THE EVOLUTION OF MORALITY

‘Why should I consider others?... I think the only possible answer to this question is the humanist one – because we are naturally social beings; we live in communities; and life in any community, from the family outwards, is much happier, and fuller, and richer if the members are friendly and cooperative than if they are hostile and resentful.’

MARGARET KNIGHT,
Morals without Religion

For humanists, our moral values don’t come from somewhere outside of humanity. The origins of morality lie inside human beings.

ANIMAL ALTRUISM

Many animals display altruistic behaviour (helping others at your own expense). Some evolved instincts to take care of their immediate family, and these instincts may have spread over time to care for those less closely related. There are also benefits to helping others in need if there is a chance that the favour might one day be returned. If such behaviour improved one’s own chances of survival and reproduction, then the genes that promoted this behaviour would have been likely to spread.

‘The social instincts acquired by man will from the first have given to him some wish to aid his fellows, some feeling of sympathy... Such impulses will have served him at a very early period as a rude rule of right and wrong.’

CHARLES DARWIN, biologist

HUMANS ARE SOCIAL ANIMALS

Human beings are animals that have long lived together in groups and, as such, we have good reasons to treat others well. We benefit from working together and cooperating. We evolved a natural capacity for empathy with others, to recognise their feelings, to imaginatively identify with them, and to feel compassion and concern for their suffering. Scientists may disagree about exactly how our positive moral capacities evolved, but there is widespread agreement that the explanation for them is natural.

‘All humans have a mind which cannot bear to see the sufferings of others... When someone sees a child about to fall into a well, they will all experience a feeling of alarm and distress... to be without this compassion is not human.’

MENG TZU, ancient Chinese philosopher

LESS FRIENDLY INSTINCTS

We have, however, also evolved other instincts. We can react aggressively under pressure or when faced with a perceived threat. We identify more closely with our immediate group and can be hostile to strangers (such group loyalty can often cause more harm than purely selfish behaviour). We also have incentives to cheat or to treat others badly for our own benefit if we can get away with it.

Our instincts, then, do not always tell us how we should act. Morally good behaviour involves more than just following our instincts. The scientific story, then, does not give us all the answers about how we should behave, but it does help to explain the origins of altruistic behaviour. For humanists, our potential to be good does not require some non-natural explanation – the motivation does not need to come from somewhere outside of us.
QUESTIONS

- Where do humanists think morality comes from?
- If we could wind back time and human civilisation evolved all over again, some humanists believe it would be unlikely that the same religions would develop, but very likely that our basic moral principles would be the same. Do you agree?