

## The Evolution of Morality

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Darwin's failed attempt to explain the origin of morality ultimately led to millions of deaths in the 20th century as he rejected the true source for morality in God

In chapters 4 and 5 of *The Descent of Man*, Darwin compares the mental and social capacities of mankind with other animals, with much of the focus on the conscience of man and peer-pressure (either negative or positive). He then attempts to show how morality developed in humans as an evolutionary progression from lower animals.

### Man, the “Social Animal”

Darwin's starting axiom is that man is a “social animal,” in fact he uses that phrase 25 times in the book and 19 times over the course of chapters 4 and 5. Darwin believed that most “higher” animals were social animals, meaning that they show sympathy with others of the same tribe. According to Darwin's thought on this subject, sympathy was the first or base instinct upon which social interaction was founded (Darwin 1882, 99). Darwin then proposed the steps by which the higher animals and man became social animals.

The first step (after developing a foundational sense of sympathy) was to take pleasure in the company of other tribe members, clans, or associates. The second step was (after the animals' mental faculties reached such a state) to be satisfied with its behavior in relation to other tribe members, or to feel a sense of shame at its behavior. Thirdly, once some form of communication or language developed among the tribe, the expectation of each member of the tribe could be expressed so each member would know how to act to ensure it met with the approval of its fellows. Fear of being looked down upon or ostracized by the community being the driving force to ensure compliance. Lastly this pattern of social morality would be reinforced by habit, and habit would become a sense of duty (Darwin 1882, 99–100).

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Darwin then elaborated on each of the four steps mentioned above to show how they would have evolved over time. Step one would have started as a self-preservation instinct that spread out to others of the same community. If the most basic individual instinct is flight or fight in a survival situation, then the most basic mutual instinct (if an animal has developed some degree of sympathy) in the higher animals is to warn one another of danger. Aside from self-preservation, self-comfort or self-satisfaction is the next strongest instinct. In a community setting, the best way to ensure self-comfort is via a mutual benefit arrangement—often literally in many animals a “you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.”

Thus in Darwin's view, grooming, food-sharing, extended family care, mutual defense, hunting, and even care for the aged and slightly injured would have come about. Then physical or mental pleasure and pain drove the next stage as fear of reprisal, punishment, or shame caused animals to act for the good of the community for pride or from fear (Darwin 1882, 100–102). It should be noted that Darwin built his theory of morality around anecdotal stories of animal's interactions with other animals and with man. Much of what he speculated was based on others' testimony, and much of that was anthropomorphized.

### Major Problems with Darwin's Proposal

Yet Darwin acknowledged that sympathy even among the same community is not a universal aspect of social animals, and he noted that “animals sometimes are far from feeling any sympathy is too certain; for they will expel a wounded animal from the herd, or gore or worry it to death” (Darwin 1882, 102). Darwin also acknowledged that pleasure and pain cannot explain every social interaction and that some must be based upon mere inherited instinct (using bird migration as an example) (Darwin 1882). But perhaps his two most candid admissions of problems dealing with the “social animal” were in respect to man. For some reason, mankind didn't fit the pattern of other “social animals.” The presence of a conscience and the ability to compare past and present motives and actions seemed to Darwin to be the primary things that set man apart from other animals. The question must therefore arise, how can morality have evolved from lower animals if man alone is considered by Darwin as the only moral being? Darwin wrestled with this problem as the quotes below will show.

A moral being is one who is capable of comparing his past and future actions or motives, and of approving or disapproving of them. We have no reason to suppose that any of the lower animals have this capacity... But in the case of man, who alone can with certainty be ranked as a moral being, actions of a certain class are called moral, whether performed deliberately, after a struggle with opposing motives, or impulsively through instinct, or from the effects of slowly-gained habit. (Darwin 1882, 111–112)

Although some instincts are more powerful than others, and thus lead to corresponding actions, yet it is untenable, that in man the social instincts (including the love of praise and fear of blame) possess greater strength, or have, through long habit, acquired greater strength than the instincts of self-preservation, hunger, lust, vengeance, etc. Why then does man regret, even though trying to banish such regret, that he has followed the one natural impulse rather than the other; and why does he further feel that he ought to regret his conduct? Man in this respect differs profoundly from the lower animals (Darwin 1882, 112).

### **Inexplicable Altruism That Somehow Evolved?**

Ironically enough, Darwin appeals to the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) as the highest standard of morality, yet believed and wrote that it came about via evolved sympathy as a cultivated habit.

Darwin recognized that there was a higher morality exhibited by some men and women that seemed difficult to reconcile with an evolution of social morality. Yet because of his commitment to just such a principle, he was forced to believe that somehow it had, leading Darwin to hold an almost utopian view on the subject—that mankind was morally improving and would continue to do so. Ironically enough, Darwin appeals to the Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12) as the highest standard of morality, yet believed and wrote that it came about via evolved sympathy as a cultivated habit.

To do good in return for evil, to love your enemy, is a height of morality to which it may be doubted whether the social instincts would, by themselves, have ever led us. It is necessary that these instincts, together with sympathy, should have been highly cultivated and extended by the aid of reason, instruction, and the love or fear of God, before any such golden rule would ever be thought of and obeyed. (Darwin 1882, 112–113)

Finally the social instincts, which no doubt were acquired by man as by the lower animals for the good of the community, will from the first have given to him some wish to aid his fellows, some feeling of sympathy, and have compelled him to regard their approbation and disapprobation. Such impulses will have served him at a very early period as a rude rule of right and wrong. But as man gradually advanced in intellectual power, and was enabled to trace the more remote consequences of his actions; as he acquired sufficient knowledge to reject baneful customs and superstitions; as he regarded more and more, not only the welfare, but the happiness of his fellow-men; as from habit, following on beneficial experience, instruction and example, his sympathies became more tender and widely diffused, extending to men of all races, to the imbecile, maimed and other useless members of society, and finally to the lower animals,—so would the standard of his morality rise higher and higher. (Darwin 1882, 124–125)

Looking to future generations, there is no cause to fear that the social instincts will grow weaker, and we may expect that virtuous habits will grow stronger, becoming perhaps fixed by inheritance. In this case the struggle between our higher and lower impulses will be less severe, and virtue will be triumphant. (Darwin 1882, 125)

The moral sense perhaps affords the best and highest distinction between man and the lower animals; but I need say nothing on this head, as I have so lately endeavoured to shew that the social instincts,—the prime principle of man's moral constitution—with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise;" and this lies at the foundation of morality. (Darwin 1882, 126)

### **Getting Better All the Time?**

Darwin thought as the reasoning powers of the members of a community became more advanced, each man would soon learn that if he aided his fellows, he would typically receive aid in return. From this base motive he might acquire the habit of aiding his fellows, and the habit of performing benevolent actions would strengthen the feeling of sympathy, which in turn perpetuates the impulse to continue benevolent actions. Darwin postulated that such habits followed during many generations probably tend to be inherited. Darwin again was naïve in his belief about man's inherent "progressive morality" (and one could say, based on Darwin's theology degree, that he was willfully naïve on this point).

It must not be forgotten that although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe, yet that an increase in the number of

well-endowed men and an advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection. At all times throughout the world tribes have supplanted other tribes; and as morality is one important element in their success, the standard of morality and the number of well-endowed men will thus everywhere tend to rise and increase. (Darwin 1882, 132–133)

### When Willful Ignorance Leads to Social Darwinism and Eugenics

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Darwin's writing on the progressive morality of mankind would at first blush seem to be hopeful. A bit unrealistic perhaps, but a positive one in outlook, right? Well, not necessarily. Recall that Darwin's belief was that mankind's sympathies would expand to include "the imbecile, maimed, and other useless members of society." Now I realize that some terms, though charged now, were technical terms of the day, such as "imbecile" and "maimed." Today we would say mentally and physically handicapped or impaired. But notice the paraphrased thought here: someday in the future man will be able to sympathize more with those who are mentally and physically inferior to us and who do nothing to contribute to society. If you think I'm putting words into Charles Darwin's mouth, let's see what he said further on this subject in Chapter 5.

With savages, the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated; and those that survive commonly exhibit a vigorous state of health. We civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination; we build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands, who from a weak constitution would formerly have succumbed to small-pox. Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed. (Darwin 1882, 133–134)

### A Short Step From Darwin to Dachau

Less than 70 years after the first edition of the *Descent of Man* was published, one community of man (Nazi Germany) decided that they agreed with what Darwin said in the above quote taken from Chapter 5 and rejected Darwin's statement from Chapter 4 that they had to extend sympathy to the "useless members of society." In fact to do so in their mind would be "highly injurious to the race" of Aryan man. Darwin's condescending tolerance towards those less mentally, physically, or medically fortunate only extended to those already in society. But Darwin bemoans that mankind would allow this cycle to continue in future generations. It is but a series of small steps from begrudging tolerance, to apathy, to dislike and distrust, to ostracization, to banishment, and finally to murder.

The Nazis and the eugenicists understood Darwin's words all too well. The Nazis had no tolerance for anyone outside what they termed the Aryan stock, and they murdered or enslaved everyone else (and the Nazis were not the only people during the early 1900s to implement social Darwinian and Eugenics programs: the Imperial Japanese did the same). (Terazawa 2005, 84–85)

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The eugenicists (in Europe, Canada, America, Australia, and New Zealand) tolerated those already alive but, through forced sterilization, wanted to ensure that there was no future "degeneration of the race." Eugenicist's main goals were to isolate "defective" members of the community and prevent them from "breeding" to "strengthen the racial stock" of the country. Children with learning disabilities, and especially those with Down Syndrome, were often forcibly removed from their homes and sent to institutions. Adults with those conditions were often institutionalized as well. And most stayed there for the rest of their life. The eugenics programs were at their core elitist, "racist" (meaning they were often implemented against non-Caucasian peoples), sexist (many more women than men were targeted for sterilization), and against personal liberties

and property rights (Virdi 2018). Sadly, many countries had eugenics laws in place even before the Nazis came to power, and many survived several decades past the fall of the Third Reich (Anonymous 2017).

The twentieth century was not kind to Darwin's utopian vision of a progressive morality. With the horrors of two World Wars, the Holocaust, several other wars (Korea, Vietnam, Gulf), and several civil wars rife with genocidal and "ethnic cleansings," mankind did not progress morally. If anything, man went backward.

### The (True) Descent of Man

Darwin got one thing very right, the title of his book. But it was not as he thought, in regard to the ancestry of man, rather it was and is to mankind's morality. Darwin believed that mankind descended from lower animals but that his morals were ascending upward and would continue to do so. Scripture however says just the opposite. Mankind was originally created perfect, directly by God, and given dominion over all of creation (Genesis 1:26–31), from which he was separate. But since the fall of man in Genesis 3, we have not been on an upward trajectory of morality; rather we have spiraled downward—we are in a rapid moral descent.

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Jesus didn't advocate grudgingly tolerating your neighbors but rather loving them as yourself. He didn't want to eradicate the physically disabled: he healed them. He didn't treat the less-wealthy or less-educated as less-worthy. In fact, he made some of them his disciples and sat down to eat and fellowship with others. He didn't shy away from tax collectors and sinners: he sought them out to save them (Matthew 9:11–13; Luke 19:10).

Even Darwin saw that the teaching of Jesus was on an entirely different plane than the common morality of his day. Yet he still was committed to the principle that such high morality had evolved from basically a selfish quid-pro-quo start. Though Darwin attempted to trace morality from self-preservation, to cooperation, to instinct, and finally to habit—all guided by some vague notion of sympathy—he really had no ultimate basis for doing so. He even acknowledged that there were some problems with the linear progression of morality. His belief that "an advancement in the standard of morality will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another" was shown to ring hollow in the twentieth century, when totalitarian regimes murdered millions of people. Stalin "purged" 50 million of his "own tribe," Pol Pot murdered 2–3 million of his own people, and there have been countless other dictators and tyrants.

People tend to look at all the evil in the world and somehow blame God for it; yet Christianity has the only answer to why there is evil in the world. An original perfect creation by a loving and just God was subsequently marred by mankind's sin and rebellion (Genesis 3). Yet if there were no God and everything, including morality, just evolved, then there really is no evil. There are just hard circumstances and people with less-evolved morality than ours. And who is to say that their morality is worse? That is just an arbitrary assumption and assertion. A quote by author Andrea Dilley as mentioned in a *Christian Post* article really captured her struggle with the essence of the origin and source of morality. Her story serves as a good way to close this discussion.

When people ask me, what drove me out the doors of the church and then what brought me back, my answer to both questions is the same. I left the church in part because I was mad at God about human suffering and injustice. And I came back to church because of that same struggle. I realized that I couldn't even talk about justice without standing inside of a theistic framework. In a naturalistic worldview, a parentless orphan in the slums of Nairobi can only be explained in terms of survival of the fittest. We're all just animals slumming it in a godless world, fighting for space and resources. The idea of justice doesn't really mean anything. To talk about justice, you have to talk about objective morality, and to talk about objective morality, you have to talk about God. (Simmons 2020)

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