

Words About Why:

No absolute edges anywhere means there is only This, and action does not come from nowhere, so "why" is a self-portrait of the Universe.



When you fix pipes or wash dishes, a lot of people agree that what you're doing is useful. Gushing pipes & dirty dishes are usually accompanied by human suffering. A lot of people believe, therefore, that "correcting" those conditions automatically alleviates suffering, and is therefore automatically useful.

Let us temporarily grant that the alleviation of suffering is a pretty good basis for usefulness: all living beings prefer to feel better, by the definition of "prefer". Even a masochist is responding to some -perhaps complicated and incomprehensible- perception that this next action will produce pleasure or reduce suffering.

But...

Judging usefulness on the basis of results is doomed. Ordinary human judgement is clearly incapable of calculating all of the factors that bear on or will be affected by an action, since those factors include the entire universe,* and even if we could arrive at some beautiful evaluation of the state of the entire universe at some particular time, no result can be said to be final until the -possibly non-existent- end of time, and what value can there be in ascribing some importance to a completely arbitrary less-than-final state of things?

Why, you ask, is it necessary to be so absolute, to consider the whole universe when calculating if suffering has been reduced? Why can't we just say that if it feels good to *me*, right *now*, then that's good enough?

Well, what *is* this *me-right-now*?

Look carefully at your edges. Aren't they a little fuzzy? When you eat or drink something, at what *exact* point does it become your body? Stuff like sugar and celery and oxygen (which are *not* you, right?) become bodily structures and actions, including thoughts (which *are* you, right?). Where are the boundaries in that process that justify the separation? No "thing" has a real,

* or at least, for those who fervently believe in the absoluteness of the speed of light and the isomorphism of light and knowledge, or who are terrified, enraged or revolted by the thought of spooky workings-at-a-distance, that part of the universe included in the past & future light cones of the action in question.

absolute, separate existence, yet most of what we say and do asserts the delusion that things do.

There *is* only *one thing*. You can call it This, or the Absolute, or space-time, or the entire undifferentiated history of the universe, but since any self at all must therefore be the self of the whole, the "me-right-now" of which we spoke must be all of space-time.

So, results being incalculable, there is no way to determine if suffering has been reduced.

The reduction of suffering can only be intended.

An intention is usually defined as a plan that *causes* action, but a mental image that occurs somewhere in space-time is not exempt from the laws of physics. What's happening is what's happening, and "why" is simply the *direction* of the change in the distribution of all of the energy in space with respect to time. An "intention" cannot be something that alters the flow of energy at some point, because that would make it something *in addition to* all of the energy in space, which is ridiculous. A better way to view intention is as a *model* of that change and its direction, and the quality of an intention as the degree to which it simultaneously maximizes completeness and precision. In the case of humans, the basic models are neural ones, but neural images can be mapped onto other symbol sets, and thus be stored, transferred over distances, mapped onto other sets of neurons, compared, or otherwise manipulated.

We arrive, then, at a measure of usefulness that subsumes the reduction of suffering (which turns out to be only a pretty good intention anyway): there being only one self, an action is useful if it gets the universe where it is going, but there is no action that doesn't, so every action is equally useful. *However*, the history of consciousness, back through paramecia and beyond, is an evolving set of models of the universe, in effect a set of replies to the question "What is this?" (or -same thing-"What am I?"), and some models are more complete and precise than others.

Living beings are just a way for the universe to create images of itself, but out of that endeavor have grown some exquisitely complex structures. Completeness and precision are at constant war with each other, and it is no achievement to increase one at the expense of the other, but effecting a net increase seems to be the fuel that drives the engine of existence.

-- Peter Rowntree 8.XII.89