
The Origins of Morality

Paulina Sanchez

Department of Biology; College of Arts and Sciences
Abilene Christian University

In modern society, there exists a standard for moral conduct that seems to reign universal over many societies of people. Pinpointing the origins of morality, however, can become problematic because of how one approaches what morality is and what its purpose is in society. Psychologists may point out the social constructs and norms that allow for morality to unfold. Evolutionary biologists may give evidence of human-related species that have developed similar behavioral standards. A Christian theologian may look to scripture in explaining a Creator who ordained that all abide by the standards of conduct most pleasing to this deity. Which one of these explains the origins of morality matters in discerning what exactly prompts humans to consciously choose to do “what is right” even when that doesn’t always prove to be evolutionarily advantageous. Whether these human principles originated from a transcendental force or can be empirically measured is crucial in understanding how humans as a species could be shaped in the future. Is there any way of finding harmony in the variety of explanations for morals provided by each school of thought? This paper will evaluate some of the common philosophical, biological and psychological explanations for the origins of the moral codes of conduct that govern human society.

To premise the Christian ideology behind the origins of morals, one must first be introduced to the most basic understanding of the Genesis narrative on the creation and fall of mankind regarding how “sin” entered the world. God created the universe and so created humans. Adam and Eve were first created perfect and in the image of God in the Garden of Eden. God explains to Adam and Eve that they can eat from any tree in the garden so long as it is not the tree of knowledge of good and evil, lest they choose death. Eventually a serpent tempted the two to eat of the fruit and they became aware that they were naked. Ashamed and guilty, they hid from God and were eventually cast out of Eden by God when he confronted them over what they had done. It is here that Christians can point out the moral realization of the shortcomings

of man throughout the rest of the bible. Humans can only hope to lessen this separation of God by abiding the commandments sent from God and through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the son of God, mankind has been given the opportunity to redeem the relationship with God. This account has been interpreted at face value but many Christians have been guided to read these passages with a more allegorical lens. Pope John Paul II explained to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences that when approaching narratives of the bible this way, Genesis explained creation in terms of cosmology, but aimed at teaching the nature of God and the nature of humans, their experience of moral realization and what we can learn from attaining a relationship with God.¹

¹ John Paul II, 1981

Philosophers of secular and non-secular schools of thought have given transcendental answers for the genesis of our moral code of conduct. Christian apologetic C.S. Lewis argues that humans are separate from other creatures and inanimate objects of the world by a moral law of nature. This is not to say that this law is like a law of nature in which all living organisms abide without choice such as gravity. Lewis explains that the Law of Nature or Moral Law regards human behavior that humans can disobey if they so choose. He points out that this is universal amongst all men despite many people saying that there are different civilizations and societies that follow various moralities. Those differences, Lewis says, “have never amounted to anything like a total difference.”² This is to say that in most societies, for example, running away from battle is not admirable nor is being a double-crosser. Humans, whether they want to believe this or not, are always putting others to this standard and pointing things out as fair or unfair. This standard is known as *ought*, which goes beyond the instincts that we must do right and wrong just as many other animals are capable of distinguishing. This uniquely human characteristic, Lewis says is different than those two previous impulses that tells you that you *ought* to follow the impulse to do the right things and suppress the impulse to do the wrong thing. This *ought* is unlike the option of the right or wrong thing to do as those rights and wrongs are different depending on the circumstance. It is not a visible code of conduct because we are not able to observe this. Lewis also explains that if this Moral Law is truly a construct in our society that one does not need to learn solely from being raised by parents or by the constructs of a community, there must be a Moral Law giver. This Moral Law giver is implied to be

the Judeo-Christian God and implies not what humans are doing but rather what they believe they ought to do. Lewis also goes onto explain that this moral law is not good because the Moral Law giver arbitrarily deems actions as intrinsically good or bad. Actions are simply good or bad and humans can consciously discern between the two because of the rationale that exists within humans. It is in human nature, however, to fall short of the commands of the Moral Law giver, who desires that all humans choose good over bad.

Immanuel Kant, though a contributor to secular philosophy and ethics, believed that such a moral law exists within humans, and that it has no place in nature, since morals deal with free will and nature has more to do with cause and effect. Kant says “moral requirements, instead, are rational principles that tell us what we have overriding reason to do.” As Kant describes in *The Groundwork*, what makes a good person good is their ability to control a drive or an urge that makes decisions that abide by moral laws.³ In making moral choices, in transcending mere instinct, human beings rise above the realm of nature and enter a realm of freedom that belongs exclusively to them as rational beings.⁴ These ideas are much like those of Lewis without directly giving credit to the origin of these morals as being products of an omnipotent deity. Kant, however, does explain that these morals and standards for human duty cannot be products of nature as other behaviors are instead transcendental. What makes certain actions good is their following of the moral law and the relationship of the good that could be produced by the action’s outcome.

John Duns Scotus is a Christian philosopher that validates this moral law as well regardless of whether the Judeo-Christian God is the creator of such laws.

² Lewis, 1952

³ Johnson, 2016

⁴ Wilson, 1998

According to Scotus, what makes an action right or wrong is because a deity, or God, commands it, and God allows us to access this ability to distinguish between the two.⁵ Scotus defines inclinations towards certain actions as affections. He states “The Affection for Advantage is an inclination or movement in the will towards one’s own happiness.”⁶ The Affection for Justice involves actions that are for goodness’ sake, therefore for God’s sake. Therefore, God, through his son Jesus Christ, commands all people to love their enemies as this is a template for the Affection of Justice in sacrificing one’s own self-interests and doing what is best for others. Scotus brings up that the trouble with pursuing the affections for advantage is when it takes precedence over the advantage of justice. Humans need God to be able to discern between those two advantages because we are born as creatures who intrinsically choose actions that favor ourselves rather than doing good for others despite the inconvenience. The free will that was given to humans by God lends one the opportunity to go against moral inclination. Scotus explains how this makes reliance on God pivotal for humanity to lean to God to more appropriately prioritize the affection for justice over the affection for advantage.

Evolutionary biologists can point out the origins of several human behaviors as they have been proven to be advantageous to our survival and the well-being of our species. Some people who tend to believe the more Christian narrative for the origin of the universe will initially see this explanation as flawed for its reliance on the theory of evolution. When lay people - who have not been exposed to the lengthy scientific process of making a hypothesis a theory- hear the word “theory” it is almost as if you have handicapped your argument.

The theory of evolution is not to invalidate its significance in our world just as the theory of gravity is no less a force in our everyday lives simply because it is denoted as a theory. For this paper’s sake, we will be evaluating biological and psychological hypotheses for the origin of morals considering that the theory of evolution is more like a fact, rather than a hunch. It is necessary to address this issue to allow the reader to understand the weight of the arguments given by evolutionary biology and psychology.

Cooperation, fairness, and altruism are observed through multiple types of animal species. For these evolutionary biologists, the question regards whether the morals that humans exhibit are uniquely human or if there is an empirical link of these behaviors to evolution. Many biologists will begin by pointing out eusocial behaviors within a variety of animal types such as bees, bonobos, or naked mole rats. Bees will sacrifice their reproductive abilities to allow the queen to take on that responsibility allowing for the rest of the colonies to take on tasks such as searching for food as well as building and defending the nest and caring for the brood.⁷

Other biologists believe that the morals that are discernable by humans can only at best be represented by humans and the higher apes with intellect high enough to build complex scenarios. In Frans de Waal’s book, *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates*, many examples of higher thinking primates display eusocial behaviors that give out absolutely no evolutionarily fit advantage. An example was when Amos, a chimp in the congress he and his colleagues had studied, began to die and in the process of his death a chimp female began to cushion his head with valued material used for good nesting.

⁵ Hare, 2004

⁶ op. cit. (ref. 4)

⁷ Ratnieks, 2009

This female chimpanzee, though witnessing the loss of a high status chimp in her congress, began to show sympathy and selflessly gave, what she would have used in a nest for herself, to a dying chimpanzee in need.⁸ This selfless act amid opportunity to be indifferent or selfish is the hallmark of altruism and is being displayed by living organisms other than humans. Frans de Waal continues to explain how studies on Bonobos demonstrate that they are also creatures that can reflect sympathy. Empathetic Bonobo brains contain spindle-cell neurons that are involved in self-awareness, empathy, sense of humor, self-control, and other human fortes, which could only be found in humans but subsequently found in the brains of Bonobos and other apes. With so many similarities in function, it is difficult to see humans as uniquely superior to other creatures based on our ability to suppress animal instinct for selfishness. Frans de Waal debunks those ideas in showing that the only difference is humans ability to articulate this phenomenon more clearly as humans are technically a more evolved species.

Moral evolutionary psychologists such as Jonathan Haidt explains that humans have an automatic reaction which is positive or negative then in a controlled process, an initial moral intuition followed by emotions. The emotions involved are mostly due to our evolutionary background that has given humans scenarios that, across the board, provoke similar reactions. In the moments when humans are making decisions, there is an initial intuitive reaction that Haidt describes as occurring in the prefrontal cortex that create an alarm system that gives humans a flash-like instant reaction before any awareness or reasoning has occurred. After this initial reaction is when humans apply a reasoning. When Haidt explains that

Intuitive Primacy Principle shows that the thought process of moral reasoning is “usually a post-hoc process in which humans self-reflect to defend our initial intuitive reaction” to whatever humans are observing.⁹ Haidt says that there is evidence that this sequence of events is the standard sequence comes from studies indicating that people have near instant “implicit reactions to scenes or stories of moral violations; affective reactions are usually good predictors of moral judgments and behaviors.”¹⁰ Moral intuitions and the emotions attached to them are the first thing that the mind processes after witnessing an action. The moral judgment only comes after this initial assessment. For example, one could see the phrase ‘It is morally wrong to be homosexual’ and one could experience an intuitive reaction they felt that was true and find a rationalization for that reaction.

On the other hand, morals may seem to have a more cultural beginning than evolutionary. Stanford University psychologists have performed studies examining the behaviors of one and two-year-old children to decipher whether they innately behave altruistically or if there are social cues that gear them towards such actions. The studies at Stanford University performed by Rodolfo Cortes Barragan and Carol S. Dweck have indicated that moral behaviors such as altruism may be the product of “values or practices subtly communicated in social situations.” These subjects were put through four different play scenarios involving reciprocity or parallel play and in that time the researcher would indicate to the toddlers a need for assistance in grabbing objects he or she could not reach.¹¹ After each study the toddlers tended to produce altruistic behaviors and expectations after reciprocal play, indicating

⁸ de Waal, 2013

⁹ Haidt, 2007, p. 989

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Barragan, 2014

to the researchers that these types of interactions elicited the representation and expectation of altruism in those toddlers.¹² These conclusions give human culture, parental, and familial influence more weight in the origin of our moral behaviors by demonstrating that children have an innate ability to learn what is adequate for their society but require cues and demonstration on what is socially acceptable.

Each school of thought I have examined and even those that I have not been able to have given me ample information to weigh and determine which provides the best plausible explanation for the origins of morals and moral behavior. Is asking the origins of morality a question for empiricists or does this deal far more with transcendental thought? Morality has many definitions depending on the frame of reference one chooses to use. It is understood that humans are not the only creatures capable of prosocial behavior or even self-sacrificing behavior as being “moral” or abiding by codes of conduct tends to be evolutionarily advantageous. There is a wide variety of evidence that even proves that other creatures are also capable of moral reasoning via interpretation of the actions that influence others. I raise the argument that what separates humans in this realm of “behavior” is that humans, in part because of our larger brains, can acknowledge right versus wrong and understand why those things are right or wrong. Perhaps my Christian upbringing makes me resistant to the notion that evolution has the only responsibility in shaping the moral foundations of life. There exists a gnawing sensation that I believe exists in all other humans, a compulsion to do the “right” thing over the “wrong” thing (in accordance to that specific scenario) for which I cannot accept that biological

evolution has full accountability for the existence of this phenomenon.

Certainly, a person does not need to know or believe in God to attempt to abide by morals guidelines in life. Morals are not good because God or any other deity wills them to be. Morals have existed in societies of early human species and even in many primate societies. However, I cannot discount God’s role in the creation of morals or the influence of the adults accountable for my upbringing. The evolution of morals and prosocial behaviors can be empirically observed, therefore support the hypotheses that there is indeed an innate desire that seeks to make moral decisions. These interpretations on the origins of moral reasoning can be difficult to come to terms with for a Christian and even one who has a science background. Even when choosing to interpret the Christian Bible more figuratively than literally, I continue to give God the credit for the creation of the universe and all that lies within it.

Is it possible then to be able to accept that evolution has played a hand in shaping the social constructs that govern good and bad behavior while still crediting God for the gnawing push to do the right thing after evaluating that the easy or “bad” choice is more desirable? I have come to agree more with C.S. Lewis’ interpretation of moral law and believe this is God speaking to us to do what is right, which tends to be the more difficult choice. Although I still believe that much of morality can have an evolutionary origin, I hold God accountable for creation and thus I see that God’s creations, when deciding to do the “right” versus “wrong” thing, experience a third thought process, which knows that the “right” thing to do is what should be done even though it is the harder of the choices. This is the thought process that humans experience when attempting to do what is good instead of

¹² op. cit. (ref. 9)

what is easy or fit. I see the shortcomings of creation as the metaphor in Genesis reminding humans that we are still influenced by our sinful nature and do not always do what is right. This gnawing feeling to do what is right over what is easy or bad is that goodness from God that lingers within all people, encouraging humans that the right thing is what is also most pleasing to God. This is where humanity needs God and why I feel as though God sent Jesus Christ. The fall of mankind is something that all people exhibit but may not have been one epic moment in which all of humanity became sinful. All humans have sinned and fallen short of the

will of God. Since humans have a propensity to sin because of the fall of humanity, God provided the Ten Commandments a reminder that choosing right over wrong is pertinent in mending the relationship with God that sin severed. Even further, Jesus Christ came to earth as the physical embodiment of morality that God yearns for humanity to fulfill and took it a step further. Through the Sermon on the Mount, I feel that Jesus explains to us the standards for moral conduct in an even more challenging way, which gnaws at humans to love above all else and love those who do harm against you.

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