

Existentialism as Biology

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Abstract

Existentialism is compatible with a broadly biological vision of who we are. This thesis is grounded in an analysis of “concrete” or “individual” possibility, which differs from standard conceptions of possibility in that it allows for possibilities to come into being or disappear through time. Concrete possibilities are introduced both in individual life and by major transitions in evolution. In particular, the advent of ultrasociality and of language has enabled human goals to be formulated in partial independence from the vestigial “goal” of biological replication. The existentialist stance is validated by the necessity of choice grounded in emotion, in a way that does not require a commitment to a Kantian Will.

Keywords

biology, existentialism, Robert Solomon

My aim in this article is straightforward. I propose to argue that Existentialism is not merely compatible with a broadly biological vision of who we are; it is, in fact, a biological fact about us that we transcend biology in just the sort of way that an existentialist position like Solomon’s requires.¹

Robert Solomon’s philosophical passions were both deep and broad. Few of his friends and admirers can claim to match the variety of topics he addressed in his more than 40 books, innumerable articles and conference talks, and in his tireless teaching. That variety is also exhibited, on a barely smaller scale, in what passes for the single “field” I shared with him: the philosophy of the emotions. Like him, I thought emotions absorbing as a philosophical topic not just because emotions are, as he often pointed out, what life is *all about*, but also because, from a purely theoretical point of view, the study of emotions encompasses pretty much everything in philosophy. To speak only of the “core areas” of philosophy, emotions raise problems pertaining to metaphysics, to epistemology, to logic and philosophy of language, to ethics and the philosophy of action, and to aesthetics. Among ontological questions about emotions, one can ask: what sorts of things are they? Do they reduce to combinations of other states? Do all emotions consist in blends and of a small number of basic emotions? Or is every emotion, on the contrary, constituted by a confluence of appraisals in many dimensions? Epistemological questions about emotions are particularly pressing: how do we come to

know the emotions of others and one’s own? Are they among those states to which we have “privileged access”? Or are they, as common observation as well as psychological evidence suggests, among those aspects of our own mental life about which we are most deluded? In logic and philosophy of language questions arise about the logical form of emotion attributions: are they relational? If so, does every emotion have a fixed number of places for objects of different sorts? What is the logical form of emotion statements specifying the different objects of emotional states? That emotions are involved in ethical and aesthetic judgments is a matter of general agreement; but the nature of that involvement is far from clear. Do moral and aesthetic judgments, when made with understanding and sincerity, necessarily include an emotional component? Or, conversely, do certain emotions inherently contain evaluative or appraising judgments?

Thoughtful discussions of most of these questions—with the possible exceptions of the drier issues concerning logical form—are to be found in Solomon’s own work, from his article on “Emotion and Choice” (1973) and *The Passions: The Myth and Nature of Human Emotions* (1984), to some of his late books, notably *Not Passion’s Slave* (2003a), *In Defense of Sentimentality* (2004), and *True to our Feelings* (2007), the last of which sums up, perhaps better than any other, his accumulated wisdom. Solomon was at once deeply sympathetic to the various classical accounts of emotion—Aristotle, Stoics, Descartes,

Spinoza, Hume—and lucid in his analysis of how each needs to be complemented by insights that can be gleaned from the others. In addition, in the last decade of his life, he had become impressively knowledgeable about relevant work on emotions outside of philosophy as narrowly understood. He mastered a great deal of scientific literature on emotions, from evolutionary theory, anthropology, and brain science to psychology, and had developed a coherent and sympathetic way of understanding how such work could be relevant to philosophy. He had never, however, succumbed to the temptation of thinking that science could preempt philosophy.

Like many philosophers nowadays, I tend to be left uncharacteristically tongue-tied when nonphilosophers ask, “You are a philosopher—so what is *your* philosophy?” Bob Solomon’s response was to answer without hesitation: “I’m an existentialist.” Compatibly with all the sophistication expected of a professional philosopher, existentialism remained his own central philosophy of life. I would like to say I am one too, though I feel I sadly lack the credentials, for I have always been more inclined than he was to adopt a biological perspective in which human life is ruled by the play of chance and necessity. As I’ll try to explain, however, one can be a determinist reductionist (though not, perhaps, a strict genetic determinist—but then there never really were any of those outside the imagination of anxious biophobes), and still be an existentialist.

This can seem implausible. For what is characteristic of existentialism is its affirmation of the absolute freedom of human agents; the biological view of human reality, on the contrary, suggests determinism, reductionism, and denial of transcendence. How can they be reconciled?

As far as I know—though I confess I have not canvassed the entire corpus of his work to be sure of this—Solomon did not address this question directly. What I shall attempt in this article is a sketch of how that argument might go. I shall suggest that when both are rightly interpreted, the existentialist attitude can, with some qualifications, be seen as arising from the basic facts of human biology, in the light of an analysis of possibility and choice.

It must be acknowledged that the more extreme Sartrean doctrines about freedom do face problems that have lately been exacerbated by findings in neuroscience. Bob Solomon, unlike Sartre, did not rely on the influence of drugs like Corydrane to write philosophy; and he was willing to renounce the literal interpretation of those more extreme doctrines, because they simply don’t accord with the facts of life. In later works, most notably in his *reprise* of the question of the passivity of emotions (Solomon, 2003b), we shall see that he repudiated some Sartrean excesses. Nevertheless, I think he was right to be an existentialist.

The idea that existentialism could be somehow derived from biological facts appears to be a paradox. But deep truths sometimes present themselves in implausible guises, and so it is in this case. Some scholars have not seen past the paradox. One such is a prominent intellectual journalist, Leon Wieseltier, who reviewed Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* (2006) in the *New York Times Book Review*. Wieseltier began by quoting

Dennett: “Like other animals . . . we have built-in desires to reproduce and to do pretty much whatever it takes to achieve this goal. . . . But we also have creeds, and the ability to transcend our genetic imperatives.” Wieseltier then commented: “And then more, in the same fine antideterministic vein: ‘This fact does make us different’.”

Notice first, in passing, that the smooth passage from the idea that we are “different” to the idea of “anti-determinism” is a complete nonsequitur. In the sense intended by Dennett, “transcendence” has strictly nothing to do with determinism. Wieseltier goes on:

Then suddenly there is this: “But it is itself a biological fact, visible to natural science, and something that requires an explanation from natural science.” . . . Dennett does not see that he has taken his humanism back. Why is our independence from biology a fact of biology? And if it is a fact of biology, then we are not independent of biology. If our creeds are an expression of our animality, if they require an explanation from natural science, then we have not transcended our genetic imperatives. The human difference, in Dennett’s telling, is a difference in degree, not a difference in kind—a doctrine that may quite plausibly be called biological reductionism. (Wieseltier, 2006)

Wieseltier has instructively missed the point. I want to explain why, and to show how Solomon’s existentialism was indeed a “humanism” that is not in the least incompatible with a biological point of view.

I must begin with a detour into certain questions about the nature of possibility. The detour is motivated by the fact that when philosophers speak of the freedom of the will, they take for granted that at any moment an agent is faced with a number of possible actions. But they seldom discuss the more general question of what constitutes these possibilities, or of what biological facts might lie behind them.

Possibility: General and Particular

When philosophers talk about modality—what is necessary, possible, or impossible—they refer primarily to propositions. According to the model-theoretic semantics introduced in the 1960s by Saul Kripke, Bas van Fraassen, and David Lewis, possibility is construed in terms of *accessibility* from one possible world to another. A proposition is necessary if it is true in all accessible worlds, impossible if it is true in none, and possible if it is true in some of them.²

That leaves only the task of determining what it is for a world to be accessible from this one. In logic, that is hardly a trivial task, for “accessible” means “*possible* of access,” so what is accessible from this world is just a special case of what we were trying to figure out in the first place: *what is possible?*

The ingenious technical devices elaborated by modal logicians to answer that question without begging it need not concern us here. Most of their answers, however, take it for granted that the actual world is just one of an infinity of possible worlds. The actual is contained in the possible. But that way of talking obscures the fact that, from a more commonsense point of view, *the possible is contained in the actual*: what is or is not possible

affects what is real, what we aspire to, and what we need to take into account in our planning. Without the possible, a whole range of emotions, notably fear, hope, doubt, and trust, would have no object. Furthermore, when we contemplate other possible worlds, we furnish them with entities constructed with the raw materials of our own. Regarded in this way, as Nelson Goodman formulated it, “the only possible entities are actual ones” (Goodman, 1983, p. 55).

One obvious way to see how the possible is contained in the actual is to take note of the fact that many properties are dispositional. The actual microstructure of glass, for example, is such as to make it possible for light to pass through it, thus constituting the dispositional property of transparency. We can think of this perspective as delimiting a conception of positive possibility, contrasting with the negative and purely abstract sense in which anything is possible that does not entail a contradiction. A crucial feature of this way of thinking is that what is possible shifts with circumstances in the actual world. As things change, some things *become* possible which were not possible before. Becoming proficient in mathematics *opens up possibilities* for a career in engineering or physics; learning a new language creates new possibilities of conversation with people who previously could not have understood you. We might call these “concrete” or “individual possibilities.” The idea is related to Aristotle’s distinction between “first potentialities” and “second potentialities,” as commonly explicated in terms of the different senses in which a baby or an adult can talk. It is possible in the fullest sense for a normal adult to talk; for an infant, it is possible in that she is expected to become an adult. By contrast, it is not logically impossible for insects to talk, as in the fable of the ant and the grasshopper; but logical possibilities don’t come or cease to be.

Although possibility and impossibility do not admit of degrees in the same sense as probabilities, there can be different levels or grades of impossibility, conceived as a series of increasingly stringent filters. A first approach begins, at the least stringent level, by excluding from the realm of possibility only what is ruled out by the laws of logic. What is logically possible (travel at “warp speed,” for example) might not be physically possible. Narrower ranges of possibility can then be defined on the basis of further filters: what is chemically impossible might still be compatible with logic, mathematics, and physics, but not with chemistry (providing chemistry isn’t reducible to physics). What is logically, physically, chemically possible might not be biologically, or maybe psychologically, economically, or maybe even aesthetically possible.

Changes in what is, in the sense described, concretely possible, impossible or necessary typically result from the passage of time. When Marlon Brando’s Terry Malloy laments that he could have been a contender, he is implying that what once was possible is no longer possible. My actual future is only one of several possible futures; it becomes necessary as it shifts into the past, where roads not taken become impossible-for-me. There was a time when it would have been possible for me to go into medicine or ballet, but that is no longer possible for me now. The world of possibility is shaped like an inverted tear: At

the beginning of life, all possibilities are purely abstract. As a child grows, concrete possibilities quickly form the wide belly of the tear as skills are learned and capacities developed. At the end of life, some of those potentialities have become actual, while others have dwindled. In the end, death represents the vanishing of all concrete possibilities in a point.³

Such absolute expansions of a field of possibilities occur not only in individual lives, but on the grand scale of evolution. In a strictly logical sense, of course, one might insist that possibilities don’t evolve. Possibilities, like all self-respecting philosophical truths, are eternal. But there is a more interesting and important sense in which not every logical possibility is a possibility for something or someone at a particular time: possibilities for a given person or species can begin (and perhaps cease) to exist. In that sense, new possibilities were indeed created in the course of evolution.

So much has been argued by Maynard Smith and Szathmáry (1995, 1999), who have described “major transitions in evolution”—such as the onset of metabolism, self-replication, the genetic code, cells, sex, differentiated multicellular organisms, eusociality (the kind of strict division of labor, including reproduction, typical of ants or bees), and language. Each of these transitions has two apparently conflicting characteristics. First, each one brings important constraints. With differentiated multicellular organization, for example, individual cells lose their autonomy; with sex, all somatic cells lose the potentially eternal life afforded by cell division (Clark, 1996). Now that we have emerged from the sea, developed arms and hands, and devised advanced flying technology, we are unlikely to face any selective pressure for our limbs to change into wings. But with each transition, and apparently in contradiction with the first, comes an *explosion of new concrete possibilities*. Multicellularity gives rise to all possible forms of metazoan animals, with their diversity of habitats, of diet, or modes of locomotion, and of strategies for coping with situations that even an intelligent bacterium could not conceive. Given that our forelimbs have become hands and not wings, the whole repertoire of what we can do with our fingers—all possible pieces for piano, for cello, for violin, all possible pieces for flute or harp—have become concrete possibilities.

The last transitions in Maynard Smith and Szathmáry’s scheme introduce the human variation on eusociality, namely a form of ultrasocial organization based on the recognition of distinct individuals and language. (I shall refer to this henceforth as “human ultrasociality.”)⁴ These are specific potentialities that form part of our biological nature (Maynard Smith & Szathmáry, 1999, 137 ff.). These bring new kinds of dependency, but also conjure into being radically new ranges of possibility. They enable us, among other things, to conceptualize the future and articulate alternative choices, and thereby to resist or even transcend the vestigial teleology of nature itself.

The teleology of nature is vestigial because it doesn’t involve any genuine goals. Instead, nature behaves as if its sole goal was replication. Among its tools in achieving that goal is the diversification of forms, both at the genotypic and at the phenotypic level. Language and ultrasociality are just the latest of those increasingly ingenious tools. As it happens, however,

these newest tools can be turned against the very “goal” of nature, even while among the possibilities they create is precisely the possibility of forming *genuine* goals, as social individuals capable of deliberation, debate, and critical elaboration of intentions. Once we start to describe, to argue, and to reason about our goals, we discover that our own goals need have nothing to do with those of nature. It is still true, of course, that most of what we do and think is due to motives and triggers of attention we neither know nor understand. Yet deliberation yields a vast range of possible new values independent of the teleology inherent to life.⁵ We are animals, but we talk—hence our relative freedom from the bare, stark goals of life. That freedom lies at the core of our specific biology. Thus we become, in the crucible of gossip, self-conscious thought, reason-giving, and debate, the first beings for whom existence precedes essence.

Nevertheless, as Henrich Wölfflin has written, “Even the most original talent cannot proceed beyond certain limits which are fixed for it by the date of its birth. Not everything is possible at all times and certain thoughts can only be thought at certain stages of the development” (quoted in Galison, 1996, p. 10). Each of us aspires to understand what potential emotions, what potential achievements, defeats, conquests or betrayals *we have it in us* to live through. Those are not possibilities tied to the modality of some proposition, but derive from actual dispositions or potentialities of a particular person in a particular situation. In the work already quoted, Nelson Goodman observed that “a thing is full of threats and promises” (Goodman, 1983, p. 40). In the literal sense, however, it is typically humans rather than things that issue threats and promises, harbor intentions, regrets, resentments, or desires—all of which states are by their very nature penetrated with non-actual possibility. And while merely possible facts can, as such, play no direct causal role in the natural world, yet even facts about pure possibility, mediated by human consciousness, play a determining role in the life of humans. Our consciousness is pervaded at every moment by our thoughts about what is possible, and being wrong about what was possible can have consequences as dire as being wrong about what is true (hence we admonish one another: ‘Live your dream!’ but ‘Be realistic!’).

The notion of *concrete individual possibility*, relative to a particular person at a particular time, place, and situation, is the basis of the argument for the thesis that the core thesis of Existentialism—in humans, *existence precedes essence*—derives from biological fact. As with many important truths, we can find in certain religious myths an allegorical representation of the way that new possibilities arise from the imposition of radically new constraints.

Escaping from Eden

In the story of Genesis, Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, as a consequence of having eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Having eaten of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, Adam and Eve envisage choices they never had before, and are promised experiences which were inconceivable to them beforehand. Among those experiences are a wide range of unpleasant emotions: shame, guilt, and the prospect of suffering in the course of labor in both senses of the

word. For these reasons, the perverse imagination that has kept three major religions in bondage has always assumed that it is a bad thing to be expelled from the Garden. But really we should celebrate it as an escape rather than deplore it as an expulsion. If we can take the Garden of Eden to be the garden of nature, the study of nature might well dissuade one from thinking of it as a paradise. “Red in tooth and claw” is an understatement: nature was a nasty business long before there was a tooth or a claw to be reddened.

Nature is better described as an amoral hell; but it does, of course, present a compelling appearance of design. To account for this without actually attributing that appearance to the action of a Designer, philosophers have elaborated an account of teleology and function that has gained wide if not universal acceptance. This is the *etiological* account, particularly as elaborated to its most refined formulations by Ruth Millikan.⁶ In the context of evolutionary theory, that account construes an effect as a function, if the propensity for some organ or entity to produce it explains the continued production and present existence of such organs or entities. That accounts for the features of the natural world that give rise to the appearance of design. It eliminates the need to attribute goals to nature in the literal sense applicable only to the goals of beings capable of forming mental plans and intentions. Only a vestigial concept of goal can be applied to the world of living things as a whole: whatever happens in nature, in all its diversity, is determined by one quasi-teleological principle, one aim: that is, simply, the replication of those patterns that do in fact get replicated. Those patterns are mostly genes; although certain discoveries about epigenesis, about the complexity of the role of regulatory genes, and more generally the variety of things that can be understood to be inherited, have given rise to attacks on “genocentrism” in the name of “Developmental Systems Theory” or “Developmental Evolution.”⁷ The controversies to which these ideas have given rise, however, are irrelevant to the general point that nothing exists but what has been allowed to pass through the filter of natural selection. What passes through the filter of natural selection are those patterns that have been replicated in the past. They are abstract patterns, not individual organisms—for the simple reason that, despite the connotations of familiar terms such as “survival of the fittest” and “sexual reproduction,” no individual organism ever survives, and no “sexually reproducing” individual is ever actually reproduced.

I suggest that expulsion from the Garden of Eden, then, represents the break between the natural teleology of reproduction and the individual teleology that is engendered by the capacity to create and formulate individual goals. That is what it means to have escaped, in reward for tasting the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, from the prison that was Eden. It is a consequence of those last “major transitions of evolution,” the invention of language, human ultrasociality, and everything that has followed from them. Our emotions and desires have their roots in the innate needs and the original repertoire of responses bequeathed us by natural selection. But the individual and social construction of goals that are not framed as means to the replication of inherited patterns enables us to transcend the demands of the genes. That is what makes it possible for the Existentialist stance to make sense.

What Existentialism Requires

Existentialism is sometimes conceived as presupposing a certain Stoic or Kantian conception of the Will as heroically in conflict with the demands of the body and its inclinations. As Solomon phrased it in one of his last articles, the heavily existentialist notion of choice too readily suggests a problematic conception of freedom and responsibility. It is a conception typically expressed in “Cartesianism,” but that is expressed most exquisitely in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant: that free choice entails a form of metaphysical “subject” or “agent” by way of the “will” (Solomon, 2003b, p. 204).

Contrasting with this conception of the Will as metaphysical uncaused cause is a notion of free will, according to which an “act (or an emotion) that fits and makes sense in one’s life story can be said to be free” (Solomon, 2003b, p. 205). As I see it, the body and the Will are not to be thought of as inherently doomed to conflict. Instead they are, or ought to be, on the same side, against the tyranny of the genes. The capacity to form projects that might undermine the genes’ replication is the first *existential* moment.

This idea is somewhat parallel, but also complementary, to a thought about the origin of shame expressed by David Velleman:

[T]he reason why Adam and Eve weren’t ashamed of their nakedness at first is not that their anatomy was perfectly subordinate to the will but rather that they didn’t have an effective will to which their anatomy could be insubordinate. In acquiring the idea of making choices contrary to the demands of their instincts, however, they would have gained, not only the effective capacity to make those choices, but also the realization that their bodies might obey their instincts instead, thus proving insubordinate to their newly activated will. Hence the knowledge that would have activated their will could also have opened their eyes to the possibility of that bodily recalcitrance which Augustine identified as the occasion of their shame. (Velleman, 2001, p. 34)

This might be right, at some allegorical level, about the genesis of shame; but it appears to presuppose just such a Kantian conception of the Will as we saw that Solomon rejected. Furthermore, I would rather see the expulsion from the Garden as a moment of triumph, not of dismay. From the moment Adam and Eve stepped out of the Garden, the new possibilities created for them included not only unpleasant emotions, but limitless possibilities for making and refashioning goals and plans, including the invention of birth control, democracy, and individualism.

All of these inventions depend on a very general and, as Daniel Gilbert (2006) has argued, uniquely human capacity brought into being by language, namely the ability to imagine the future. The ability to think explicitly about one’s individual and collective future is entirely different from the capacity to desire something, despite the fact that satisfaction of a desire is always in the future. For without a conceptual map of the future, in which events can be envisaged as taking place in different sequences at different distances from the present, all desire focuses on the specious present or the immediate future. With explicit deliberation, thought and emotion can articulate hierarchies of goals situated

at different distances from the present. Among the consequences of this new capability is the fact that our desires are no longer confined to the vestigial functional role they play in disposing the body to serve the replication of genes. They are now in the service of individual goals.

Here a crucial reminder is in order. Our individual goals are not elaborated by individuals in isolation; rather—and this is why language is essential, and goes with the specifically human form of ultrasociality—they result from the elaboration of values in discussion and confrontation. Judgments are elaborated in the crucible of discussion and debate; to the extent that emotions are belief dependent, they too, however much they have their roots in biology, are products both of culture and of the individual stories in which each person’s repertoire has been forged. The thought was well expressed by Cathy Lutz:

Talk about emotions is simultaneously talk about society—about power and politics, about kinship and marriage, about normality and deviance The calling up of a scenario by the speaker of emotion words is done in particular contexts for particular ends, to negotiate aspects of social reality and to create that reality. (Lutz [1988], quoted in Solomon [2003a, p. 144])

In short, the social dimension of human life is intricately bound up with the capacity for language and with the creation of both constraints and new possibilities.

A Cascade of Paradoxes

The whole drama of the subversion and enactment of biological destiny at the level of individual choice is played out principally on the stage of our emotional life. This was something which Solomon repeatedly stressed. My own first encounter with his work was through the bracing shock of his doctrine about emotion and choice (Solomon, 1973). Though the idea was refined and modified through the years, to the point where Solomon regretted having chosen to use the word *choice*, he never gave up on the idea that we are in some measure responsible for our emotions, and he was not willing to “abandon the emotions to the category of passivity” (Solomon, 2003b, p. 223). He still saw them as at least sometimes embodying strategies used to secure individual goals, and he remained committed to the more general idea that, at least insofar as our *thoughts* are within our control, “one key ingredient in adult human emotion . . . is indeed something we can choose to do something about” (Solomon, 2003b, p. 208). As so often happens with the most fruitful philosophical puzzles, the cascade of paradoxes that Bob dared to put forward in that early article generates some important truths.

Solomon claimed that we are *responsible* for our emotions; that emotions are *judgments*, and that emotions are *chosen*. The paradoxes start with the first assertion, continue in the tension between the latter two claims, and are heightened by the fact that both the latter claims individually seem counterintuitive. So there are three paradoxical assertions: (1) some judgments are chosen; (2) emotions are chosen; and (3) emotions are judgments. Let me take these one by one.

1. Judgments, it would seem, are not voluntary, and so cannot be chosen. It is only in very special circumstances that we can make sense of the idea that we “choose to believe” something. It usually involves some sort of idiom or figure of speech that is not intended to be taken literally. Thus “I choose to believe what you say” usually means that I don’t believe it but that I will act, for the moment, as if I did. And “I can’t believe it” usually means little more than that I find it surprising. For most ordinary beliefs, choosing to believe is not an option (Williams, 1973).

But there is something one can say in favor of that first paradoxical claim. It goes back to Descartes, the first existentialist, who thought the will could outstrip the understanding, and sought by that doctrine to let God off the hook and show that humans were to blame for their own mistakes (Descartes, 1986/1641). Rightly understood, that is correct. If I am (reasonably or unreasonably) convinced that *p* is true, I cannot fail to believe it. But that’s not because I can’t *believe at will*. In this case, I do will to believe it. What it shows instead is that my failure lies, just as Descartes claims, in my will: I can believe at will, but what I cannot do is *want at will*. And that is enough to deserve blame, if the fact that I am doing what I want is a sufficient condition of being responsible for what I’ve done.

2. The second point applies specifically to the kinds of evaluative judgments to which Solomon assimilates emotions. Where choosing to believe is not an option, choosing to *assert* something of which one is less than certain may indeed be a choice. And Solomon’s insight, inspired by Sartre, is precisely that in many cases having an emotion is more like choosing to assert something than choosing to believe it. That is one of the respects in which indulging in the feeling of an emotion can be regarded as a strategic choice. For various more or less Machiavellian reasons, we may commit ourselves to an *expression* of emotion, and by so doing—that much seems right about William James’s equally paradoxical yet opposite doctrine, that we “are sad because we cry” (James, 1884)—we bring it about that we really experience the emotion. In some sense we did indeed do it on purpose.
3. So what of the doctrine that emotions are judgments? Of all the doctrines Solomon asserted, this is probably the one that has been subjected to the heaviest criticism. It is also a claim to which he has brought great refinement and devoted an elaborate defense (Solomon, 2003c). He begins by insisting that the term ‘judgment’ need not refer to “reflective interpretation and the deliberate consideration of alternatives characteristic (one hopes) of a magistrate at the bench.” Rather they can have the force of “prereflective . . . perceptual-evaluative judgments” in which expectations and commitments are involved, such as the confidence that a platform on which one is stepping will bear one’s weight (Solomon, 2003c, p. 95). He then lists 11 differentiae of *emotional* judgments “in order of increasing difficulty”: emotional judgments are (a) spontaneous; (b) pre-reflective; (c) evaluative; (d) constitutive; (e) systematic; (f) self-involved; (g) essentially tied to desires; (h) essentially tied to their expression; (i) dispassionate only

in pathological circumstances; (j) acts of judgment rather than propositional contents; and (k) “sustaining rather than simply initiating, structural rather than disruptive” (Solomon, 2003c, p. 95). I want to draw attention in particular to the claims defended under (a), (d), (g), (i), and (j).

I begin with (j): “Emotional judgments are particular acts of judgment, not propositional contents” (Solomon, 2003c, p. 95). Mere propositional judgments with a certain informational content may be entertained without being endorsed. One can also hold something to be true but not care about it emotionally at a particular moment—as when one is not thinking about it, or when one is too tired or preoccupied with something else. But when we are speaking of occurrent emotions, the sort of judgment Solomon intends cannot be one that is delivered dispassionately—except, as he says, “in pathological circumstances” (i). Solomon need not decide whether we should say that emotions include judgments, or whether on the contrary certain types of judgment normally include emotions. The important question, relevant to certain debates about “ethical internalism,” is whether it is possible for a moral judgment to be made sincerely and with full understanding, but without any emotional commitment. On that broader issue, it is clear that Solomon would stand firmly with the internalists in affirming that merely expressing a certain sort of information about, say, the injustice of a certain practice does not yet amount to a full-fledged moral judgment if in the act of judgment the speaker is not emotionally engaged. Furthermore, he would hold that you cannot *really* believe that *p*, where *p* is an evaluative judgment, without some degree of commitment to behavior consonant with the judgment (Solomon, 1990). This view has been contested on grounds derived from the new (and to some still suspect) field of “neuroethics.” Thus, Roskies (2006) argues that the issue of ethical internalism can be decided in the negative on the basis of fMRI evidence. No evidence can, of course, prove that this is true, since what is in question is in part a terminological issue about what is to count as endorsing such a judgment. But the brain evidence cited by Roskies suggests that all other features of what are normally called belief or judgment are present in cases where the behavioral commitment is entirely lacking. If the judgment is intact in every other way when the presence of certain differences in brain response indicates a lack of motivation, she argues that it simply begs the question to claim that a judgment without motivation was not “really” endorsed.

While this is impressive, it is not conclusive. There is interesting evidence on the other side. It is true that psychopaths—who present clear cases for the present debate—are notoriously capable of uttering propositions that sound exactly like moral judgments, while failing to experience any of the normal emotional manifestations that “normal” people manifest, including purely physiological measures such as heartbeat and sweating reflexes. But Roskies is not quite correct in her claim that their verbal judgments are indistinguishable from those of normal moral agents. A mark of the latter is that they make a distinction between purely conventional prohibitions and those that are derived from the moral repugnance we feel for gratuitous harm. Psychopaths are unable to grasp this distinction. Jessie Prinz

(2007), citing the work of R. J. Blair, relates that psychopaths may be aware that there is something they are not getting, and attempt to compensate by classifying *all* prohibitions on a par with the more stringent, purely moral category:

psychopaths tended to treat all rules as inviolable in an effort to convince the experimenter that they were mentally healthy. The plan backfired. Non-psychopathic criminals in the control group who were equally motivated to impress the experimenter answered in line with normal subjects The compensatory strategy of feigning moral rectitude actually revealed the profundity of their deficit. (Prinz, 2007, p. 44)

Internalism seems to be vindicated by the psychological and neuroscientific evidence after all, and that seems to justify Solomon's insistence that morality involves a certain kind of judgment—an essentially emotional judgment.

It may seem more difficult to deflect objections to the fundamental project of existential freedom that stem from neuroscientific explorations of the will. Benjamin Libet showed that the onset of motor activity involved in a simple action precedes the moment of conscious “decision” (Libet, Wright, Feinstein, & Pearl, 1979); and Daniel Wegner (2002) demonstrated that the feeling of agency can be disconnected from the fact of the agent's causal influence. These results clearly show that we cannot take the experience of a conscious intention to constitute the causal determinant of our actions. But it is a mistake to think of this as a problem for the sort of autonomy that an existentialist requires. For all it shows is that our choices, like our emotional responses, are determined by factors some of which eventually emerge in consciousness, not by states of consciousness as such. And given the narrow space allowed in our current awareness at any one time, that is indeed a good thing. If it were otherwise, we would *always*, not just occasionally, be acting on a crippling impoverished subset of our available reasons and motivations (Dijksterhuis & Nordgren, 2006).

The Creation of Existential Possibilities

Some of the central ideas, or better attitudes, of existentialism can be seen as fitting “naturally”—the word is apt—into a biological perspective. But I don't want to go too far. I remain committed to a fundamentally biological picture of our individual destinies. It was Heraclitus, I think, who first said *character is destiny*. We have all known people whose lives were blighted by certain traits of character that restricted their own vision of the choices available to them. It is one thing to make choices that one will regret; another to be devoid of acceptable alternatives; but perhaps most tragic of all is to be prevented from seeing that right before one is an alternative that might provide a way out of the impasse. Circumstances always constrain, of course, as well as affording opportunities. This leads to a more tragic version of the failure of self-fulfillment, in that an observer constantly has the impression that the solution to her friend's problem is right before her eyes. Like a spectator of classic tragedy, one is moved to shout warnings and advice, but the actor is behind a fourth wall and cannot hear us in her rush to perdition.

A surprising amount is becoming known, for example, about the path from genes through neurotransmitters to the temperamental dispositions measured by the five “dimensions” of personality theory: extraversion, conscientiousness, neuroticism, openness, and agreeableness. Each of the “big five” independent dimensions of personality varies along a continuum, so that together they generate a vast five-dimensional space, an array of points each of which is highly predictive of the probable responses persons at each point in that space. And although each dimension is highly heritable (Loehlin, McCrae, Costa, & John, 1998), and some of the specific paths from genes through neurotransmitters to personality dimensions are becoming known (Canli & Lesch, 2007), none of the predictions generated by personality theory is ever likely to amount to more than a statistical probability.

This remains true even if we are entirely skeptical of notions of personality and character. Consider the provocative claims made by Doris (2002) on the basis of such evidence as Milgram's obedience experiments or the “good Samaritan” experiment of Darley and Batson (1973). These are adduced as evidence for the claim that circumstances, not character, determine responses. But in both cases what is shown is not that there is no variance, but that one prediction is a better bet than another. That leaves, in the Milgram experiment, over 30% of subjects, and at least 10% in the Darley and Batson experiment, who did *not* conform to the situationist prediction. The right conclusion, we should infer, is not that there is no such thing as character, but that character is *rare*. But we knew that, come to think of it, without benefit of psychology or neuroscience.

Should we then claim, like modern “soft determinists” and Lucretius before them, that the leeway allowed by those statistical generalizations constitutes the interstices of determinism, the narrow space within which free will benefits from indeterminism? I don't believe it for a moment, for like Hume I believe that the space left open by determinism is merely that of randomness or chance, and therefore wholly unhelpful to the seeker of a home for free-will.

And yet the “merely statistical” character of the predictability afforded by social science still does make room for the spirit of existentialism. This is because it is *predictability* and not *determinism* that is relevant to the Sartrean paradox that we are “forced to be free.” In the absence of ironclad predictability, we have no recourse but to decide, and we have no way of approaching decision other than by deliberating. Deliberation involves *thinking through consequences*, which in turn consists in imagining and reasoning about outcomes. That, in normal circumstances, is done communally, by debating, disputing, arguing, and confronting one's individual emotional responses to that of our fellow humans. And that, as I've suggested, is what has allowed us to escape from the nightmare of Eden, and become human; but we need to concede that we haven't all escaped, and that none of us have escaped entirely. Not everyone can be a fully realized existentialist. Bob Solomon was lucky to be more fully one than most. Lucky, too, were those who both chanced to meet him and enjoyed just the right temperament to benefit from his teaching and example.

Notes

- 1 The present article is a much expanded and revised version of a short talk given at a memorial conference in honor of Robert Solomon held at the University of Texas, Austin, in February of 2008. The text of that talk is to be published in a book of articles deriving from that Conference, edited by Kathleen Higgins and published by Oxford University Press. I am very grateful to her for permission to incorporate here some of the text and ideas of that talk.
- 2 Some foundational works are Kripke (1980), Lewis (1968), and van Fraassen (1971).
- 3 For a more detailed elaboration of this conception of concrete possibility see de Sousa (2004).
- 4 I borrow this term from Richerson and Boyd (1998) to cover both eusocial species and human societies, which have only recently passed the former in complexity and in the numbers of individuals involved, Human ultrasociality, unlike eusociality, implicates individual members in a great variety of particular and collective relationships.
- 5 In that perspective, it is curious to reflect on the fact that champions of our spiritual freedom from biological determinism, such as the Vatican, reject the very emblem of that freedom—the capacity, as Monty Python put it, to put a little rubber thing on the end of my John Thomas.
- 6 (Millikan, 1984, 1993). The view can be traced back through Wright (1973), Taylor (1964), and Sommerhoff (1950). Although further modifications and refinements have been proposed, some of which have been collected in a useful collection by Allen, Bekoff, and Lauder (1998), I believe the basic idea remains unscathed.
- 7 See, for example Moss (2003); on DST, see Godfrey-Smith (2000), Oyama (2000); and on “Developmental Evolution” see West-Eberhard (2003).

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