

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.**

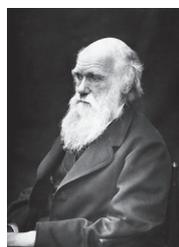
ANIMAL ALTRUISM

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.

‘There are other aspects of human nature, including reason and empathy, that can help us to reject tribalism. We should nurture those better aspects of our nature.’



ALICE ROBERTS,
scientist

‘Humanists believe that morality – being good or at least doing no harm – is based on human nature and human experience... We humans have evolved as a social species and we need to cooperate with each other. Empathy, compassion, and reason are essential elements in the development of human society, and these form the bases of humanist morality.’

MICHAEL ROSEN AND ANNEMARIE YOUNG,
What is humanism?

THE HUMANIST AMBITION

For humanists, it is important to recognise that we have evolved both positive and negative qualities. We are neither naturally good nor sinful. The humanist challenge, then, is to find ways to promote and encourage our positive instincts (which support cooperation), while overcoming our negative instincts (which lead to conflict). Education is important. Hearing stories can provide a good way to develop our empathy and become better aware of how others would like to be treated. Contact with other people is also important, especially those who are different from us. It can help us to better understand each other and live together peacefully.

‘Stories can foster our capacity for imaginative identification with others. There’s no guarantee that they will do so, but they can be the beginning of empathy, compassion, and a sense of justice.’

RICHARD NORMAN,
humanist philosopher

‘Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it.’

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS, author and journalist

THE DANGERS OF TYING MORALITY TO RELIGION

Many humanists believe our positive moral instincts evolved before religion and that being good does not require religious belief. Many believe it is important that we do not raise young people to think of morality as something that is dependent on religion. If we do, then we risk the non-religious believing that, without religion, there is no reason to be good. Thankfully there is good evidence that many non-religious people still see plenty of reasons to try to be kind, honest, and fair (even if, like all people, they don’t always succeed).

For humanists, morality is not something handed to us from on high, but instead needs to be built from the bottom up. The way to do this is by understanding our human nature, recognising our shared needs and the benefits of cooperation, and promoting our positive instincts and capacities.

‘Ethics loses its air of mystery. Its principles are not laws written up in heaven. Nor are they absolute truths about the universe, known by intuition. The principles of ethics come from our own nature as social, reasoning beings.’

PETER SINGER, humanist philosopher



‘If there is no god – and there isn’t – then we made up morality. And I’m very impressed.’

JENNIFER MICHAEL HECHT,
historian and teacher



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?