# The Evolution of Moral Rules from Natural Laws

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## Two Views on Moral Goodness

- Moral Realism
  - Certain behaviors are objectively good/bad (right/wrong), independently of any individual's feelings, motives, or goals
  - Eternal moral truths (e.g., Slavery = wrong) therefore exist and can be discovered, just like scientific laws ($E=mc^2$).
- Moral Irrealism
  - Denies existence of moral facts or truths
  - Judgments of moral goodness are a function of human sentiments, goals, conventions, and agreements

## Dominance of Moral Realism in Philosophy and Psychology

- In theology, moral rules considered to be part of God's eternal laws.
- Thanks largely to the influence of Kant, moral realism is the default position in moral philosophy.
- In psychology, Kohlberg's stage model of moral development predominates. In the highest stage, individuals are said to grasp timeless, universal moral principles.

## Dominance of Moral Realism in Everyday Life

- Piaget (1932) found that 5-year-olds are natural moral realists. They regard moral rules as external and immutable, according them the same status as natural laws.
- Gabennesch (1990) points to ethnocentrism as evidence that adults pervasively continue to reify moral rules as absolute, unchallengeable laws.
- Greene (2003) suggests "that many people, probably most people, are moral realists."

## Why Moral Realism is Wrong

- Moral realism is incompatible with a naturalistic biology
  - Gods do not exist; hence they cannot be the source of moral laws.
  - To say an act is good/bad "in itself" or "by its very nature" ignores the biological function of behavior. Behavior is good for accomplishing some things (but not others).
  - No act has ever been identified as good for accomplishing all aims of all individuals/species.

## Interlude: Cross-Species Disagreement about Good and Evil

- 'Where is evil? In the rat whose nature it is to steal the grain. Or in the cat, whose nature it is to kill the rat?' - *Master Po*
- 'The rat steals. Yet, for him, the cat is evil.' - *Caine*
- 'And to the cat, the rat.' - *Master Po*
- 'Yet, Master, surely one of them is evil.' - *Caine*
- 'The rat does not steal, the cat does not murder. Rain falls, the stream flows, a hill remains. Each acts according to its nature.' – *Master Po*
- --from "Kung Fu" Episode 11, March 15, 1973

## "Good-For" Thinking

- Premise: Wolpert's (2006) theory of brain evolution has at least some validity
- Wolpert's proposal: A critical skill for hominid survival was accurate discernment of natural, cause-effect laws relevant to tool manufacture/use.
  - The power of something to cause an effect indicates what it is "good-for."
  - For example, this type of stone is good for chipping edges of other stones.
  - Accurate good-for thinking allowed tool users to manipulate the environment to their advantage.
- My proposal: First moral rules embodied natural laws concerning how behaviors are good for causing desirable effects on other people.
- In other words, "good" behaviors are good for manipulating others in useful ways.

## What are Moral Acts Good For?

- People generally regard morally good behavior as good for others but not good for one's self.
- But Alexander (1987) noted that socially beneficent acts are also good for
  - creating a reputation as a rewarding interactant, which elicits social beneficence from others
  - eliciting direct social elevation with its accompanying perquisites
  - promoting the overall viability of the group and therefore the success of descendants

## Why Is the Good-For Function of Moral Behavior Hidden?

- People normally are not aware that they are acting morally in order to accrue personal benefits . . .
- . . . any more than they are aware that many behaviors are good for passing on their genes.
- If it seemed you were being beneficent to receive personal benefits, your reputation as a moral person would be damaged.
- Therefore, it is better to remain unaware of the good-for function of beneficent behavior.

## From *Good-For* to *Just Good* Rules

- Because ignorance of the good-for function of moral behavior is adaptive, people are predisposed toward moral realism, *viz.*, viewing moral rules as absolute and lawlike, rather than self-serving.
- This predisposition is supported by reflexive moral emotions (e.g., sympathy, disgust). Behaviors *feel* obviously just right or just wrong.
- The growing consensus from research (Greene, 2003; Haidt, 2001; Raine & Yang, 2006) is that moral judgments are based on gut feelings rather than rational appraisal.

## Adaptiveness of Moral Realism

- Alexander (1987) described adaptive function (good-for-ness) of social beneficence.
- Remaining unaware of good-for-ness (being a moral realist) is also adaptive.
- Is moral realism adaptive in other ways?
- Hogan, Johnson, & Emler (1978): moral realism in children promotes rapid assimilation of culture (and hence, survival).
- Johnson (1996): An adult can manipulate others more successfully by calling a behavior "an absolute necessity for the common good" rather than "something I would like you to do."

## Benefits and Costs of Consciousness

- Hogan, Johnson, & Emler (1978): Consciousness, which increases both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, adds flexibility to rule-governed behavior.
- They propose three developmental phases
  - Rule-attunement (pure moral realism)
  - Social-sensitivity (awareness of others' feelings allows spirit of the law to override letter of the law)
  - Autonomy (awareness of one's evolved nature allows override of reflexive moral emotions)
- Increasing awareness to make deliberate choices brings costs as well as the benefit of flexibility

|  | Reflexive | Deliberate |
|---|---|---|
| Advantages | time-tested fast, effortless appears genuine | can consider all consequences in a modern world |
| Disadvantages | based on old EEA; fails to consider all consequences in a modern world | no track record slow, effortful may appear unnatural, fake |

## Final Caution for Moral Irrealists

- 'Then is there no evil for men? Each man tells himself that what he does is good, at least for himself.' – *Caine*
- 'A man may tell himself many things but is a man's universe made up only of himself?' – *Master Po*

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