, and so on – has root in this sort of developed survival, one which hinges, again, on vast cohesion, and these behaviors initially driven by survival imperatives became institutionalized as ethical norms.

However, with the rise of communal interdependence and the institutionalization of normative frameworks, the moral field began to exceed the binary structures of immediate survival – what might be called *die-not-die* logic that governed early human behavior. In this primitive calculus, moral action was implicitly judged by its capacity to sustain biological life: cooperation, sharing, and loyalty were morally reinforced for they directly enhanced the probability of not dying. Right and wrong, in this context, were indistinguishable from adaptive success and failure. Yet as human communities became more complex, and as linguistic, cultural, and institutional forms stabilized and transmitted norms across generations, the direct link between ethical judgment and survival utility was gradually weakened. Norms could now be preserved, justified, and indexed to values independently of the immediate survival function. This shift generated new moral terrain wherein higher-order values – such as justice, dignity, truth, and autonomy – could conflict with, and even override, the foundational survival strategies from which they emerged. It is here that internal tensions arise: a society may uphold the sanctity of truth even when deception might ensure greater collective survival; individuals may sacrifice themselves for principles that hold no immediate adaptive advantage. In such cases, ethical reasoning no longer merely reflects evolved heuristics for living, but articulates ideals that transcend the evolutionary logic from which they historically developed. Thus, the institutionalization of ethics introduces a constitutive rupture: while rooted in survival, moral life comes to orient itself by values that cannot be reduced to the logic of *do this or die* but instead reflect an ongoing negotiation over what life ought to be, rather than merely how it can be preserved.

Despite the foundational role of survival in shaping values, there exists a perceived tension between survival-based value systems and higher ethical values such as justice, freedom, and equality. Critics might argue that these higher values are abstract ideals disconnected from survival imperatives. However, in retort, these values are instead extensions of survival strategies, essential for long-term group survival and flourishing. Justice, for example, emerges as a higher-order value precisely because it optimizes the conditions for both survival and flourishing. By ensuring equitable resource distribution, justice promotes social stability, which in turn fosters environments where individuals can pursue diverse forms of flourishing. Thus, justice is not an abstract ideal, but a sophisticated extension of survival imperatives tailored to complex human societies. Similarly, equality promotes social cohesion by ensuring that all members of the community have access to necessary resources, thereby enhancing overall group survival chances.

Therefore, ethical principles emerge from the practical needs and experiences of individuals, with survival being the most fundamental of these experiences. The higher ethical values are not unrelated to survival but are merely sophisticated and complex extensions of survival strategies designed to enhance group cohesion, adaptability, and long-term flourishing. By demonstrating that higher ethical values are integral to the survival of human communities, as primitive so too modern, I argue the tension between survival-based systems and higher values is

include other communities, promoting broader cooperation, empathy, and alliances that benefit multiple groups collectively.

not inherent but is instead a reflection of the evolving complexity of human societies – nodding to Noonan’s complex ontology. As societies develop more intricate social structures and face more complex survival challenges, their value systems also become more sophisticated, integrating higher ethical principles that support both individual and collective well-being. For where Marx sees the material conditions of life as forming the basis of human value, those material conditions likewise cannot help but shape the superstructure of culture, ideology, and moralities, such that “the [modes] of production of material life,” he commits, “conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.”⁵⁰ However, with the advent of these higher values comes the detachment from a grounded ontology, one where the basis of understanding is largely left to the individual.

Remarks On Subjectivity and Moral Development

Modern moral philosophy has often adopted a subjective tone, treating value as existing primarily within the individual, manifesting internally. Consider, for example, what I view as a misrepresentation of Sartre’s claim that “existence precedes essence” – namely, the common assumption that individuals must create their own values in isolation within a world lacking inherent meaning.⁵¹

This reading detaches ethics from the material conditions of existence, presenting it as an abstract addition or supplement rather than something inherent. Idealist perspectives such as this interpretation argue value systems evolve primarily through the development of human consciousness and self-awareness. An example can be seen in Hegel where he posits that the dialectical process of history leads to the evolution of ethical systems as expressions of human *spirit* and rationality.⁵²

I challenge this type of subjectivism; I argue that ethics, an intrinsic part of existence itself, emerges directly from our engagement with the world through survival. For our bodies are always engaged personally with the world in survival-based activities, which in turn shape how we experience value subjectively. Moreover, a survival-based ontology contends that values arise from necessity and are subsequently intellectualized. This suggests that the material imperative of survival precedes and shapes the evolution of consciousness and ethical systems. This idea is more in keeping with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, where centered on immediate lived experience of perception our *being is shaped*.⁵³ This materialist standpoint, with the combination of evolutionary facets, suggests that we project meaning and value onto the world of things, not simply as a coping mechanism for the inherent absurdity of existence, but as a response to the immediate, tangible conditions of survival. This projection is not done in the abstract or purely subjective realm, but in the practical, real-world sense of survival: *I am here now; what am I to do?*

What I would argue is often, or completely, overlooked is the fundamental basis of material conditions of existence. From a survival-based perspective, survival is not merely a prerequisite

⁵⁰ Marx, *Critique of Political Economy*, 2.

⁵¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Meridian Publishing Company, 1989), 287-311, 295.

⁵² See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1807).

⁵³ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945).

but the very origin of ethical behavior and values, and therefore, precedes value, for it forms the foundational condition for projecting any meaning or value onto the world. This is evident even in the most basic life functions; when we are born of our mothers we need not be told to breathe – we simply do. Thus, ethics is embedded in existence itself, manifesting through these survival imperatives, and precedes essence. Without the imperative to survive, the very act of imbuing the world with meaning would be rendered meaningless. Properly understanding the impact of survival on our value systems allows us to reorient Sartre’s statement such that it is read properly, and synonymously, with survival – that is, existence precedes value, or essence in this case. As so, ethics is not, nor can be, something tacked onto existence; it is and must be an evolving expression of our material reality and its demands.

While values are often dismissed as subjective preferences or culturally relative constructs, grounding them in survival needs introduces an objective dimension. Moral realism, in this context, is not a metaphysical assertion about timeless moral facts, but posits that values are objective features of the world. These objective features are recognitions that certain evaluative orientations are necessitated by the conditions under which life can be sustained and flourish, that is, the material conditions that sustain life. Values do not hover above existence; they emerge from the material constraints and possibilities that define what it means for organisms – especially social ones – to continue existing. This materialist ontology directly challenges the traditional fact-value dichotomy by denying that facts describe the world and values merely express attitudes. Rather, it asserts that the very structure of life entails orientation toward what is conducive or inimical to its continuity. Survival, as a shared and objective condition, generates evaluative demands that are not merely subjective projections but intersubjectively verifiable responses to real conditions.

John D. Wild’s exposition of generosity illustrates this tension: generosity may seem like a subjective moral ideal, but when situated within the concrete reality of interdependence it becomes a vital social practice that secures cohesion, trust, and reciprocity – conditions essential for communal survival. Thus, generosity links subjective intention with objective necessity, revealing that value is neither wholly imposed by the agent nor passively derived from external facts, but forged at the intersection where the needs of the organism meet the structure of the world. In this way, materialist ethics reframes the fact-value debate: it does not conflate the two but shows that values are embedded in the very facts of our existence as beings whose survival depends on normative organization.

I do not deny that humans possess the unique freedom to determine their own means of attaining the ends they comprehend. However, reason can apprehend an end, as it is inherently relative, and reason alone can grasp relations.⁵⁴ Moreover, humans are free to devise and select their contingent means, navigating their individual circumstances and charting their own course through the complexities of human history. “This voluntary, free aspiration, or will,” desire, want, and so on, stands as the highest mode of *being* ordained by the law of our nature, governing estimative and sensory appetites, as well as every active inclination within us.⁵⁵ In other words, our ability to choose – to pursue what we value, rather than merely react to stimuli – is what most fundamentally shapes our behavior. This does not require an abstract metaphysics of the will, but simply a recognition that we act not only from impulse, but from a sense of what matters. Our

⁵⁴ See Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 431, 481.

⁵⁵ Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 206.

wants are not random; they reflect a structure of value we participate in, and our freedom lies in how we respond to that structure. Only through this means can individuals truly take charge of their lives and accomplish the objective for which they are brought into existence on this earth: the human living of human life, as “self-conscious *agents*.”⁵⁶

In the words of William H. Marnell: “Thus the final reality is not change but growth, and the creative activity is not directed toward some external end but is the end itself. Ethics exists to give man a steady growth, a deepening, expanding, and increasing vision in his perception of the meaning of life – and that is precisely what we live for.”⁵⁷ What I am arguing herein is an approach which challenges the arguable superstructural interpretation of Hegelian idealism and instead suggests a material basis as the true driver of value formation. The issue with the abstraction of value is (much to the same end as the subjectivist) value becomes free from its origin and therefore becomes a means to an end without proper articulation of the means and the end. I argue the issue with abstraction of value rests in the instrumentalization of reason.

Instrumental Reason and the Misunderstanding of Value

Kamenka writes that humans, viewed from an empirical perspective, are endowed with certain purposes, needs, requirements, and so on. These elements are essential to their (the human’s) recognition, and which ought to be recognized by “any science that has man for its subject.”⁵⁸ Moral demands (we will assume this term lightly) arise from the effort to fulfill these needs. If these efforts are practical and consider objective conditions, “they are norms that any detached, honest and impartial human enquirer must accept as built into the nature of man.”⁵⁹ To the delight of the Marxist, “[t]here is no point in asking for some further, metaphysical criterion,” for “no ultimate or absolute for man is more ultimate or absolute than his own needs.”⁶⁰

Building on this foundation Noonan asserts that “[t]he natural impulsion to stay alive leads us to work together to build societies in which we might not only live, but live well and freely.”⁶¹ Subsequently initiating his distinction between terms, Noonan clarifies that, “[i]n social history, it is not *only* survival, passing one’s genes on to the next generation, that counts but *also* satisfaction, meaning and fulfillment that matter.”^{62,63} This is his distinction between survival and value and thus Noonan’s complex ontology. This progressive aim of human nature, whereby survival once satisfied to an appropriate extent, directs itself towards satisfactions beyond *not-death*. It could,

⁵⁶ Noonan, *Materialist Ethics*, 217.

⁵⁷ William H. Marnell, *Man-Made Morals: Four Philosophies That Shaped America* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 304.

⁵⁸ Kamenka, *Marxism and Ethics*, 47.

⁵⁹ Kamenka, *Marxism and Ethics*, 47.

⁶⁰ Kamenka, *Marxism and Ethics*, 47.

⁶¹ Noonan, “Historical Materialism,” 4.

⁶² Noonan, “Historical Materialism,” 6.

⁶³ Noonan’s formulation references the passing on of “one’s genes,” which, on a strictly Darwinian or “selfish gene” interpretation, might seem to reduce value to individual genetic replication. However, this framing raises questions about those who do not reproduce biologically: adoptive parents, caregivers, or those who contribute meaningfully to social life without genetic legacy. A more expansive reading, consistent with Noonan’s broader ontology, would suggest that what ultimately matters is not individual gene propagation per se but the reproduction and flourishing of the species as a whole, understood through social, ethical, and existential contributions that transcend mere biological transmission.

however, be argued that this separation risks overlooking the ways in which survival remains subtly embedded within even the most refined human pursuits, potentially leading to idealistic or, worse-yet, subjective valuations. Survival, though, in its strictest and most archaic form is not stripped from a complex ontology: when I walk the dog across the street – a pleasurable time indeed – I am still wary of the vehicles that drive by. This is a sense of survival though rinsed in many pleasures. So, to claim that, as we wash our hands clean of the archaic man’s burden, we are free from survival and therefore it does not connote nor denote value, I argue, is myopic, or conversely even, too broad.

The extension of value beyond mere survival simply illustrates the development and practical evolution of human beings; it reflects how human pursuits have become more complex and layered, not that we have abandoned our embodied nature in favor of purely mental or idealistic pursuits. To recognize that value includes meaning, fulfillment, and satisfaction is not to imply that value now arises from detached reasoning or metaphysical speculation alone. Such a turn would suggest that value is determined solely through intellectual faculties removed from the lived, embodied, and practical contexts in which human beings actually experience the world. But value remains rooted in the continuum of life: even when engaged in contemplative or aesthetic activities we do so as living beings shaped by needs, habits, and dangers that remain ever-present, though perhaps more subtly. In this way, the evolution of value beyond brute survival still remains marked by survival – refined, enriched, but not wholly transcended.

From this, I argue that ethical theories that ignore the historical and material roots of value obscure the forces that give rise to our moral outlook. For instance, modern capitalist societies, which elevate profit and productivity as primary values, reflect the historical contingencies of industrial production and wage labor. Capitalism is not a value-neutral system; it actively shapes the ethical landscape by framing human relationships and natural resources in terms of instrumental utility. The alienation of workers from their labor and the commodification of nature under capitalism, in turn reduce value to economic utility, and life itself becomes devalued – thereby subordinating the flourishing of human beings to economic survival (profit in many cases). This distortion exemplifies the failure to balance survival imperatives with ethical flourishing. And, therefore, this instrumentalization of value leads to the erosion of life-value ethics.

Left unchecked, instrumental reason, divorced from life-value, leads to a narrow understanding of ethics – focused on means-ends calculations, neglecting the broader, intrinsic worth or value of life itself. Wild’s notion of causation involves a recognition that actions have ethical consequences, and I add: not merely because they achieve survival goals, but because they affect the intrinsic worth of other beings.⁶⁴ In this sense, reason must be integrated with an understanding of life-value to avoid the pitfalls of ethical systems which prioritize ignorant efficiency – that is, efficiency pursued without awareness of its harmful consequences or broader ethical implications.⁶⁵ This reintegration requires moving beyond the purely utilitarian calculations of means and ends to embrace a form of rationality that acknowledges the intrinsic worth of all beings and the interconnection of life systems. Such an approach necessitates a shift in how we

⁶⁴ See Part 1, Section 4, “Irresponsibility and Its Causes” in Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 82-96.

⁶⁵ This resembles Marcuse’s concept of *blind necessity* – mechanical behavior carried out without conscious ethical reflection. See Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1960).

conceive of reason – not as a detached cognitive tool but as an engaged and holist informed process.

Moral Communities and Development Through the Lens of Rationality and Generosity⁶⁶

Reason, therefore, must be understood not as an abstract faculty divorced from ethical practical demands but as substantive reason, a faculty that incorporates values from the outset. While both idealist and instrumentalist fracture the bond between fact and value, moral realism – especially in its instrumental realist form – does not make this error; it grounds reason in the material and ethical necessities of life. Reason emerges as a capacity developed to navigate and manipulate the world, not only for survival but for the coordination of complex, value-laden social life. It enables humans to transcend immediate needs by constructing strategies oriented toward sustainable flourishing. Thus, reason is not a merely subjective virtue, but an objective practice rooted in recognition and interdependence. Generosity, in this context, corrects the amorality of instrumental reason. In early human communities, it functioned as a survival strategy: the sharing of resources ensured the collective endurance of the groups. Yet generosity cannot be reduced to its pragmatic function alone; it reflects a deeper ethical responsiveness to the intrinsic value of others.⁶⁷ As an objective act grounded in material interrelation, generosity challenges the atomizing tendencies that arise from the abstractions of contemporary ethical theory.⁶⁸

From a survival-based perspective, generosity is not merely a moral sentiment but an evolved strategy for enhancing group survival. Sharing resources and fostering goodwill within a community increase the chances of collective and individual survival, thereby embedding generosity as an objective strategy within ethical systems. It is a practical virtue that arises from the necessity of cooperation, for survival-value is at odds with purely subjective accounts of value. For without the objective foundation of survival needs, ethical values would lack the grounding necessary for coherence and applicability. Together these ideas point to the objectivity of survival needs providing a stable basis upon which values are constructed, ensuring that ethical norms are not arbitrary but are instead aligned with the fundamental necessities of human existence.

Modern ethical systems often focus on individual autonomy and personal gains, thus my connection to capitalist ideologies, which prioritize competition and discourage generosity through its framing as irrational or inefficient. Yet, the example of generosity, like life-value, points at the importance of relationality and mutual dependence. By recognizing, through reason, that values are formed from the interaction between individual consciousness and objective, historically

⁶⁶ The concept of generosity, as explored in Wild's work, has been adapted and further developed to complement the context and ideas presented in this discussion.

⁶⁷ Wild writes, "Those who are great in soul will tend towards temperance [...] In the same way they will tend towards generosity [...]" Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 143.

⁶⁸ The abstractions of contemporary ethical theories often extend beyond the traditional notion of abstraction as the removal from particularities or historical context. In practical ethics, these abstractions manifest as theories that, whilst claiming applicability to lived realities, are frequently disconnected from foundational philosophical frameworks grounded in historical and material realities. This detachment risks fostering principles that prioritize abstract rationalizations over the concrete, relational, and contextually grounded bases of moral life. For instance, utilitarianism, when narrowly applied in modern contexts such as algorithmic decision-making, often assumes universal principles whilst overlooking specific historical, economic, and cultural contexts – thereby reducing ethical judgments to mathematical calculations.

developing human needs, and that our survival is inextricably linked to the survival of others, we can construct a more comprehensive ethical theory – one that accounts for both the cognitive capacities of individuals and the material conditions that make those capacities meaningful.

These shared values such as generosity, relationality, and cooperation, then, create a foundational framework that shapes a society's identity, guiding members in understanding their roles and responsibilities within the group. For a society's collective understanding serves as the basis for how individuals are valued, with their skills and contributions assessed in terms of how effectively they help achieve these shared goals. Therefore, the development of communal values and morals depends on the existence of a social environment in which members are united around a common purpose.

In communities structured in this way, the ethics and distribution of responsibilities are organized in a manner which reflects each person's role in achieving the group's survival, that is, the shared ultimate aim – that is, what makes life worth living. Therefore, instead of evaluations of people based on their unique, biological traits, as hypotheses by the likes of Dawkin might have us assume, the focus instead is alignment with broader cultural maxims. The value of these categories or maxims are determined by a moral community's collective contribution to its sophisticated survival, flourishing, and so on. As these moral communities evolve, these value systems undergo transformations, especially when cultural innovations shift the criteria for what is or can be considered valuable or necessary for well-being. In such instances, the value system is not static but adapts, a reflection of changing needs and complex survival strategies of the society in a specific time or epoch.

IV. Closing Remarks: Causes and Value

Any historical transformation arises from a material foundation where new entities emerge. This establishes the concept of value as specific material or structural conditions that distinguish one entity from another. Value formation occurs at the intersection of survival imperatives, material conditions, and socio-development. These elements do not simply coexist; they are intrinsic to the process of transformation. When these causes converge, value emerges as the necessary outcome. Thus, survival strategies and material conditions, embedded within a social context, serve as catalyst for value, persisting within the transformed states they generate.

Transformation relies on material convergence, but neither survival imperatives nor material conditions alone suffice to produce value; value must emerge within a broader, mediated context. A brick does not equate to a house, just as raw matter does not inherently constitute the means to human ends – means of shelter, sustenance, or flourishing.^{69,70} If these elements – bricks, materials, or survival needs – were inherently unified with their outcomes, transformation would be impossible. The evolution of value hinges on the dialectical tension between survival

⁶⁹ As derived from Wild's work, in which he states, "As long as the wood and bricks remain only *potentially* a house there is no process of building. The capacity of a thing to endure, first by maintaining itself and secondarily by acting on other things, is not change (the actualizing of the potential) but energizing (the actualizing of the actual). Change has an essential duality of potency (matter) and actuality (formal being) in its nature. All change is hylomorphic in character, out of matter (*hyle*) into form (*morphé*)." See Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 321.

⁷⁰ See Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 300-301.

imperatives and the material conditions that may enable or frustrate them; neither axis alone generates societal value. If survival alone constituted value, or if material configuration inherently aligned with flourishing, there would be no room for normative or institutional development – no real historical progression. A world in which matter and means were intrinsically unified would exclude the dynamic processes of construction and decay that characterize historical transformation.⁷¹

Formal dependencies – those logical or definitional linkages that presume a fixed relation between matter and function – fail to account for this dynamism. They overlook the contingent, historically situated interplay through which matter becomes meaningful. Observation reveals constant flux: matter combines with means to which it is not inherently tied. A brick may crack; mortar may fail.⁷² Their combination into a structure of value is not necessitated by their physical form alone. If the very nature of matter dictated its alignment with human ends, the world would be static – the brick would by essence, be a house, and the possibility of transformation would be non-existent.⁷³ Thus, a world where means and material were essentially conjoined would undermine the logic of change.

Change without cause – that is, transformation occurring without intelligible mediation – contradicts this framework, which holds that value formation presupposes underlying material and existential drivers. Ethical systems evolve not by accident but through the dialectical movement between survival imperatives and the material conditions through which flourishing becomes possible. This dynamic, far from incidental, is the engine of ethical development, as unexplained change would render the concept of value incoherent. Hence, investigating cause is therefore essential to fully grasp the reality of value formation.

Efficient causes – understood as external agents or conditions that bring about change – are necessary to synthesize form and matter in the process of societal value formation. These causes include forces such as cultural norms, prevailing ideologies, technological innovations, economic developments, and social movements. Such forces catalyze internal transformation by disrupting or redirecting existing material and institutional arrangements. When these causes operate outside the systemic structure they ultimately affect – such as when global market shifts influence a local economy – they generate technical change: functional adaptations that remain external to ethical transformation. This aligns with life-value ethics insofar as value arises from engagements with historically specific material conditions rather than moral *ideals*.⁷⁴

When efficient cause act within the broader social system – say, within the economy or political structure – but remain external to any particular individual or group, they produce what might be called a natural evolution: gradual shifts in value mediated by structural adaptation. In contrast, when these causes emerge from within individual or collective agents – internalized and expressed through conscious action – we observe autonomous development, the realization of *telos*: the directed unfolding toward human flourishing.

⁷¹ See Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 298-301.

⁷² Taken from Wild's discussion in "The Four Species of Cause." See Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 298-302.

⁷³ See Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 300-301.

⁷⁴ See Wild, *Realist Philosophy*, 300.

Thus, value formation is not reducible to material survival or mechanical adaptation but reflects the synthesis of survival strategies, material conditions, and the dialectical intercourse of internal and external causes. It is grounded in a historical material reality, continually reshaped by the dynamic forces that mediate between individual agency and structural transformation which in turn shape and reshaped the trajectory of human development.

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Colin Anthony Smith MacNairn is a writer, published poet, and once long-time union welder. His work generally focuses on morality, ontology, politics, and their intersections. His most recent publications include, “Liberty, Affect, and The Rise of Populism” (2025) and “Moral Realities: Continuity, Narratives, and the Normative Self” (2025). His recent conference presentations – at universities around the world – have had their general topics ranging from moral theory to Marxism, metaphysics to materialism, sustainability practices to scientific postures. Currently, Colin researches and writes out of the Department of Philosophy at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada.

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