

The Evolution of Morality

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[<http://www.ship.edu/%7Ecgeo/evolmoral.html>]

Morality begins with biology, and specifically with the instincts we have evolved over eons to aid in our survival and reproduction. For human beings, there are three of these instincts:

One is based on kin selection, and it tells us that we should care for our closest relatives, especially our children. After all, caring for our relatives increases the likelihood of their survival and reproduction, which in turn increases the likelihood of our genes – including the ones that lead us to care for our relatives – get passed on to future generations.

The second is the care we feel for our mates. As an animal that produces few offspring, requires a nine month gestation culminating in a precarious delivery and resulting in a very vulnerable infant requiring years of care, we have evolved a strong tendency to develop attachments to our mates. As any parent can tell you, it takes at least two people to raise children.

The third is sympathy. We, like many other animals, are social creatures, and, like so many prairie dogs, we are attuned to the emotions and behaviors of our fellow humans. When one of us is frightened, the rest go into high alert; when one of us is angry, we can rouse the ire of an entire mob; when one of us is laughing, others begin to laugh as well – even when they don't get the joke.

Of these three, sympathy is the weakest. In the animal world, there are always "cheaters," animals of the same species who take advantage of others who instinctually aid each other. In the human world, we have a great many examples of these cheaters, whom we often label "sociopaths." Also, the tendency to sympathy depends a great deal on social learning. It needs to be nourished by example. In any family where sympathy is lacking, any instinctual tendency a child may have can easily be destroyed by abuse or neglect, or just self-centered parenting.

As human beings, we have evolved a rather large brain, and one that is capable of learning a great many things, not least of which is language. The ability to learn allows much quicker adaptation to environmental change than evolution, and so tends to "drive out" much of the hardwiring that animals come supplied with. Certainly we still have instincts, but they can be over-written with social learning far most easily than in, say, cats and dogs.

A community that has survived and expanded for many decades or centuries is one which has provided its members with patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving that permit that survival. We could call these patterns memes, or stick to older words such as beliefs and techniques - it doesn't matter. Among the patterns that appear to work well for most societies are ones that encourage extending the range of the instincts of sympathy and love of family to all members of the community, rather than just close relations. Traditions of mutual respect, obedience to authority, cooperation, and so on, are good examples. These traditions make it less likely that community members waste their energies on internal conflicts and use it instead on productive activities, community defense, and, possibly, expansion at the expense of other communities.

The Hebrews of the Old Testament are a great example of a community whose beliefs allowed them to prosper. But when the Bible says we should love our neighbor, it clearly meant our neighbor literally, our fellow Hebrew, and not, say, Egyptians or Assyrians or even Canaanites, as evidenced by all the rather vicious warfare of the day. Being good to one's enemy, someone who is not a member of our "tribe," is a rather novel concept, one, in fact, that makes its appearance only among the Jews of Hellenistic times. After all, any community that has the belief that they should be nice even to aggressors, is a community that usually doesn't last long and takes that pleasant belief down with it.

Although the idea of universal respect had been promoted earlier, notably by Buddha, Jesus, and Greek philosophers, the movement that would be most influential in actualizing the idea would not come until the Enlightenment. I believe that this was because it was only then that we had essentially filled the planet. Nations and Empires were butted up against each other with no room to wiggle. It had become clear that, if we were to be happy, we could no longer stop at making nice with our literal neighbors or our fellow tribe-mates. We had to make nice with other nations, other cultures, perhaps even everybody! The difficulty here, of course, is that you need to convince people to move beyond their instinctive love of family, beyond the social indoctrination provided by their tribe, towards accepting the fundamental sanity of universal respect.

The great value of this biosocial view of morality is that it removes the issue from religious and philosophical debate and places it squarely in the realm of the pragmatic. Without denying the inherently subjective nature of our goals as human beings, we may be able to agree that one reasonable goal is the maximizing of happiness. The question is then how do we educate people to understand that it is in all our best interests to nurture our innate tendencies toward compassion.