PoliticalExistentialism

Andrew Graham¹

¹University of British Columbia

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Abstract

Given the axiom that social reality consists of individuals and their interactions, and the conjecture that the interesting way individuals interact is through choice, this paper explicates three postulates in four stages:

1) choices are made up of ‘entrained’ sub-choices: thoughts and acts that must be made for the pursuit of another goal;

2) a sub-choice ‘entrained’ in all other choices is a choice for ‘predictability’: a quasi-Bayesian assessment whereby the greater an option’s predictability, the more likely it is to be chosen;

3) it is axiomatic that decisions should always be informed by as many truths and as few falsehoods as possible; true ‘is’ statements can only result in more fulfilling ‘ought’ statements;

4) 1 and 2, and their implications, constitute ‘is’s of sociodynamics, generating a moral and ethical ‘ought’ which I will call ‘Political Existentialism’, a stance that should inform ways in which we organize and run our societies to allow the pursuit of Eudaimonia.

Both concepts point to a sociological ‘constant’: if every choice entrains predictability and predictability is a measurable variable, then each choice can be related to every other choice in a measurable way; because choice is the way in which individuals consciously interact with their environments and one another, predictability can be used as a ‘common ground’ to measure and compare cases of choice-based sociodynamics.
Political Existentialism: Applications of a Sociodynamic Constant

Author: Andrew Graham
B.A., University of British Columbia
OSF Profile: osf.io/qjzr6
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8120-650X

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Further, this constant can be used as a basis to postulate a set of prescriptions in the realm of ethics and politics: the Humean guillotine separating fact from intersubjective value can be bridged 'objectively' by acknowledging our intrinsically individualized states and, thus, our hyper-individualized notions of how these states could be brought closer to Eudaimonia.

Defining Choice via the Action-Theoretic approach

That social reality exists through the interactive experiences of individuals necessitates an approach beginning with an account of individuals; individuals and their interactions with their environments and one another are the non-reductive starting point of sociological reasoning.

Additionally, choosing, understood here to mean performing choice-acts, is the way in which any individual interacts with her environment, other people, and often herself. It is what previous generations have called 'willing'; it is the starting point of the social world.

While these concepts apply to numerous sociological schools, particularly the Morphogenetic Approach
pioneered by Margaret Archer and as laid out in 'Choice and Social Stability: the Morphogenesis of a Sociodynamic Constant', in this paper I follow an approach that formally began with Parsons' Action Theory, i.e. an emphasis on Volition, or Intent, when analyzing action, instead of beginning from a purely action-oriented approach; in this sense, with volition as the ‘top’ of the choice rubric and pure action at the ‘bottom, this paper uses a ‘top-down’ approach. The rubric of the ‘Intentional Agent’ is used to organize and classify an individual's actions, and as such it can be considered an entry in the Rational Action school of thought.

The definition of choice used here is more expansive than others in that it isn't restricted to the mental activity alone, but includes both the physical and mental aspects of choosing, closer to what some have called a 'choice-act'. I simply use the word 'choice' to refer to every cognitive and physical element of the phenomenon of choosing:

A Choice is an act an individual performs on an element or elements of a state-of-affairs with the intent to effect a desired change to this state-of-affairs. Choices are composed of two main elements: Intention, or Volition, and Action, which are collections of other physical and cognitive features.

Volition is composed of knowledge of one's state of affairs; an opinion or feeling about one's state of affairs; one's imagination of possible other, non-immediate/existent states-of-affairs; and, most importantly, the motivation, the drive, or, to use a classical if somewhat laden term, the 'Will', to effect change.

Action is composed of the physical ability to affect the intent oneself, and/or the ability to communicate the intent to an affecting agent, a human or non-human entity that is in turn able and/or willing to affect the intended change.

Volition and Action are both necessary and sufficient for a choice to be made, and if either element is missing, the resulting phenomena cannot be a choice (e.g. if one cannot act upon the element one can never intend to do anything in relation the element...it would be wistful or fanciful rather than intentional).

Choices are therefore not accidents nor the result of non-human causation; they cannot be unintentional; and can only be performed on elements of states-of-affairs (i.e. Individual, Material, Ideal, and/or Normative). Furthermore, as intent can only exist in a mind, there can be no ‘group choices’.

Of course, a choice may or may not alter the elements in the intended ways, but the intention coupled with the action makes the action a component of a choice all the same.

**Defining Entrained Choice**

While choices are made to alter one's state-of-affairs in order to pursue interests, these nearly always have ‘secondary’ choices composing them, no matter how straightforward their pursuit might seem. In order to pursue or achieve a choice, other steps must be taken. These secondary ‘sub-choices’ I label as choices ‘Entrained’ by the ‘primary’ choice.

A choice is entrained by another choice if and only if the choice A) possesses at least some aspect that is ‘essential’ to the pursuit/achievement of a ‘primary’ choice, and B) is an actual choice, with both volitional and action components. Similarly, a state-of-affairs (SoA) is entrained by an interest if and only if it is a constituent part of that interest...either its pursuit or its end-state. These ‘smaller’,
compositional choices in the pursuit of an interest are ‘subsumed’ to and constitutive of the primary interest: they are subsumed volitionally in that they are willed as pieces of a larger pursuit, where the willing of the larger pursuit motivates the component pursuit; they are subsumed in action in that the completion of the ‘sub-act-component’ is required for the completion of the primary choice’s act-component. This subsumption, this causal ‘sweeping up’ of secondary choices when a primary choice is made, is Entrainment.

Entrained choices can be ‘essential’ to the primary choice or ‘accidental’ to the primary choice: in the classical sense of ‘essential’⁵, an entrained choice is essential to another choice if that other choice cannot be completed without it, and is accidental to another choice if that choice can be completed without it.

Entrained choices can of course be both essential and accidental, if but one of their many aspects is essential to the pursuit or achievement of a choice; the other aspect would be accidental to the achievement of the choice.

For example, if an individual chooses to quench their thirst, they must first decide what to consume from the available options: this could be in their abode, nearby, or far away depending on a number of sub-choices. Because only certain consumables quench thirst, the entrained choice of a beverage or fruit or vegetable of some kind would be essential due to its thirst-quenching attributes, whereas the entrained sub-choice of a particular beverage/fruit/vegetable among similar beverages/fruits/vegetables would be accidental, e.g. regular vs diet soda, two mandarin oranges vs one large orange, etc.

Each of these ‘essential’ sub-choices are Entrained by the ‘primary’ choice already made, and wouldn’t, or couldn’t, be made outside the rubric of this central choice. This is what is meant by ‘Entrainment’: if it is essential, it is essential to both ‘primary’ and ‘sub’ choices.

Also, if an action contributes to the realization of a central choice but wasn’t chosen, i.e. it did not have a volitional or action-based component subsumed to another choice, but only coincidentally contributed to the realization of the choice, it isn’t considered Entrained: it is only accidental to the ‘primary’ choice no matter how deeply it contributes to the actualization of the ‘primary’ choice.

An example of entrainment:

An individual is driving down a remote road on a hot day in a car with no air conditioning. She sees a convenience store ahead, the only building for many miles. She wants to cool off, decides to pull over and enter the store, taking advantage of its air conditioning and buying a refreshment. All actions that led to the achievement of her chosen interest (cooling off) are entrained by that interest, and the state-of-affairs constitutive of her interest are similarly entrained therein.

An example of non-entrainment:

An individual is driving down the same remote road on his way to work. He pulls over and enters the store to buy lunch. He makes a selection, picks up a copy of his favourite newspaper, pays and leaves. Though most of his actions were entrained by his interest, his purchase of the newspaper was not; it was not constitutive, even tangentially, of this specific interest, nor was it an action that could have led to this specific interest’s achievement.

With the above definitions we can see that while choices require Entrained sub-choices to manifest, sub-choices can only contribute to the ‘primary’ choice in question and aren’t Entrained if they do not contribute to the realization of the ‘primary’ choice in question, even if chosen during the timeframe of
the ‘primary’ choice; they would be considered non-Entrained, or simply other ‘primary’ choices, separate from the non-Entrained choice.

This leads, however, to an obvious question of reductio: where does Entainment end? At what point does one set of ‘nested’ choices end and a new one begin? The answer is, again, Intent: an agent chooses when they intend to change or maintain some element(s) of an SoA; indeed, an agent cannot not intend and, thus, cannot not be choosing. Whenever the necessary and sufficient aspects of Intent are present in any action, it is an intended action, and where any of these aspects are absent an act, it is unintentional, therefore not a choice at all. In this way, intent with respect to an action or series of actions, can begin and end.

As above choices, while intended, are Entained insofar as they are not made as ‘primary’ choices on their own, but only as part of a non-Entrained choice. Entainment is, therefore, highly contextual, with one choice in one situation being ‘primarily’ intended or not intended at all, while a similar or nearly identical choice in another situation might be Entained to another choice. This is the beginning of the volitional element of a choice.

The end of any choice, and Entained choices associated with it, comes with the end of one of the two parts to any choice: an end to volitional willing, or an end to volitionally-driven actions for that choice’s pursuit; once volitional actions ends, choosing ends, whether or not the interest is achieved. Actions without an accompanying will to pursue or maintain an interest are no longer a part of the Entainment of the choice for that interest. This is the case even if the act is performed identically as when Entained.

Some choices, of course, perpetuate over time and space and so may not have any well-defined states of which one can say it is ‘fulfilled’ or its intent is ‘achieved’, and thus some sub-choices made to support such a choice may likewise have fuzzy ‘beginning’ or ‘end’ times. However this fuzziness is due to the fuzziness of the motivating volition, or at least it’s beginning(s) and end(s).

Choices and their entrained component choices are not infinite regresses in another way closely related to volition: the ‘floor’, or perhaps the ‘guardrails’, to the course of choices/sub-choices is consciousness, meaning that only things one can be conscious-of can be choices...thus, some ‘micro’ elements of a choice, such as finger-placement on a bottle of soda, are not themselves choices or even components of choices; analyses that position such specificities as part of an individuals’ action are misguided.

**How Predictability is a universally entrained choice**

The above establishes that entrainment is a feature of all volitional acts. I further postulate that there is at least one universally entrained choice is for predictability: the predictability of the choice’s component pieces, volitional, actional, and all that go into them.

This Predictability Hypothesis (PH), consists of two clauses: A) of the possible paths to achieving her desired goals, an individual will choose the most predictable path towards the most predictable desired goal; if the individual cannot sufficiently predict the behavior or attributes of their interest or the path that constitutes pursuit of its achievement, she is very unlikely to choose to pursue the interest or to follow that path to the interest, and will instead choose a path and/or interest with a higher predictability; B) for comparable societies, those that provide more choice to their members simultaneously provide more predictability and will, ceteris paribus, be more stable than those that provide less choice and, thus, less predictability.

For an SoA or element of an SoA to be predictable for a given individual is for it to adhere, across some
timeframe, to certain parameters of that individuals' expectations. These expectations are based on their experience of that element, including their experiences of others' experiences of that element, in a 'fuzzy Bayesian' fashion.

When making a choice between SoAs, the various SoA elements' predictability is integral to all parts of the choice: volition (knowledge, imagination, will) and action (ability) require a high degree of predictability to function. In this sense, predictability is entrained in all choices...again, and more specifically, in all elements of all choices.

This Predictability Hypothesis (PH) is therefore similar to other manifestations of rational self-interest, e.g. pursuit of resources, preservation of life and limb, gain of comparative advantage, etc. However, because some degree of predictability is logically necessitated by the act of choosing, the choice for some degree of predictability is universally subsumed to all choices: the very nature of choice involves willfully, teleologically altering our environment...it always involves choosing an SoA ‘to be’, either a currently non-existent SoA that we wish to see existent or a current SoA that we wish to remain existent but that will inevitably change if not maintained.

Furthermore, to choose at all one must have in one’s mind a built-up image of what the world is, of how it works, of one’s place within it, to be able to act according to one’s interests. One can only bring about an SoA by manipulating or avoiding those things of which one believes the world to be constituted; predictability is the degree to which an individual believes, due to recalled experience, their choice will affect the world in a particular way at a particular time. Because individuals want to achieve their interests by definition, they are also predictability maximizers by definition.

This description is related to the idea of ‘ambiguity aversion’ explored by Fox and Tversky6 (1995), the largest difference being that PH seeks to explicitly link individual decisions with consequent societal patterns, a trait in general contrast to studies involving heuristics.

**How The PH could act as a constant in the 'is' of a sociodynamic praxis**

A state-of-affairs’ predictability for any given individual can be used to compare both other, similar SoAs for that individual and that particular SoA or similar SoAs for witnessing individuals, allowing for an assessment of the predictability of a set of SoAs overall.

To achieve such measurement, however, a method is required to identify and categorize these doggedly subjective assessments; my paper7 proposes one possible method of doing so, and further develops a metric, Social Stability, indicating the social ramifications of high individual predictability, viz, that this generates high social stability, reciprocally and morphogenetically8.

For example, the imaginative introduction of heavier-than-air aviation in the early 20th century fostered the two nodes of our morphogenetic aviation industry: one encompassing unprecedented freedom of movement for individuals, the other embodied by an ever-growing corpus of normative standards and procedures surrounding an evolving technical prowess. The first node is a node of predictability for the individual, the ability and possibility to transit unthinkable vast distances in slivers of time; the second is a node of stability, the undergirding framework of technical and regulatory norms that allow such freedoms to the individual...hence a morphogenetic binary of predictability and stability that allows individuals to fulfill their goals.

Because high predictability fosters and is fostered by high social stability, and is directly related to high choice achievement, any given society benefits from high, widespread individual predictability, no
matter that society’s geographic or temporal position nor it’s culturo-technical specifics.

We must make this axiom more concrete, however, to bring it about in practical terms in order to assess its implications.

**How predictability could further the ‘ought’ of Political Philosophy and Ethics**

The fact-value distinction, Hume's is/ought ‘guillotine’ or Moore's 'naturalistic fallacy', is the contention that one cannot logically move from statements about what is to statements about what should be. This contention is regularly invoked9 as an insurmountable barrier to the coherence of fact-based ethical standards, priorities, even statements.

While this may hold formally or logically, it most certainly does not hold practically.

It should be obvious that humans interact with their environments in a way different from other animals: they can foresee and assess various actions and paths-to-action in the non-immediate environment, and adjust their behaviour accordingly...in other words, they can use their imaginations to plot immediate decisions based on probable, or even possible, future scenarios: these range from what most would consider mundane to the very complex, from filling a grocery list to plotting a space probe’s rendezvous with a celestial body.

Certain human peculiarities, i.e. awareness of themselves and their situations, their ability to manipulate their environments in non-obvious ways while choice-making, allow for humans to unthinkingly bridge ‘Hume’s razor’ with almost every action; indeed, crossing this divide is inherent in human living, as the ‘being’ of a human is its continuous ‘becoming’. It is simply axiomatic that constant movement between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ is the way humans operate.

When discussing existence and being for humans in the world, Heidegger lays this out by stating

*We are ourselves the entities to be analyzed...These entities, in their Being, comport themselves towards their Being...they are delivered over to their own Being.*

*The essence of this entity lies in its “to be”.*10

To be a thinking being is to be a choosing being, interacting with one’s world. We can put it thusly: for self-aware individuals, Being is Becoming.

Understanding this, we can briefly outline some of the ethical implications of the Predictability Hypothesis, a general ‘ought’ to my contention that this hypothesis is a concrete fact of human behaviour and sociodynamics.

Take our morphogenetic example from the previous section, that of the aviation industry: certainly the stability offered by this activity allows for a vastly expanded field of predictability for individuals: to explore exotic locations, pursue career goals, directly interact with one another across the planet...but also to pursue destructive agendas, spread harmful ideas, to threaten and terrorize innocents.

We can therefore move to the larger ethical and moral question: what does the Predictability Hypothesis offer to the *zoon politikon*? For, as J.S. Mill puts it, “Some rules of conduct...must be imposed...what these rules should be is the principal question in human affairs.”11
To ask this question is to take the position of an ‘objective’ arbiter of human affairs; this is the nature of ethics and political philosophy not as personal stances but as they inform ethical and political decision-making...the Humean ‘ought’s that do not apply to oneself and which are thus logically suspect.

As individuals are the building blocks of societies we should initially focus on the ethical priorities of individuals, before moving towards their ramifications; in an assessment of ethics, one cannot begin with any 'larger' unit of social analysis, as this will necessarily skew the results towards groups, and just as necessarily away from people.

Therefore we must begin from the perspective of individuals, and even though every individual always has more 'oughts' than the total number of individuals in any given society (as priorities change day-to-day, hour-to-hour), the Predictability Hypothesis allows us to base ethical principles on a common thread between them all, between the 'oughts' amongst individuals as well as the 'oughts' within the experience of one individual day-to-day or hour-to-hour.

Here, our sociodynamic constant can be used as a starting point, the principle that, no matter the specifics of the choice itself, the act of choosing entrains a choice for predictability.

The mutually reinforcing interplay between choice and predictability/stability, this particular ‘is’, allows for an ethical stance to be taken on larger questions of ‘ought’ because it acknowledges that humans must be able to choose for their own self-fulfillment...the radically individual nature of choice itself implies the equally radically individual nature of what one’s self-fulfillment looks like.

Considering the above axiomatic statements, concluding that the ‘is’ of *zoon politikon* is one of existentialism, we can say with certainty that Eudaimonia is as radically individualized as each given mind. Camus makes this point succinctly when he says

*Knowing whether or not man is free doesn’t interest me. I can experience only my own freedom.*

This means that political ethics, the answer to the ‘ought’ of ‘how are we to live?’, must confront this existential reality head-on: in order to have the opportunity to pursue their own radically individualized happiness and fulfillment, individuals require as much choice with as much predictability as possible from the Polis.

A maximally fulfilled life, one with maximal choice and maximal predictability, would only be attainable in a maximally stable society. Stability-predictability is necessary for Eudaimonia.

While predictability and stability are intertwined in a positive feedback loop, the ethical upshot of predictability is different than that of social stability: while an individual's feeling of predictability morphogenetically translates to an objective, measurable social stability, the two are not 'enactable' by human agency in the same way. The achievement of predictability requires us to allow individuals the autonomy to discover and pursue their own self-fulfillment, a ‘negative liberty’; however, if one aims to reinforce social stability one must exercise the levers of 'top-down' control. Precisely how these levers are exercised to this end is the realm of what can be termed ‘Political Existentialism’.

**The ‘Ought’: Political Existentialism**

The interplay of predictability and stability in actual practice is not circular, however: our ‘objective’ Platonic Republicans’ ‘oughts’ inject movement to its morphogenesis, enhancing, diminishing, and
ultimately interfering with, this morphogenesis depending on their personal or relayed policy priorities. It is here, again, that the ethics of our being/becoming, our existential reality, can speak to what these policies ought to be.

If the above is true, any form of leadership necessarily promotes its own personal policy goals/ideas, or those relayed by its supporters. This necessarily injects instability into any group, interfering with the ‘oughts’ individuals must pursue for a chance at Eudaimonia.

Political ethics therefore requires that leaders refrain from any decisions outside the scope of ensuring stability for their societies. Because ‘the good life’ exists only in the mind of each individual and nowhere else, leaders must forego all policies, priorities, and principles to the exclusion of maintaining stability and, thus, allowing their fellow citizens to enjoy the predictability that will allow for their happiness. This is the only way in which happiness has the possibility of being attained.

This ‘political existentialism’ requires the Ship of State to be forever moored in safe harbours, and not to be sailed out on adventures demanded by a leader or their followers.

The role of government should therefore be that of a city manager, focusing on maintaining the economic and societal infrastructure necessary and consistent with providing the foundations by which individuals can make choices with predictable outcomes: access to clean food, air, and water; access to science, evidence, non-ideological education; access to health care; fostering of a healthy economic environment; maintenance of a sufficient defensive military capability; and the ability to create, alter, and enforce laws to ensure the sustainment of these concerns.

There is no one individual that has the moral or ethical right to guide the ship of state towards goals held by themselves or their followers that deviate from those concerned with the basic maintenance of social stability...neither leaders nor their followers, no matter how numerous these might be, can morally or ethically tamper with this priority, as it will directly interfere with the pursuit of Eudaimonia for all.

In the same vein, the machinery of government cannot be ethically used to progress the choices made by any individual or set of individuals, for the same reasons: if the goals of any individual are prioritized by the powers and resources of the state, the naturally self-reinforcing morphogenesis of predictability and stability becomes skewed and impacts the predictability of all possible choices for all individuals, including those who’s agendas are being promoted.

If the possibility of Eudaimonia, of individual happiness and fulfillment, is the answer to the question ‘how are we to live?’, then Political Existentialism is necessary: the only morally and ethically legitimate purpose of government or politics is to maintain the arena in which individuals pursue their own goals. Maintenance of the playing field is the maintenance of stability, the foundation of a just social system; the field government maintains is where individuals choose the course of their lives and where government has a moral and ethical duty to abstain from interference. Again, the existential reality in which humans find themselves requires socio-political stability for any chance at pursuing and achieving self-fulfillment; thus the Ship of State should only and always be anchored in secure harbours.


Aristotle


J.S. Mill