

The Evolution of Ethics

A goal implicit in human evolution is survival; thus, humanity directs some of its energy toward creating a state of peace to achieve the necessary efficiency and conservation of energy to survive in a hostile and sometimes unpredictable world.

The foundation of the emergence of rule systems is built upon centuries of reasoned insight and personal experiences that reveal which actions are better than others, which are productive, and which are disruptive and should be avoided. As efficient actions reveal themselves to an evolving society, its people develop the means to make productive choices between one type of action and another. Some choices are decidedly better than others. This prioritizing of human actions into efficient hierarchies establishes the foundations of rule systems which later refine themselves into more sophisticated systems of morals, manners and statutory laws. All these systems have a tendency to address the fundamental need of the human species to survive and avoid the common fate of extinction by conserving energy and directing social attention towards more productive kinds of behavior. It could be said that as

civilization approaches the ideal of efficiency, the harmony that follows from efficient and thoughtful actions inspires a state of peace that exponentially increases the chances of human civilization surviving over long periods of time.

Social change has more or less followed the more reasoned logic and experiences of people. Change is not always perfect. However, as people experience more and learn more about their world through formal education, they have more resources by which they can make judgments about the behavior of their fellow humans. Knowledge of the past lends to enlightened minds a knowledge of the future. Common education and experiences inspire the emergence of informal belief systems, clarifying what appears to be acceptable behavior and what is not. Observations that endure centuries of reasoned scrutiny integrate ultimately into the cultural ethic.

As a rule of thumb, an action that contributes to the disorganization of society is often considered “wrong” and that which contributes to the organization of society “right.” Behaviors that corrupt the peace, prosperity, and productivity of a society are generally discouraged as “wrong,” in favor of behaviors which contribute to the well-being of the society and are generally considered “right.” In any event, the evolution of rules in complex societies addresses the fundamental impulse of the human species to survive in a world of competing biological systems.

Ethical systems and formal laws together serve to bring order to a world that tends to become disorganized and

sometimes violent if ethical views and rules of conduct are not established. Ethical systems that emerge for any given period of historical development may not represent the finest of rules ever conceived, but they are sufficient to hold the growth of humanity in the balance.

Along with the emergence of good rules have evolved many others that were bad. These bad rules evolved from errors, delusions, and self-interest. But over time the good rules that incorporated a keen insight into human relationships have likely endured and have slowly grown into a reasonably consistent set of rules. These rules today are expressed formally and informally in systems of laws, morals, manners, and customs.

Rules spontaneously evolve in every social system, whether it is a group of small-time criminals or highly educated people in a multinational corporation. Rule systems evolve along the lines of an efficiency algorithm that effectively organizes the prevailing state of affairs in small increments of change over long periods of social time. In the beginning of the formation of social systems, rules may not have been as refined as they are today. But rules necessarily existed from the beginning simply to keep volatile passions, immaturity, ignorance, and misunderstanding from inspiring endless fighting and slaughtering of human beings.

Written laws, morals, manners, and customs help synchronize the various parts of an increasingly complex society. Developments in higher education, technology, national politics, or even from natural phenomena, such as extremes in the

weather, all affect the destiny of humankind. Some people are slow to see changes in the world, while others are quick. As a result, people's lives operate at different speeds. Moral and legal systems help sustain order in a society where people operate at different levels of sensitivity, understanding, and speed of thinking. Rule systems, on the whole, concern the evolution of sensibility rather than insensibility and self-interest.

Rule systems are not always the result of one person or party imposing dogmatic prescriptions of behavior on another. They evolve because they are inherently sensible reflections of the natural order. The capacity of a tiger to kill and maim other animals, for example, is part of the natural order. Wishing tigers away will not make the danger disappear. Natural order bestows a power upon tigers, which like other powerful things or people in the world should be dealt with prudently. The ability of a tiger to inflict harm is not subject to opinion or political perspective; it is a "reasonably" known fact. Not all facts are deduced by time-consuming laboratory experimentation. Some are learned over centuries of time through the experiences of people who, in this instance, have tangled with tigers and learned their power to inflict pain, suffering, and death.

Systems of morals and manners are inherently sensible perspectives of what constitutes prudent behavior in a dangerous and sometimes unpredictable world. Prudence is an aspect of sensibility. The history of the evolution of ethics is essentially the history of sensibility and intelligence coming to life. To move toward the ethical and legal is to move away from the

primitive. There is a dynamic relationship between the evolution of rules, concern for human survival, and the need for increasing systemic efficiency. The evolution of ethical systems is a natural result of this relationship. Efficient biological systems are likely to survive where inefficient ones do not. Organization follows efficient action.

If the theory of natural selection holds true, it is likely that one of the mechanisms that determines extinction or survival is an organism's ability to use its energies efficiently. The ways in which human beings or organisms struggle to survive profoundly affect the way they behave. If order and efficiency in a biological system truly enhances its chances of survival, then the system will encourage the evolution of rules to make existence more orderly. By this thesis it could be said that, as the construction of human society approaches the ideal of efficiency by the promotion of societal peace through thoughtful lawmaking, the chances of human civilization surviving extremely long periods of time, increase exponentially in biological terms.

It would be difficult to separate the biological evolution of humans from the evolution of the rule systems they create to define order. Human beings are a part of nature. They are subject to the influences of genetic development that have been in the works for perhaps billions of years. At certain points, evolutionary ethics moves from talking about concerns of survival at the human level to concerns of survival at the genetic level. This is a gray area, and one that evolutionary

biologists perhaps need to sort out. What is important, however, is that many behaviors arising from human struggles find their analogs in genetic and cellular activity. Clues explaining human behavior may run deep in the species.

Over centuries the construction of social rule systems (formal laws, customs, manners) may result from credible and accurate observation rather than self-serving beliefs defining what is real and true about human nature. For instance, if people observe the destructive effects of alcoholism, the accuracy of such observation over centuries will eventually overcome the most hardened of self-serving beliefs to the contrary. From such observations, attitudes and laws will likely follow. There is chemistry evident in social life that allows certain things to occur and other things to be prevented, if there is a way of preventing them. For example, there has been a natural progression of laws that prohibit an intoxicated person from driving an automobile. After decades of experience, people can fairly accurately guess what will happen when people drink and drive. That intoxicants are destructive is no longer considered to be merely a belief. Some moral values, therefore, derive from physiological facts. Over centuries of time, facts concerning generative or degenerative behaviors invariably lead to the creation of values. To a degree, values evolve as a consistent response to persistent social problems. In this respect, biological principles lie at the root of ethics. The accumulation of facts and observations leads to the construction of values to enhance systemic efficiency and the ability of individuals,

as well as the entire species, to survive. While values may vary from culture to culture, the principles of biology affecting human behavior that contribute to the evolution of value systems remain the same.

Sound empirical knowledge implied in portions of ethical systems is sometimes difficult to distinguish from self-serving beliefs, delusions, and unexamined opinions. Since ethical systems are complex, few want to take the time to examine their logic. It is easier to believe that rules are merely opinions; thus, people never have to accept the discipline of any rule set. They are morally free by their own ignorance to do whatever they want. Since laws are believed to be opinions, or an extension of an authoritarian state, the prohibition against drinking and driving restricts their actions only as far as the legal sanctions intimidate people into conforming to the proper use of alcohol and automobiles. Because the idea that excessive alcohol consumption is wrong (for good reasons) is not understood, laws and values must force a spirit of compliance on those who seek the protection of ignorance to maximize their moral freedom.

Ethical prescriptions many times represent a statistical accumulation of facts and observations that have been gathered over centuries and appear to point to some inherent truth (e.g., that excessive consumption of alcohol injures the health of a person and disrupts the lives of those around them). A much different form of moralism might be the view that “patience is a virtue.” This view is not simply some off-the-wall belief of

personal propriety; rather it derives from mature observations concerning behaviors that help people navigate the stresses of life without an overreaction to their circumstances that would be counterproductive to their attempts to realize their ambitions. Clear, concise, and reproducible observations about human conduct are generally expressions of wisdom rather than of opinion. While there are elements of belief present in almost all ethical systems, it is their fundamental wisdom that shines through the generations. As a civilization grows, it archives its wisdom in many ways. In more ancient times, myth and religion served to archive the essential nature and wisdom of humankind. Literature has carried some of this essential knowledge. In more refined form, philosophy has dealt with the essentials of wisdom, but few can understand the complexity and rigor of its language. The larger portion of proven and practical knowledge to guide our behavior is known through our legal system, morals, manners, and customs.

When a civilization blossoms, a wide spectrum of ethical views, customs, and laws evolves. Ethical systems can vary greatly. Some are better than others at fostering the growth of a culture. Some become so corrupted with self-serving intentions that they must be rebuilt. There is a natural tendency of biological units to become compartmentalized. In a similar way, different ethical systems may evolve and become compartments in a larger system. Ships are built so that the many areas in them are divided into watertight compartments. In this way if one area of the ship is damaged and water begins to pour in, then the damaged area

can be isolated and sealed off so the entire ship does not sink. The evolution of the human species appears to operate along similar lines. Compartmentalization of societies makes sense. If one legal or ethical system leads to the destruction of a nation, the entire world does not suffer. The inherent efficiency in natural design lends itself to a multipurpose design in systems. Not only does compartmentalization keep a world that is operated by only one standard ethic from being destroyed by some opportunistic manipulation of the system, it also allows for the natural diversity of local customs and genetic differences to be accommodated in “culturally friendly” ethical systems. People have choices in how they will decorate their lives by adopting a variety of value, ethical, and social systems.

The evolutionary process operates on a grand scale. It is somewhat analogous to a laboratory experiment, operating on an enormous scale, in which new ideas and methods are constantly applied. Sometimes the experiments lead to counterproductive results. However, the mishaps do not spread, because their effects are limited by compartmentalization. Compartmentalizing civilization is essential to its ultimate survival, as is the creative exploration of new systems. In time, an uncreative system, whether it is a cell in a plant or a human society, will be overcome by more vital systems that more creatively adapt to the ever-changing demands of the environment.

The evolution of efficient rule systems may be crucial in maximizing the possibility of survival and minimizing

the possibility of extinction. By this thesis, the development of rules could further assist natural selection at all levels of human development: it could be an isolating mechanism that keeps people who can follow rules from genetically mingling with people who are unable to follow them. Organisms, and the environment that produces them, necessarily must be symbionts if either is to maximize its chances of survival. At the human level, an ability to follow rules satisfies the debt of giving to the environment (the social environment). In response the environment bestows greater opportunities on cooperative people than on uncooperative rule violators. A natural separation occurs between the two (cooperative and uncooperative people), further enhanced by the isolating effects of value and moral systems warning a society's members of the problems of dealing with uncooperative people. Natural selection likely favors cooperative elements in nature rather than uncooperative elements. Nature does not provide a single system of rules, but rather a wide spectrum of rule systems that the human species can follow and thus benefit from the natural system's efficiencies. Which ethical system is best is less important than which system isolates cooperative from uncooperative elements to maximize systemic efficiency.

Rules represent the minimum standards of conduct necessary for a person to act cooperatively with a society that is a heterogeneity of widely different people. The presence of rule sets helps clarify in a society who is cooperative and who is acting in counterproductive ways toward the goals, intents,

and energies of the society. The evolution of ethical systems is an integral part of social growth. Formal and informal rule systems promote systemic efficiency by maximizing the system's social power; they minimize conflicts by developing laws to the point that peace and prosperity grow incrementally. Social problems that have been repeatedly met and overcome become "behavioral information" recorded in the sentiments of the various moral systems that spontaneously emerge. If an individual, society, or civilization must repeatedly relearn the lessons of the past, that ignorance becomes parasitic on the energies of the person, society, or civilization. A biological system whether it comprises genes, bacteria, animals or humans that acts in inefficient ways places itself at a strategic disadvantage. Social problems lead to conflicts that distract from the orderly growth of civilization and are a waste of vital social energies. A society that invests more in creatively building a future instead of sustaining conflicts of the past will probably outperform its competitors.

If a society is to conserve energy, it must develop some method of distinguishing wasteful activities from productive ones. It must remember which elements in its past are associated with conditions that gave rise to conflicts. Remembering what works, and what does not, is recorded in a society's formal laws, customs, manners, ethical systems, and literature.

The simple idea of good and bad would naturally arise in the consciousness of even the most primitive society. A "good choice" would be avoiding behaviors that demonstrably lead to

conflict and a “bad choice” would be a decision that ignores the dangers inherent in certain behaviors. The idea of refraining from kicking a tiger has an Aristotelian quality to it: first, it is a practical idea; second, it is definitely a productive idea because it leads to a longer life; and third, it is theoretically the best way for everyone to live the longest life in the presence of tigers. The tiger is a metaphor for human nature. A human analog might be that if you are a one hundred and thirty pound professor, it is probably a bad idea to make romantic overtures toward the girlfriend of a two hundred and thirty pound drug dealer on a dark street. Certain conditions invite certain dangers. There are various formal and informal ways a civilization teaches people such things.

What people value profoundly affects the way they define their world and make laws. Every person values something. People value their health, their families, their possessions and their careers. The things that people value most are their lives and the lives of their friends and their families. Survival is a cardinal value in an extensive hierarchy of values. If people value their careers more than their lives, they are thought to have misplaced their priorities. If one’s hedonistic pursuit of sexual pleasures carries with it the high possibility of disease and death, again society might think such a person had misplaced his or her priorities. To comment on this possibility is to express a sense of morality that comes from prudent thinking. Drugs, alcohol, gambling, are activities that have repeatedly caused people to temporarily misplace their priorities. Rule systems

help keep people in their “right mind” instead of going “out of their minds” through excess. People who are repeatedly “out of their minds” have less chance of surviving and surviving well than people who remain true to their original personality. Some behaviors corrupt the efficiency and social compatibility of people more than other behaviors. Some part of the evolution of ethical systems monitors the growth of potentially harmful behaviors and looks for methods to suppress them.

Rules help to reign in human passion as progress demands finer and finer delineations of labor, resources, and authority. The visceral compulsions of humans to survive rather than perish commands intelligent people to try to hold their society together and to keep people and their passions from tearing it apart. Survival places an imperative to be sensible enough to stay above the threshold of extinction as a species. This evolutionary process inspires finer and finer details of order, and is first evident in the moral senses of reasonable people who push for better rules to keep society orderly. To do this they must look from past experience into the future.

As a civilization grows larger its complexity increases to the point that a small disruption in a crucial aspect of society can have enormous consequences on the stability of the entire system. As a social system becomes more dynamic, it takes on more energy. But to stay energized it must be a coordinated system wherein each of its parts synchronize well. While emergent ethical systems may not hold legal sway, they do help coordinate people and institutions. They can work at

higher and higher speeds and produce more in a shorter time. As the coordination and speed of a society increases, the resultant efficiency begets an increase in its production and the reliability of its products.

When a system becomes reliable it is less apt to break down under the stress of aggression from another system or a natural disaster. Coordination reduces conflicts and increases the general sense of prosperity. But as coordination increases along with production, communications, and societal energy, so does the risk that interpersonal conflicts will inspire a breakdown of a civilization. The emergence of ethical systems is a naturally occurring, rapid response to social upheaval. Civilization is humankind's most sophisticated device. It works best when it is well regulated and finely tuned to all aspects of interpersonal relationships.