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To what extent is moral judgement natural?

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Is moral judgement a mere product of Darwinian evolution, similar to sexual behaviour and social exchanges, or is it a specific human privilege, as is the case for complex languages and mathematics? The answer is that it is both. Moral behaviour is the consequence of social practices useful to the group that mankind inherited from animal ancestors and which human culture has transformed into a discursive, and genuinely human, philosophical construct. These two sides of moral judgement affect the way we feel about our own existence as animals and the way we treat animals.

The exercise of moral judgement is one of the greatest sources of human pride. While the moral balance sheet of the human species throughout history with its wars, massacres and atrocities may not necessarily give rise to unbridled optimism when contemplating the behaviour of our species, it is still fortunate to see that humans are able to make value judgements and set the bounds between good and evil.

Where does this moral sense come from? Is it a privilege reserved solely for humans, as is the case of speech or mathematics? Or can moral sense be seen as the end-product of the evolution of the species, comparable to sexual behaviour and social relationships, where humans have simply continued and developed activities initiated by animal forebears, and specifically by primates? In one way the question is reminiscent of a past moral debate. Classical authors such as John Stuart Mill[1] expressed opposition to the idea propounded by Montesquieu and others who believed that good was to be found in compliance with the natural order of things. The actual idea of 'moral sense' which had often been perceived as 'too innate', was attacked on these grounds by many philosophers.[2] But the all-powerful theory of evolution[3] made it possible to reposition this long-standing

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problem, assessing it from an entirely new angle. The focus shifted away from the natural order of things and the issue was now the animal part of the human. In other words, in the light of the advances of modern biology, can moral judgement still be positioned in the scope of culture, or has it moved into the scope of nature?

Observation of animal behaviour patterns and, specifically, of primates close to humans (monkeys, and in particular apes such as chimpanzees and gorillas), have provided many lessons. These animals, which often live in complex societies, display a range of behaviour patterns strangely reminiscent of the patterns of the human species and including areas suggesting moral considerations.[4] Two eminent experts on primates, Jessica Flack and Frans de Waal[5], call diverse behaviour patterns 'protomorality', these range from signs of attachment between individuals and care for handicapped members of the group to rules applying to life in society, such as punishment, revenge, conciliatory gestures and peace negotiations. The display of affection for younger members of the group offers an exemplary case: if the protection of younger individuals in a group can be seen as a moral stance, why should it be a moral consideration for humans but not for apes? Modern animal psychology provides evidence to refute the Cartesian hypothesis of moral judgement as a solely human prerogative on the grounds that only humans are 'aware' of it, whereas animals are allegedly guided by 'instinct' alone. It is now quite clear that mammals, and primates in particular, do have a form of awareness.[6] The reference to instinct has mostly been dropped from discussions, while in many cases the cognitive skills of higher-ranking animals have been clearly recognised[7] and these animals can even be referred to as 'subjects'.[8] According to Flack and de Waal, primates have a 'building block' that is a constituent part of moral awareness. The question then remains of whether there may be more remote protomorality roots in the evolutionary forebears of primates.

Could moral judgement be merely the fruit of nature?[9] Could humans simply have adapted a building block to suit the species, using the building block passed down from distant or close animal forebears? Could human ethics be nothing more than one of any number of random events appearing in the evolution of the different species, a side-effect of blind Darwinian mechanics?[3] In one sense this is no doubt the case, but it is essential to note that it is only in one sense, for it is precisely in the process of adaptation, in the eventual transformation effected by human activity on constraints imposed by nature, that features characteristic of humans can be found. Nature does not set cultural standards in the human sense of the term. Any reference to 'adaptation by humans' also involves specifically human means of operation, with specific experience of human biological heritage, i.e. involving cultural (or artificial) processes. While many positions defended by philosophers arguing against the existence of a moral sense arise from the fact

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that such a moral sense is seen as an innate, unchanging entity, arguments can also be presented (as Jaffro[10] has noted) for a 'dynamic concept of innateness which does not reduce it to an inventory of data provided in advance, but sees it as the direction in development'. Human adaptation of innate properties has thus had scope in the course of development for creating artifice and for cultural innovation. This living adaptation of innateness through culture is the key to understanding human involvement in moral judgement.

While human beings stand as the only animal species communicating by language (with due reservations for anthropoids learning basic language skills in laboratory situations, but not relevant here) and as the only animal species systematically handling abstract entities, the logical conclusion is that the behaviour patterns passed down from evolutionary forebears are now, in humans, no longer a simple practice, but have become a complex theory, connected to abstract and symbolic groups. As Flack and de Waal note, animals are not moral philosophers.[11] With humans, a cultural system of values has emerged, with properly thought out analytical ethics. This explains why the term 'moral', referring to both the theoretical aspects and practical constraints on a moral attitude, is often discarded these days in favour of the term 'ethical', with more limited scope focusing on the abstract theoretical edifice specific to humans.

As is the case with other patterns of human behaviour, moral judgement is both the result of nature and the result of nurture, i.e. culture. Nature has provided us with a series of altruistic practices[12] which are always useful in life and in the community. The cultural context provides the possibility of raising these practices to form a system, of analysing their roots and of weighing up the obligations and constraints. Moral judgement is firmly founded in the nature of animals and courageously raises its head to the sphere of human culture. It is rooted in the biological world and its branches extend into the realm of the artificial.

This dual nature of moral sense generates two major conclusions. The first concerns humans themselves. While it may be absurd to consider moral standards as wholly biological or wholly cultural entities, it is just as absurd to disregard one of these two facets. In their quest to break away from animal identity, human beings have often forgotten the biological roots behind the standards governing their behaviour. With total disregard for proof but clearly supported by observations of human behaviour, humans are determined to be pure creatures of culture and artifice, permanently rid of any animal origins and of the cumbersome elements of their biological constitution. But it is quite the opposite, moral arguments based on these natural origins (e.g. the argument propounded by the philosopher Allan Gibbard) that seem to offer greater relevance and broader scope for application. When Gibbard argues[13] that 'Darwinian forces shaped the concerns and feelings we know, and some of these are broadly moral', he is not adroitly side-stepping moral judgement as a human prerogative, but includes it

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as an integral part of an overall view giving due recognition to the very earliest origins. Even a modern Aristotelian author such as Alasdair MacIntyre was struck by these arguments. He has shown that humans, in their quest for virtue, behave as dependent and vulnerable animals. It is quite extraordinary that on this point, the philosopher admitted he 'was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible'.[14] Yet, at the same time, MacIntyre obviously does not refute the cultural aspects of moral judgement, seeing a link with practical reason, as he states later in the same text: 'The common good … requires both the virtues of the independent practical reasoner and the virtues of acknowledged dependence.'[15]

The second comment concerns attitudes to the animals from which we have descended. In clear contrast to post-Cartesian thinkers who refused to see animals as anything more than machines or objects,[16] and in agreement with a number of modern utilitarian,[17] or Kantian[18] thinkers, an extension of human moral sense to allow greater consideration of animal rights, seems to be the logical outcome of these arguments on evolution.[19,20] As animals are not only our forebears and cousins, but also our precursors in protomorality, greater respect for their rights would be an opportunity for extending the scope of the moral considerations devised by humans to include their fellow creatures.

The need to respect animal rights must be clearly understood, it must not have negative repercussions on the respect due to humans and must therefore leave humans with the specific rights to which they are entitled (human rights). Respect for animal rights must not take human rights backwards, after the great efforts in defending them over the centuries,[21] and we must avoid the trap noted by Picavet[22], i.e. the possibility of losing the humanist consensus underlying human rights, permanently undermining the status of humanity itself. When viewing animals as beings and not objects, humans must obviously not be relegated to the rank of things! Quite the opposite, greater respect for animals can and must mean moving towards broader humanism and, ultimately, in a direction to improve human moral values which are, as has been seen, built on both natural and cultural foundations. It is conceivable that the practical moral values within the human species could gain from this (as they so sorely need to) and, in turn, the species would be all the nobler for it.

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