

Morality and the Human Condition

Clem Henricson

One of the principal features of the human condition is the concept of moral choice. Articulated morality and associated religiosity is one of its distinguishing features. A further significant human trait is the search for causation. Why morality? - and in dissecting the whys there is an inevitable urge to unearth the common elements across divergence. Amidst all the liberality of relativism there coexists a compulsion to identify common root causes. There is simultaneously an element in our psyches that veers away from too full an understanding of thoughts and behaviours – reductionism some may call it. Yet despite the reductionist criticisms, the contradictory impulse to decipher the puzzle is generally irresistible with the sense of satisfaction particularly intense if the answer to complexity proves to be simplicity. There has been such a search in relation to the causes of morality. It has a substantial historical context, but in recent times with the development of behavioural sciences that quest has escalated. The purpose of this essay is to join the fray. The intention is to take that search for commonality a step further and indeed to challenge received perceptions in an era of neuroscience and psychological awareness. The object of this challenge is to enhance understanding of morality to support public policy responses in one of the most problematic spheres of human relations in our multicultural society of the twenty first century.

The Historical Search for Commonality

There is an historical discourse that endeavours to tease out the elements in common across moralities – to seek a shared point of reference and even an explanation of the phenomenon. This strain of thought stretches across the span of western philosophy and tradition. Socratic thought pre-supposed a common moral universe, a common positive within which rational debate could operate and result in agreement. In this thesis humanity is viewed as having a common motivation with irreconcilable stances being due to lack of understanding or misconception. Descartes (1641) and Leibniz (1710) offered an underlying root cause explanatory unifier. Their philosophic approach

viewed a pro-social stance as consequent on self-interested rational calculation. In contrast, a major thread of commonality in the interpretation of morality has veered away from rational interest towards the emotion of empathy. In the 18th century, David Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature* viewed natural sympathy as the overriding influence on the derivation of morality.

We may observe that all the circumstances requisite for its [sympathy's] operation are found in most of the virtues; which have, for the most part, a tendency to the good of society, or to that of the person possessed of them. If we compare all these circumstances, we shall not doubt, that sympathy is the chief source of moral distinctions; especially when we reflect, that no objection can be raised against this hypothesis in one case, which will not extend to all cases. Justice is certainly approved of for no other reason, than because it has a tendency to the public good; and the public good is indifferent to us, except so far as sympathy interests us in it. We may presume the like with regard to all the other virtues, which have a like tendency to the public good. They must derive all their merit from our sympathy with those, who reap any advantage from them; as the virtues, which have a tendency to the good of the person possessed of them, derive their merit from our sympathy with him. (Hume, 1738/1888, p 618)

More recently Darwin has been credited with being one of the most prominent advocates of instinctive empathy as the core explanatory motive for morality, an emotion he associated with the parent child relationship.

... any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed as in man. (Darwin, 1871, pp 71–2)

A pro-social commonality supported by the empathetic emotions and/or rationality is a recurrent, though varied, theme. It is an optimistic model that has much in common with enlightenment convictions of 'progress' and even deterministic interpretations of the operation of society that have an expectation that moral behaviour will flourish

in the correct social environment and that moral behaviour can be explained by socioeconomic circumstance – Marxism being the example par excellence.

There are, however, major challenges to this conception of a humanity motivated by common pro-social values. A tranche of thinking has been pre-occupied with other motives rather less associated with empathy – single, all-encompassing drives such as Freud’s interpretation of the role of sex and latterly, more negatively, his identification of a congruent motive – an underlying death wish (Freud, 1905; 1920). Hobbes (1651), Nietzsche (1886), Adler (1929) and others considered that the determining motive was the aspiration for power. Empathy is squeezed from these scenarios with selfish, single motive undercurrents providing an explanation for the not inconsiderable variety of human relationships and actions.

Scientific Perspectives

Scientific investigations into moral traits are one of the principal drivers of current moral discourse. By their nature they presuppose an element of commonality. Obviously there is an historical continuum of investigation; consideration of human behaviour has been evident in literature, religion, law and most aspects of conscious living from time immemorial. More recently, however, there have been some highly significant and distinctive developments that draw on what might be described as the scientific method. This analysis involves naturalistic observations, psychological analyses of human impulses and neurological investigations into the operation of the brain and behaviours. Darwin provided the initial impetus for this approach in *The Descent of Man* (1871) leading the way with naturalistic observations and an emergent theory of evolution that had major implications for understanding morality.

Darwin’s thinking and observations encompassed the full range of human instincts and their intrinsic tensions. But, concurring with Hume, he considered empathy – the social instincts – to be the prime determinant of morality. Darwin reflected on the multiple impulses and instincts with the combined capacity for memory, intelligent thought and language that typify humanity. His conclusion, as cited above, was that morality would have arisen in any species with comparable intellectual capacities, and that it was the result of a need to order and prioritise impulses so as to avoid regret over succumbing to one at the expense of another. This process through language and social

exchange had become not only an internal cognitive function but was also externalised in the form of codes across groups.

Darwin recognised the complexity of motives, impulses and habit that determine human action. The array of instincts, needs and behaviours were described from hunger, to shame and fear of approbation, to the parent child relationship. His understanding of the web of mood, motive, and cultural and biological influences on conduct was considerable, and links were drawn with other species. He nevertheless focused on two principal drivers – the social instincts and innate aggression, and deemed the social instincts to be prioritised within morality because they provide longer-term satisfaction.

... as soon as the mental faculties had become highly developed, images of all past actions and motives would be incessantly passing through the brain of each individual: and that feeling of dissatisfaction, or even misery, which invariably results, as we shall hereafter see, from any unsatisfied instinct, would arise, as often as it was perceived that the enduring and always present social instinct had yielded to some other instinct, at the time stronger, but neither enduring in its nature, nor leaving behind it a very vivid impression. It is clear that many instinctive desires, such as that of hunger, are in their nature of short duration; and after being satisfied, are not readily or vividly recalled.
(Darwin, 1871, p 72)

Darwin's findings concerning evolutionary psychology and the processes of moral behaviour have been complemented in more recent developments. Neuroimaging or brain scanning have found the location of pro-social emotions such as compassion, gratitude, pride, shame, regret and guilt in the ventromedial prefrontal cortex. (Moll and de Oliveira-Souze, 2007). Through a combination of neuroscience and psychological experimentation, a powerful process of unconscious decision-making has been identified (e.g. Haidt, 2001; Hauser, 2006). Responses are often immediate, intuitive and strongly linked to the emotive, and, where reasoning is deployed to explain decisions, it has been found to be predominantly the result of subsequent rationalisation (Haidt, 2007, 2012).

We have become aware of a strong role for features in the brain concerned with emotions, but it is not the exclusive domain with influence. Cognitive ordering of decisions also features, as it does in

Darwin's discourse on empathy and the control of behaviour. Although psychological research has demonstrated the intuitive and habitual nature of immediate responses on moral issues, there is also evidence that when further in depth consideration is given there is an ability to analyse and as a consequence to readjust those initial positions (Greene, 2014). The role of the brain's prefrontal cortex in hosting cognition has also been identified; it has a function in guiding and ordering thought and actions, in relating past to future and in formulating and executing goals involving a capacity to consider the benefits to be secured in the longer term (Fuster et al, 2000; Shimamura, 2000; Miller et al, 2002).

However, while a dual role for emotion and cognitive order have been established, the way in which these impulses interact within the individual is not fully understood and critically not to the degree of rendering behaviour predictable. The interplay of a plethora of emotions and the role and capacity of cognitive faculties in reality to marshal order is subject to question. Certainly the nature of the prioritisation being sought does not appear to be pre-determined across the species.

A significant point of fluidity relates to the element of difference in genetic make-up within a given population. This fraught issue is compounded by a social evolution construction floated by some psychologists who have attributed differences to the need for societies to have a spread of dispositions for sustained survival (Haidt, 2001; Tuschman, 2013). The proposition is that, in terms of social functioning, it is important to have a population group with a proportion of individuals with a caring, sharing and trust orientation, on the one hand, balanced by a proportion of those with egocentric, go-getting and authoritarian leanings, on the other (Tuschman, 2013). Whether or not this social evolution interpretation of difference is plausible, what cannot be disputed is the difference that exists between individuals in terms of the operation of impulses. A major influence on that difference is undoubtedly the overlay of a multiplicity of cultural influences (Haidt, 2001, 2012). A simple observation of the span of divergence between morality in different cultural settings and in relation to cultural change over time is sufficient to underwrite such a role for culture.

The desire for universal answers – commonality within morality – has become strong in the search for a sense of security in a world with shifting sands of uncertain belief. But the dominion of desire over

facts needs to be resisted. Scientific models have offered something of a commonality solution, but there has perhaps been too much reliance on the solutions of biology displacing the fluidity of culture. There are questions to be posed, too, about the nature of biological interpretation – the interplay and the questionable elevation of empathy at the expense of other impulses within motivation.

Commonality and Empathy; the Challenge

The emphasis on empathy by Darwin and others as the primary emotion underwriting morality offers a prima facie common platform – a common cause and motivation for morality. Some of the findings of neuroscience demonstrating the location of social instincts in the brain have lent further credence to the empathy thesis. However, examination in a broader context suggests that the relationship between morality and the emotions is considerably more fluid and complex than this, with a rather more dominant role for other impulses and layered and divergent cultural influences.

Questioning empathy as the sole harbinger of long-term satisfaction

Much credit has been given to Darwin's view that morality is the mechanism by which empathy is prioritised in human conduct. The view is that it enables humans to manage fleeting and contradictory impulses that run counter to pro-social behaviour. But is this really so? Is it sufficiently resonant with the evidence of moral codes and practice?

There is a range of unanswered questions and issues pursuant to Darwin's proposition. The principal one of these relates to his contention that the longer-term satisfaction offered by the social instincts lies at the root of their superior ranking within morality. While both the longer-term and profound nature of the good and meaningful life may be widely endorsed and the benefits of an element of deferred gratification recognised, the prioritisation of the social instincts within the framework of moral philosophy is by no means a given.

Gratification that satisfies the ego in ways not necessarily to do with social instincts may be pursued as a long-term goal, for example in relation to sustaining interests of the mind, the pursuit of arts and the acquisition of status symbols. Then there is the assuagement of hunger through long-term forward planning. Critically there is the fulfilment of the emotional drives of the ego in relation to sexuality which can

involve sustained action contravening the social mores of the group: homosexuality, adultery and desertion.

These and many other examples can be given of the pursuit of the meaningful life that involves a considered prioritisation of aspects of the ego that are not to do with social instincts. The fulfilment of other needs can produce long-term satisfaction, and if denied can result in emotional, intellectual or physical crippling. Indeed, it has been the denial of these egoistical needs that has caused some thinkers to deprecate rigid codes of conduct in favour of a liberated ego.

Morality holds the reins for multiple emotions

The evidence suggests that it is questionable whether the social instincts are necessarily the prime purpose of morality. Might not morality be the management of different emotional and cognitive pulls within the human psyche with the social instincts being one but not necessarily the dominant pull? Certainly the strength of other influences is incontrovertible. Darwin's own catalogue of human drivers across hunger, self-preservation, aggression and fear is witness to that, as are the arguments put forward by advocates of sex and power as principal determinants of human conduct. The contention in this discussion is that morality acts as an accommodator of this breadth of impulse. It encompasses far more than empathy, fellow feeling and the social instincts of caring.

Science has confirmed this interpretation grounding it in the intricate workings of the brain and observation of the complexity of human behaviour across cultures. In these findings of the operation of habit, cognition, emotion, what does not emerge is any clear thematic indication of a single route to prioritisation. Rather what is apparent are a host of impulses with different ones being prioritised at different times and in different circumstances, and frequently we see the operation of impulses in tandem unprioritised.

Religions tend to recognise and embrace a breadth of impulses with life models that encompass egotism, the reinforcement of authority, social and sexual repression, violence and sadism, artistic fulfilment and more – as well as empathetic concern. In many cases the full breadth of living habits are addressed from sexual regulation to eating habits and medical practice. Religions frequently have an expectation of proselytising; the duty to persuade others to join a belief set is not infrequently taken to the extreme of physical violence. There are also

examples across religions of ascetic reclusive habits being viewed as the zenith of moral of conduct – an impulse rather more concerned with eliminating the burden of choice and want than caring. There is the support for authority at the level of family through to the state, which is a major component of many moralities – a question principally to do with power relations. And closely linked with the bolstering of authority is the upholding of the status quo in respect of material matters, with theft deemed immoral notwithstanding gross inequalities.

Within secular morality, too, there is evidence of this wider accommodation of impulses. Hobbes writing in the 17th century, for example, saw human motivation as governed by appetites and aversions which social structures and morality were intended to manage to avoid the destruction of humankind by antagonistic, power driven individuals. Hobbes' social contract thesis clearly contrasts with a model driven by empathy. While it has been criticised for its exclusive negativity, few would deny that *Leviathan* contains recognisable elements of the human condition (Hobbes, 1651).

There is a more tempered perspective within secular moral philosophy that acknowledges the behavioural trait of weighing up options and divergent claims in the context of life's pressures in order to achieve a meaningful life without necessarily prioritising the social instincts. Bernard Williams is the leading exponent of this train of philosophical thought. In *Moral Luck* (1981) he chooses the example of the artist Gauguin to describe the process. In this instance the call of individual artistic fulfilment trumps adherence to social instincts, and this draws the approval of the community because of the product – great art. The barometer that Williams uses is one of avoiding the emotion of regret; it involves weighing up multiples of feelings, impulses, relationships, rules and outcomes – a minefield.

The concept of *fulfilment* has a history throughout the development of moral philosophy from the Ancient Greeks to the present; it can be traced through virtue ethics, utilitarianism, civil liberties and facilitating equality. Aristotle's good and meaningful life, intended to secure *eudaimonia*, translated as happiness or human flourishing, suggests an approach that is neutral on the question of the social instincts and rather more inclined to a goal of self-fulfilment (Aristotle 2004).

Overall, taking both religious and secular morality into account, the evidence suggests that historically there have been moralities that

offer recognition and accommodation to a spectrum of human traits. Morality it seems is associated with the interplay of a wide variety of needs including fear, egotism and even cruelty, alongside pro-social empathy.

Culture and change

Shifts in morality – episodic change and movement over time – provide one of the clearest indications of morality as the tool endeavouring to hold the reins between muddled drivers of the human psyche. These include major shifts in sexual mores, intergenerational relations, filial duties, expectations of self-sacrifice and self-realisation, obedience and challenge to authority within the family, community and the state, and attitudes and behaviour towards the ‘other’. These multiple and changing norms can be found in revelatory as well as secular systems of morality.

Cultural diversity has a major impact on the integration of impulses into human behaviour. The exhibition, prioritisation and accommodation of impulses occur in response to varying pressures emerging from a plethora of shifting cultures. Consequently, while scientific observation and research has undoubtedly demonstrated a commonality associated with the make-up of the brain and the existence of identifiable impulses, difference in the manifestation of those impulses also pertains.

The underlying role of impulses

Notwithstanding an acknowledgement of the substantial role of culture in the determination of behaviour, the scientific observation of the operation and derivation of impulses is critical. Impulses are at the root of culture and consequent behaviour and require as full an understanding as possible. While other influences are at work, it is the interrelationship of culture with impulses that is the trigger for behaviour both in its delivery and moral conceptualisation. The complexity of that relationship is daunting and, while the study of behaviour has been the subject of extensive research across disciplines embracing psychology, anthropology, economic behaviour and sociology, its full comprehension continues to prove elusive. Human group behaviour remains to a disconcertingly large extent unpredictable. Chaos theory to the effect that the smallest of incidents can have an extraordinary thread of interconnectedness, an effect that cannot be anticipated, appears to fit at least metaphorically (Kellert, 1993; Werndl, 2009). Uncertainty there is, but, while predictability may

be out of our grasp, there are connections to be made and it is important to be alerted to these in managing morality. Some synchronisation is needed between impulses and culture and an understanding that when they are substantially out of kilter, tensions and possibly social disruption may be anticipated.

What is left for commonality?

The proposition that morality is not about a single direction prevalence of empathy over the spectrum of human impulses, but rather that prioritisation is multidirectional and in a state of constant flux poses some problems for discourses favouring a cut and dry analysis and solution. The lack of predictability in human behaviour as a consequence of a fluid jostling of impulses and external influences poses questions for the project of shaping behavioural responses in a particular direction and certainly undermines any simplistic conviction associated with the concept of progress.

With this analysis how much are we left with of commonality across moralities? Rather more than might be thought. While empathy may not be the single point of reference for the ordering of actions, what is apparent is that morality is about addressing the multiplicity of human impulses. This does not necessarily entail prioritisation, although it may do so. Rather it is about an accommodation whereby impulses are managed within a framework for living.

Conclusion

The complexity of motives influencing human behaviour, their tensions and contradictions, is considerable. They go beyond the dichotomy between sociability and competition. They cross a range of short- and long-term impulses, some innate, some cultural and some of which, despite the advances of behavioural science, we do not yet understand. As well as a strong empathetic strand, they comprise urges within the human drama associated with power, sex, self-preservation and the assertion of the ego and identity. And at least as influential with considerable staying power is a tendency to comply with habit and group norms. The processes at work are volatile vying between stability and eruption. The contention is that morality is a significant player in this maelstrom, not as a simple promoter of the social instincts, but rather as a manager of the human condition. While morality is a vehicle for the reconciliation of conflicting impulses, it is about the management of these in all their complexity without the presumption of a

dominant single motivation. The emerging proposition that morality is concerned with the accommodation of impulses within varied and changing cultural contexts combines a degree of commonality and relativism that would benefit from recognition and synchronisation in the public policy arena. In effecting such a process the constantly mutating alignments and antagonisms within and between cultures will require a fully informed and sophisticated understanding. There will be a need to unearth and work with the potential flexibility that exists across traditions – and to minimise intransigence and emotionalism.

References

- Adler, A. (1929) *The Practice and Theory of Individual Psychology*, translated by P. Radin, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul
- Aristotle (2004) *Nicomachean Ethics*, H. Tredennick (ed), London: Penguin Classics
- Darwin, C. (1859) *On the Origin of Species*, London: John Murray
- Darwin, C. (1871) *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 1981 facsimile of original edition, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press (<https://teoriaevolutiva.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/darwin-c-the-descent-of-man-and-selection-in-relation-to-sex.pdf>)
- Descartes, R. (1641) ‘Meditations on first philosophy’, in J. Cottingham (ed) (1996) *Meditations on First Philosophy with Selections from the Objections and Replies* (revised ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Freud, S. (1905) *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, A. Richards (ed) (1991), London: Penguin
- Fuster, J., Bodner, M. and Kroger, J. (2000) ‘Cross-modal and cross-temporal association in neurons of frontal cortex’, *Nature*, 405 (6784), pp 347–51
- Greene, J. (2014) *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason and the Gap between Us*

and Them, London: Atlantic

Haidt, J. (2001) 'The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment,' *Psychological Review*, vol 108, pp 814–34

Haidt, J. (2007) 'The new synthesis in moral psychology,' *Science*, vol 316, pp 998–1002

Haidt, J. (2012) *The Righteous Mind. Why Good People are Divided*, London: Allen Lane

Hauser, M. (2006) *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, New York: Ecco/Harper Collins Publishers

Hobbes, T. (1651) *Leviathan*, C. MacPherson (ed) (1981), London: Penguin Classics

Hume, D. (1738/1888) *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press

Kellert, S. (1993) *In the wake of chaos*, Chicago: University of Chicago

Leibniz, G. (1710) *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*, translated by E. Huggard, edited by A. Farrer (1951), Chicago/La Salle: Open Court

Miller, E., Freedman, D. and Wallis, J. (2002) 'The prefrontal cortex: categories, concepts and cognition', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences*, 357 (1424), pp 1123–36

Moll, J. and de Oliveira-Souze, R. (2007) 'Moral judgements, emotions and the utilitarian brain', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, vol 11(8), pp 319–21

Nietzsche, F (1886) *Beyond Good and Evil*, translated by R. Hollingdale (2003), London: Penguin Classics

Shimamura, A. (2000) 'The role of the prefrontal cortex in dynamic filtering', *Psychobiology*, vol 28, pp 207–18

Tuschman, A. (2013) *Our Political Nature: The Evolutionary Origins of What Divides Us*, New York: Prometheus Books

Werndl, C. (2009) 'What are the new implications of chaos for unpredictability?' *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, vol 60 (1): pp 195–220

Williams, B. (1981) *Moral Luck*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press