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Moral Camouflage or Moral Monkeys?

By Peter Railton July 18, 2010 5:20 pm

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After being shown proudly around the campus of a prestigious American university built in gothic style, Bertrand Russell is said to have exclaimed, “Remarkable. As near Oxford as monkeys can make.” Much earlier, Immanuel Kant had expressed a less ironic amazement, “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe … the starry heavens above and the moral law within.” Today many who look at morality through a Darwinian lens can’t help but find a charming naïveté in Kant’s thought. “Yes, remarkable. As near morality as monkeys can make.”

So the question is, just how near is that? Optimistic Darwinians believe, near enough to be morality. But skeptical Darwinians won’t buy it. The great show we humans make of respect for moral principle they see as a civilized camouflage for an underlying, evolved psychology of a quite different kind.

This skepticism is not, however, your great-grandfather’s Social Darwinism, which saw all creatures great and small as pitted against one another in a life or death struggle to survive and reproduce — “survival of the fittest.” We now know that such a picture seriously misrepresents both Darwin and the actual process of natural selection. Individuals come and go, but genes can persist for 1000 generations or more. Individual plants and animals are the perishable vehicles that genetic material uses to make its way into the next generation (“A chicken is an egg’s way of making another egg”). From this perspective, relatives, who share genes, are to that extent not really in *evolutionary* competition; no matter which one survives, the shared genes triumph. Such “inclusive fitness” predicts the survival, not of selfish individuals, but of “selfish” genes, which tend in the normal range of environments to give rise to individuals whose behavior tends to propel those genes into future.

A place is thus made within Darwinian thought for such familiar phenomena as family members sacrificing for one another — helping when there is no prospect of payback, or being willing to risk life and limb to protect one’s people or avenge harms done to them.

But what about unrelated individuals? “Sexual selection” occurs whenever one must attract a mate in order to reproduce. Well, what sorts of individuals are attractive partners? Henry Kissinger claimed that power is the ultimate aphrodisiac, but for animals who bear a small number of young over a lifetime, each requiring a long gestation and demanding a great deal of nurturance to thrive into maturity, potential mates who behave selfishly, uncaringly, and unreliably can lose their chance. And beyond mating, many social animals depend upon the cooperation of others for protection, foraging and hunting, or rearing the young. Here, too, power can attract partners, but so can a demonstrable tendency behave

cooperatively and share benefits and burdens fairly, even when this involves some personal sacrifice — what is sometimes called "reciprocal altruism." Baboons are notoriously hierarchical, but Joan Silk, a professor of anthropology at UCLA, and her colleagues, recently reported a long-term study of baboons, in which they found that, among females, maintaining strong, equal, enduring social bonds — even when the individuals were not related — can promote individual longevity more effectively than gaining dominance rank, and can enhance the survival of progeny.

A picture thus emerges of selection for "proximal psychological mechanisms"— for example, individual dispositions like parental devotion, loyalty to family, trust and commitment among partners, generosity and gratitude among friends, courage in the face of enemies, intolerance of cheaters — that make individuals into good vehicles, from the gene's standpoint, for promoting the "distal goal" of enhanced inclusive fitness.

Why would human evolution have selected for such messy, emotionally entangling proximal psychological mechanisms, rather than produce yet more ideally opportunistic vehicles for the transmission of genes — individuals wearing a perfect camouflage of loyalty and reciprocity, but fine-tuned underneath to turn self-sacrifice or cooperation on or off exactly as needed? Because the same evolutionary processes would also be selecting for improved capacities to detect, pre-empt and defend against such opportunistic tendencies in other individuals — just as evolution cannot produce a perfect immune system, since it is equally busily at work improving the effectiveness of viral invaders. Devotion, loyalty, honesty, empathy, gratitude, and a sense of fairness are credible signs of value as a partner or friend precisely *because* they are messy and emotionally entangling, and so cannot simply be turned on and off by the individual to capture each marginal advantage. And keep in mind the small scale of early human societies, and Abraham Lincoln's point about our power to deceive.

Why, then, aren't we *better* — more honest, more committed, more loyal? There will always be circumstances in which fooling some of the people some of the time is enough; for example, when society is unstable or individuals mobile. So we should expect a capacity for opportunism and betrayal to remain an important part of the mix that makes humans into monkeys worth writing novels about.

How close does all this take us to morality? Not all the way, certainly. An individual psychology primarily disposed to consider the interests of all equally, without fear or favor, even in the teeth of social ostracism, might be morally admirable, but simply wouldn't cut it as a vehicle for reliable replication. Such *pure* altruism would not be favored in natural selection over an impure altruism that conferred benefits and took on burdens and risks more selectively — for "my kind" or "our kind." This puts us well beyond pure selfishness, but only as far as an impure *us*-ishness. Worse, us-ish individuals can be a greater threat than purely selfish ones, since they can gang up so effectively against those outside their group. Certainly greater atrocities have been committed in the name of "us vs. them" than "me vs. the world."

So, are the optimistic Darwinians wrong, and impartial morality beyond the reach of those monkeys we call humans? Does thoroughly logical evolutionary thinking force us to the conclusion that our love, loyalty, commitment, empathy, and concern for justice and fairness are always at bottom a mixture of selfish opportunism and us-ish clannishness? Indeed, is it only a sign of the effectiveness of the moral camouflage that we ourselves are so often taken in by it?

Speaking of what "thoroughly logical evolutionary thinking" might "force" us to conclude provides a clue to the answer. Think for a moment about science and logic themselves. Natural selection operates on

a need-to-know basis. Between two individuals — one disposed to use scarce resources and finite capacities to seek out the most urgent and useful information and the other, heedless of immediate and personal concerns and disposed instead toward pure, disinterested inquiry, following logic wherever it might lead — it is clear which natural selection would tend to favor.

And yet, Darwinian skeptics about morality believe, humans somehow have managed to redeploy and leverage their limited, partial, human-scale psychologies to develop shared inquiry, experimental procedures, technologies and norms of logic and evidence that have resulted in genuine scientific knowledge and responsiveness to the force of logic. This distinctively human "cultural evolution" was centuries in the making, and overcoming partiality and bias remains a constant struggle, but the point is that these possibilities were not foreclosed by the imperfections and partiality of the faculties we inherited. As Wittgenstein observed, crude tools can be used to make refined tools. Monkeys, it turns out, can come surprisingly near to objective science.

We can see a similar cultural evolution in human law and morality — a centuries-long process of overcoming arbitrary distinctions, developing wider communities, and seeking more inclusive shared standards, such as the Geneva Conventions and the Universal Declaration of Humans Rights. Empathy might induce sympathy more readily when it is directed toward kith and kin, but we rely upon it to understand the thoughts and feelings of enemies and outsiders as well. And the human capacity for learning and following rules might have evolved to enable us to speak a native language or find our place in the social hierarchy, but it can be put into service understanding different languages and cultures, and developing more cosmopolitan or egalitarian norms that can be shared across our differences.

Within my own lifetime, I have seen dramatic changes in civil rights, women's rights and gay rights. That's just one generation in evolutionary terms. Or consider the way that empathy and the pressure of consistency have led to widespread recognition that our fellow animals should receive humane treatment. Human culture, not natural selection, accomplished these changes, and yet it was natural selection that gave us the capacities that helped make them possible. We still must struggle continuously to see to it that our widened empathy is not lost, our sympathies engaged, our understandings enlarged, and our moral principles followed. But the point is that we have done this with our imperfect, partial, us-ish native endowment. Kant was right to be impressed. In our best moments, we can come surprisingly close to being moral monkeys.

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Or watch the entire discussion on the Bloggingheads.tv site.

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