

QUANTUM MORALITY – A Cosmological Perspective

Saros Seminar 2000. 'The Garden of Eden Revisited - Morality: right or wrong?'

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*What do we mean by Morality in a global society? Is a common framework across cultures possible? What is morality founded upon, and what do people use to decide the morality of an action or behavior?*

I called this talk 'Quantum Morality' when asked to dream up a title, as a sort of statement of intent or aspiration, perhaps even an act of faith. It expresses faith that in the crisis of the times, the angst and despair and turbulence of our day which finds its cutting edge in the issue of morality, it is possible to look deeply enough at the eternal verities to find some sort of platform from which to act which transcends cultural and belief systems, and is also a product of our day: a reflection, in principle of the current worldview.

I don't have the background to discuss scientific concepts in any detail (or indeed at all) but I, like many others, am drawn by the mythological overtones of contemporary physics and cosmology, the sense of relevance to experience, if one could just make the translation. However, the more I read in preparation for this talk, the more bamboozled I became by the sheer proliferation of theoretical models, and ingenuity of so many great minds bent on clothing mathematics in image. My grey matter turned technicolor with the exertion.

The quest for understanding the visible universe is thrilling, infused with an enthusiasm and love of the subject, and which can inspire a tremendous dedication on the part of the explorers. But all of us inhabit the cosmos so awesomely expounded in the work of present-day theoretical physicists and cosmologists, and created by the technological application of science.

It is no longer the world of certainties inhabited by our forebears. In the phrase made familiar by Thomas Kuhn commenting on the major revolutions of thought and perspective which have been spearheaded by science, the paradigm has shifted. A paradigm is a way of seeing. Its implications unavoidably extend beyond the laboratories, journals and tutorial rooms of the few, into the studies and living-rooms of the nations. And into the bedroom.

And into the churches.

## **Morality in the Age of Uncertainty**

Into this paradigm comes morality, an issue which very much reflects the anguish and perplexity of the Age of Uncertainty. Physics and metaphysics have never been closer. For me, they represent two ways of grappling with existence, one looking outward, one looking inward, each encountering the other at the edge of the Unknown, but both essential to human endeavour and understanding of our universe.

In this 'looking' morality enters like a lens focusing on the practical aspect of reality, where it touches everyday living as a need for action, choice and behavior. Traditionally deriving from a code of beliefs or ideology which underpin social custom, morality makes critical demands on us emotionally, pragmatically and ruthlessly on occasion, testing the parameters of our personal paradigm, and how much it reflects the social or ideological foundation we base it on.

The new physics is all about ways of seeing, but the gaze is outward. When any moral decision is to be made, the focus is inward.

We ask of ourselves: What is right in this instance? How can I determine the right thing to do? And having combined learned guidelines with our own 'sense' of the situation, we then have to consider whether we are prepared to stand by our decision and bear the consequences, or take the rap if our decision runs counter to the views of others or the way they choose to behave. Morality always involves a delicate relationship between the *inner* cosmos and the *outer*.

The contribution of scientists like Bohr, Heisenberg and Schrodinger eighty years ago was discovering that a previously unforeseen relationship between inner (psyche) and outer holds true in a laboratory measuring external (physical) phenomena. The realization that an observer's consciousness can directly affect a measurable external event is surprising, as is the peculiarity that particles seem to know what each other is up to, and modify their behaviour accordingly.

It is a significant change in the way we view what is real, and we really ought to take it more widely on board and explore the implications of the mysterious intercommunications involved. But except when both the telephones on my desk repeatedly ring together, thereby revealing that they are in communication, and secretly in league to fluster and discredit me, I still actually live my daily life in the ancient paradigm of objects-out-there-obeying-external-laws.

For the issue of morality, *the discovery that consciousness itself alters a situation may indicate a possible way forward, a change in moral outlook*, currently locked into a paradigm which seems to have broken down and no longer meets the requirements of modern living. Without a new way forward, we feel hopeless, reduced to bewailing the loss of old values and attempting to reassert them, but without their underpinnings.

I'll come back to this paradigm question, but the general point here is that the counter-intuitive paradoxes of theoretical physics force us to consider the mystery of consciousness, the relationship of the subjective and the objective and the fact that perception is relative. All these issues which seem so abstract come to dance on the pin of morality. They are abstractions with a very sharp point.

### **The contemporary moral landscape**

By way of clearing the ground, I want just to skim through the contemporary moral landscape as it appears to me and as it relates to the need for common agreement in a world whose perceived foundation has changed.

Religion offers the carrot and stick of an external moral force: God or doctrine. It can be very effective and as a moral force it represents security. Outside a religious framework, my market research has identified the two most popular personal working definitions of moral codes as: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you' (popularly interpreted as 'do unto others *before* they do it unto you!') and 'Do no harm and do a little good'.

Both are worthy creeds, and encourage decent behaviour, but the problem is that removed from a larger context of authority, both share a reliance on personal empathy, and personal interpretations of what harm and good might be, especially as applied to others. Can good

intentions without wisdom do more harm than good? The old adage reminds us that the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

What about the hope that as a global society we should be able to develop a cultural and rational morality? A faint hope, it seems to me, partly because the world is *not* one culture and cultures vary in vital respects, but more significantly because in my experience, people's rationality differs alarmingly (it certainly differs from mine anyway!) So I think we have to look for something beyond culture and the rational.

On a bigger scale we can look to a humanitarian-based morality. This approach could be summed up as a belief *in universal moral principles based on our common humanity*, and it underlies the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is an alternative, or substitute for the authority of a religious definition, and it is rooted in an assumption that cutting across cultural and religious differences are common qualities such as compassion, respect for others, respect for diversity, and of upholding the value of Life and the continuance of life.

It is an appealing ethic. In principle it is hard to disagree with, and difficult to fault when passionately expressed. It is very often passionately expressed.

The difficulty is that there is so much room for interpretation in a given instance, that it actually provides very little guidance in a genuine moral dilemma, and can be used to justify widely different courses of action. For instance, one compassionate individual may decide to assist a loved one to die with dignity at their own request, while another *equally* compassionate individual with a different view may consign a loved one to a long-drawn out descent into pain and vegetative existence despite their request for a dignified bowing out when the time is clearly approaching. Neither choice is truly a measure of compassion, though both parties may reach their decision through compassion and love. And unfortunately, the more passionately one adheres to one view as right in a situation like this, the more an opposing view can appear to be wrong.

Another angle of the humanitarian ethic makes 'social good' pre-eminent. The argument is that in order to live together as a society, individuals and groups may have to give up some of their historical or culturally accepted values and norms, to compromise for the good of all. Unfortunately, as a compromise ethic, there will always be conflict with those who are

not prepared to compromise deeply-held beliefs. Do we then resort to coercion, and at what point? Is coercion itself morally acceptable (in a 'good' cause)?

Society-based ethics include environmental moralism. Condemning gross environmental malpractice is one thing, but should we denounce driving a car to work as morally wrong because of the social impact of crowded streets and exhaust fumes? (The guillotine may await some of us here!) The impact is obvious, but is it a *moral* question, or is there some point along the scale of congestion at which it becomes a moral question? At the top of my street I regularly see groups of moral degenerates huddled together outside their office building in sub-zero temperatures, puffing. Management might have a case, but is the disapproval of non-smoking colleagues moral or olfactory?

We should be extremely wary, I think, of allowing populist mores and causes and the prevailing winds of the social climate to dictate morality. The common courtesies of living together are important, but morality as an ethical philosophy needs a deeper Foundation than this.

The closest attempt at a common moral foundation we have is probably The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, agreed by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1948, and its existence, as much as the details of the articles, has moral weight and authority. Although framed in terms of rights, it is not a legal or enforceable document. It is clearly worded as a *statement of aspiration*, to strive by education to promote respect and recognition for the freedoms and rights enshrined in it. And it is increasingly clear that the emphasis on 'rights' has a major downside, unbalancing the equal partnership of rights and obligations, and therefore is in part responsible for the rights-based aggression which is a significant factor in the moral crisis of the Age.

## **Foundations of Morality**

So, in quest of a deeper foundation, the question distils down to: how it is possible to take a moral stand on anything with any certainty? Or alternatively, how possible it is to stand at all, without certainty? It is easy to be firm when you feel you know, when there is some security from the context or your own beliefs, and it's easy to fall apart or despair when you lack these certainties. But can one stand in a Void and still maintain integrity?

How then, does one judge rightness and wrongness without external guidelines?

One answer to this dilemma is to invoke an innate moral sense. If such a capacity exists in the human make-up, early conditioning and education or training are important factors. You could certainly argue that the moral sense, like any innate potential, has to be *developed and exercised*, or it remains rudimentary.

First the need to act morally has to be acknowledged, and then it has to be consciously pursued, even when self-interest is at stake. Being able to over-ride self-interest is a relatively sophisticated achievement, because self-interest is often so cunningly disguised. Even altruism, generosity and kindness can be part of the mask, and only ruthless self-honesty can penetrate the murky depths of human motivation, including (indeed especially) one's own.

My years behind bars as a prison teacher taught me that a considerable percentage of our fellow members of society have never heard of morality, and have no idea that there is choice in how one acts or responds, even to provocation. Profoundly uneducated; many of these moral innocents see life in pure Darwinian terms: survival of the fittest.

Depressed by the failure that has landed them inside, they will go out and try again to be more successful at what they did. I always felt that their real imprisonment was not courtesy of Her Majesty. All I could do to help the cause of freedom, apart from equipping them with some of the basic skills of literate existence, was to create a climate in which they "picked up" standards. I consciously maintained at all times the ethos that there were no thieves in my class, only men, but I never had to *say* it.

Only with new arrivals in the class, did I keep a sharp eye on the cupboard of supplies, on one occasion manually removing a fistful of pens and returning them without comment, or insisting on an excavation of pockets stuffed with booty. They were minor items, of no value, but a principle was at stake. However, I rarely had to make this point. Even accustomed as many were to grabbing what they could get as a way of life, they understood the ethos fast, and generally I could leave the room, cupboard wide open, and know that nothing would be touched. It became more important to them to preserve trust, self-esteem and their dignity as human beings. I *said* nothing. Values are communicable in other ways.

Which could possibly be seen as a small illustration of the earlier point about establishing a paradigm, and the mysterious inter-relationships and communication of the within and the without. We effect the external environment just by being conscious. Not that we *can* affect it, but that we *do* affect it, unavoidably. Moral action is therefore not quite as toothless as it seems, and articulated moral codes not quite so important. The power to alter the external environment lies in *being*, not in drawing up charters. However, it does take work to make the impact meaningful and positive; not work on others but on oneself. And what is hopeful is that if the moral universe can be thus influenced, we are perhaps, not completely powerless in the face of disintegration.

Work and education. The need for moral education applies throughout life. Through this seminar you and I are striving to educate ourselves better. The duty of educating the young formally though, requires some structure to work from. Currently, secular and non-denominational schools in their PSRE (personal, social and religious education) seem mostly to fall back on the only agreed social consensus; the "do unto others" code, stressing empathy, and ironically, self-interest. (Why is drug-taking bad? Because it will harm you. Promiscuous sex? -Ditto-you might get Aids, or a baby, which would upset all your prospects for a good job and success...).

In a forum like this, we can aim for a bit more profundity.

### **Morality and cosmology**

On a parallel with the scientist's search for the basic constituents of matter, if you subject morality to a similar probing analysis, you find it breaks down into components more subtle than the popular equation of morality with sexual mores, or of immorality with gross infringements of collective values, such as causing harm to others through theft, violence or selfishness.

You end up examining the nature of being human, and to do this you have to take account of the Highest as well as recognizing the failings which are so evident in human nature.

Possibly the defining characteristic of Homo-Sapiens, unlike worms, whales or wombats, is a capacity to reflect upon our own nature, to look backwards and forwards through time, and to ask Why? It is essentially a transcendent perspective; we go beyond and look back at

ourselves, enquiring out and in at the same time. Normally our gaze is directed to the visible world, but we can turn it inward to the simple substratum: the observing, computing, emoting singularity of the "I"-point. Here, where the measurable mass that we know as ourselves becomes infinite, is our singularity.

An echo of this sort of cosmic potential comes over in modern cosmology, where human consciousness, is peering back into the origins of time and space and penetrating further and further out into the universe. Relativity and quantum mechanics have created a cosmological problem, because if all manifestations are relative to an observing consciousness, it is impossible in principle to get outside it and describe the totality within which we live. Unlike the classical Aristotelian view which enabled the observable cosmos to be mapped relative to a fixed (divine) background, modern cosmological theorists have no background from which to take bearings; all is a product of consciousness. But, as we peer to the origin of the universe, we are gazing into our own singularity also. It is an act of enormous power.

Time and Space are formative by nature. We recognize the external universe as a construct of time and space; huge spans of time, vast stretches of space, *apparently* independent of consciousness. Except that having established that this independence is not what we thought in the micro-cosmos of sub-atomic phenomena, why should it be assumed for the macro-cosmos? At what point in the scale from micro to macro would the laws change? Man in the middle looks both ways.

The lesson I draw from all this is *not* that because everything is relative, therefore there are no absolute values and we are all at sea in an ocean of space/time. Rather I advocate that we utilize the potential of a greatly expanded view of the cosmos and our place in it. Hence, human consciousness, including the potential for education and growth, assumes great significance, and an arrow of direction can be maintained by *awareness, which is at the edge between inner and outer.*

Everything is a construct of time and space, including the internal universe of the psyche, created and organized through experience from the beginning of our life's Time. But Space is involved too: "my head was full of thoughts... full of distractions and chatter; I have no space to concentrate on this now". All these are spatial concepts. The conscious mind can only deal with a certain amount at once, so masses more is 'stored away',



functions can be 'accessed, brought forward, filed away etc'---what is this but relations in space?

Metaphorical it may be, an analogy with physical, concrete time and space, except there is no time or space which is physical and concrete! The terrible reality seems to be that in a relative universe, *everything is an analogy to everything else—equally*. It's not that this is "real" and this is the "metaphor". It could be the other way round. This point is so awesome in its implications, I am going to leave it well alone.

## **Human spirit**

Time, space and one other fundamental item in the human equation--animation. There is absolutely no doubt about the difference between life and death. The essence or spirit of human being, (from the latin 'spiritus' meaning 'breath'), arises with the first breath and departs with it. We do not know where this spirit comes from, and we cannot bring it back when it has left. It is a principle beyond humanness, though dwelling within and activating us. Acknowledging the spirit in man does not depend on religious formulation, although the latter are helpful in reminding us of its existence. What I am identifying as 'spirit' is a mysterious force which blows us into being and will always be independent of us; a name for the reality which blows our lives around in ways we cannot always foresee or control, despite our best efforts.

It is *prior* to our time and space as individuals, hence part of the backdrop, the field of human life. As we are conscious and observe the universe, the field is there too; it cannot be otherwise. We are within a Totality. Perhaps, and I can't really pursue this, the field acts like a wave, with individuals specifically located in time and space, arising as probabilities become actual.

As I weighed up the mechanics of morality, I kept coming back to a paradox. Although the moral area is concerned first and foremost with action, with choice, with dynamic processes of cause and consequence, there may still be a dependence on stillness.

Xxxxxx(period of silence)

See how silence wakes you up? When all the forward motion of expectation, the

chattering internal commentary and speculation, the mental swirl comes to a bit of a halt, the silence wakes you up and gathers your attention.

So when you are agonizing over a decision, if a moment of silence arises somehow, you know what to do.

We've all had the experience I'm sure. It comes like a gift of grace in a time of trouble and perplexity and mental groaning— a moment out of time, a space. And then you proceed to do what you have to do with confidence.

It doesn't mean things will go smoothly, or pan out as you hope, but at least you know what you must do.

I hear the next question, forming in the air: How can I engineer it when needed, at will--especially when I want to sell some shares? *Misere nobis*. The cultivation of stillness is not generally amenable to self-aggrandizement. It happens when you, the controller, get out of the way and enter a larger field, when you make a space, by stepping out of the forward surge of time and activity. It can be practised, and needs to be, regularly, or the 'inner' half of the balancing act between inner and outer which I have suggested is the crux of morality, has insufficient mass.

### **Immorality and Integrity**

Now I will lay my head on the block and hazard a workable definition (by contrast or exclusion) of *Immorality* as 'that which diminishes the human spirit'.

To see whether it is a practical definition, let us take the example of drugs. By this standard, in the arena of drug-abuse it is not only the theft and violence, lies and physical abuse, and ruination of lives which contravenes morality, but the damage to the stature of the drug-taker as an expression of the spirit within. The rest all follows, a trail of consequences from selling out the spirit for short-term aims.

The same trail, not always so obvious, attends any offence against integrity ( ie. that which affirms and maintains the spirit integral to our life and existence). Deciding what does or does not threaten integrity is not actually as difficult or obscure as it might seem. I think it is quite practical.

For example, the morality of drug-taking may be simplified by taking the measure of Integrity and its relationship to the spirit within. On the whole, drugs (and it may apply to some prescribed pharmaceuticals also ) don't generally help people actually grow in stature, being and awareness, but promote dependence and becoming less able to cope, less independent, less secure, less wise.

Therefore my case is that any action which diminishes people, reduces their stature in their own or others' eyes, is anti-moral. When your conscience pricks and you over-ride it, you are evading moral discernment. Educating the moral sense, (conscience) so that it is more sensitive and responsive will promote morality, whereas repeatedly ignoring will dull it. And being unable even to recognise it stirring, unavoidably stunts emotional growth.

The final question: does an innate moral sense actually exist? We all want to believe there is such an inborn sense, at least in most people.

### **Is there an innate moral sense?**

I have a garden full of roses. Sounds like Eden, doesn't it? Except these roses are vicious--big, old bushes with thorns like daggers. They have finally seen off the window-cleaner, but every year I put on a suit of armour and clank out to battle at pruning-time. I'm not very expert, and from my writing window this Spring I have been observing the limping progress of one particular shoot. I must have left the remains of a little thin twig, and on this has grown another vigorous new growth, much thicker and sturdier than its connection to the bush, so it flops this way and that in the wind, drooping downwards as if broken. Now I see on the end a large beautiful bud forming, and this bud, like a green flame, is pointing upwards, perfectly. Its stem is U-curved and it holds its direction unswervingly.

I will invoke two cosmological forces to account for this: *light*, the only constant, and *gravity*, the great mystery. Light is the evident; gravity the unseen: the light and the dark.

We accept that everything in the visible universe takes its referent from light. Light symbolizes the appearances of things, and ultimate boundaries or limits. But gravity, the only universal interaction, is a real problem. Science cannot yet account for how masses

attract each other across space, and with a range that appears to be infinite. The force varies with distance, but is never zero. Because it is in proportion to mass of an entity, it can be extremely weak, as in the attraction between two protons.

But what is it? "How does it work? On an analogy with, light, gravitons or energy quanta have been hypothesized, but as I understand it, never verified or detected. It remains a mystery. It is a Universal attraction, a 'nothing' which instigated the birth of stars and subsequently, as more and more elementary particles fused and cohered into mass, the entire visible universe.

So my rosebud can take its bearings and maintain direction despite adverse circumstances. The secret force of gravity, hidden in its origins, and working through its processes, orientates its growth, just as bulb shoots twist in the darkness where no photon of light can reach, accurately obeying an inexplicable imperative to grow in the right direction.

Morality, I feel, needs no other justification. We establish goals, ideals, systems, symbols as lights to direct and guide human growth, and to point the way towards transcending the adverse conditions which would keep us small, stunted, self-enclosed. But when these lights seem to fail, to need renewing or expanding to take account of new circumstances, there is still the hidden imperative, apparently so weak, so impossible to quantify but infinite in range and massive in power.

The bigger the mass, the bigger the force. In psychological terms, how big are you? How big that Otherness –which attracts you?

I suggest that a human substitute for gravity could be Honour. Honour, like morality, has fallen out of fashion, or become associated with kamikaze exploits. But honour truly means holding to a direction which is internally generated, and does not require coercion, nor play tic-tac with the letter of the law. Rights don't come into it: the cultivation of traditional virtues does.

Honour demands honesty, temperance, prudence, is just and forbearing; maintains hope when despair would take over, and remains faith-full however dark and painful the night. For me, honour is the measure of love, and love the measure of Man.

So let us affirm the Honourable act, however small, and then Morality will take its seat in the House.

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