The Evolution of Moral Rules from Natural Laws

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Two Views on Moral Goodness

• Moral Realism
  – Certain behaviors are objectively good/bad (right/wrong), independently of any individual's feelings, motives, or goals
  – Eternal moral truths (e.g., Slavery = wrong) therefore exist and can be discovered, just like scientific laws (E=mc²).
• Moral Irrationalism
  – Denies existence of moral facts or truths
  – Judgments of moral goodness are a function of human sentiments, goals, conventions, and agreements

Dominance of Moral Realism in Philosophy and Psychology

• In theology, moral rules considered to be part of God's eternal laws.
• Thanks largely to the influence of Kant, moral realism is the default position in moral philosophy.
• In psychology, Kohlberg's stage model of moral development predominates. In the highest stage, individuals are said to grasp timeless, universal moral principles.

Dominance of Moral Realism in Everyday Life

• Piaget (1912) found that 5-year-olds are natural moral realists. They regard moral rules as external and immutable, according them the same status as natural laws.
• Gabarrones (1990) points to ethnocentrism as evidence that adults pervasively continue to rely on moral rules as absolute, unchallengeable laws.
• Greene (2003) suggests "that many people, probably most people, are moral realists."

Why Moral Realism is Wrong

• Moral realism is incompatible with a naturalistic biology
  - Gods do not exist; hence they cannot be the source of moral laws.
  - To say an act is good/bad "in itself" or "by its very nature" ignores the biological function of behavior. Behavior is good for accomplishing some things (but not others).
  - No act has ever been identified as good for accomplishing all aims of all individuals/species.
• Interlude: Cross-Species Disagreement about Good and Evil
  - 'Where is evil? In the rat whose nature it is to steal the grain. Or in the cat, whose nature it is to kill the rat?' – Master Po
  - 'The rat steals. Yet, for him, the cat is evil.' – Caine
  - 'And to the cat, the rat.' – Master Po
  - 'Yet, Master, surely one of them is evil.' – Caine
  - 'The rat does not steal, the cat does not murder. Rain falls, the stream flows, a hill remains. Each acts according to its nature.' – Master Po
  - –from "Kung Fu" Episode 11, March 15, 1973

"Good-For" Thinking

• Premise: Wolpert’s (2006) theory of brain evolution has at least some validity
  - Wolpert’s proposal: A critical skill for hominid survival was accurate discernment of natural, cause-effect laws relevant to tool manufacture/use.
    – The power of something to cause an effect indicates what it is "good-for:"
    – For example, this type of stone is good for chopping edges of other stones.
    – Accurate good-for thinking allowed tool users to manipulate the environment to their advantage.
• My proposal: First moral rules embodied natural laws concerning how behaviors are good for causing desirable effects on other people.
• In other words, "good" behaviors are good for manipulating others in useful ways.

What are Moral Acts Good For?

• People generally regard morally good behavior as good for others but not good for one’s self.
• But Alexander (1987) noted that socially beneficent acts are also good for:
  – creating a reputation as a rewarding interactant, which elicits social beneficence from others
  – eliciting direct social elevation with its accompanying perquisites
  – promoting the overall viability of the group and therefore the success of descendants

Why Is the Good-For Function of Moral Behavior Hidden?

• People normally are not aware that they are acting morally in order to accrue personal benefits . . .
  - . . . any more than they are aware that many behaviors are good for passing on their genes.
• If it seemed you were being beneficent to receive personal benefits, your reputation as a moral person would be damaged.
• Therefore, it is better to remain unaware of the good-for function of beneficent behavior.

From Good-For to Just Good Rules

• Because ignorance of the good-for function of moral behavior is adaptive, people are predisposed toward moral realism, viz., viewing moral rules as absolute and lawlike, rather than self-serving.
• This predisposition is supported by reflexive moral emotions (e.g., sympathy, disgust). Behaviors feel obviously just right just wrong.
• The growing consensus from research (Greene, 2003; Haidt, 2001; Raine & Yang, 2006) is that moral judgments are based on gut feelings rather than rational appraisal.

Adaptiveness of Moral Realism

• Alexander (1987) described adaptive function (good-for-ness) of social beneficence.
• Remaining unaware of good-for-ness (being a moral realist) is also adaptive.
• Is moral realism adaptive in other ways?
• Hogan, Johnson, & Emler (1978): moral realism in children promotes rapid assimilation of culture (and hence, survival).
• Johnson (1996): An adult can manipulate others more successfully by calling a behavior "an absolute necessity for the common good" rather than "something I would like you to do."

Benefits and Costs of Consciousness

• Hogan, Johnson, & Emler (1978): Consciousness, which increases both phylogenetically and ontogenetically, adds flexibility to rule-governed behavior.
• They propose three developmental phases
  – Rule-attunement (pure moral realism)
  – Social-sensitivity (awareness of others' feelings allows spirit of the law to override letter of the law)
  – Autonomy (awareness of one's evolved nature allows override of reflexive moral emotions)
• Increasing awareness to make deliberate choices brings costs as well as the benefit of flexibility.

Integrative Model of Moral Realism

• The evolution of moral rules proceeds from "good-for" to "just good" rules.
• By the time conscious moral reasoning is possible, the "just good" rules are well established.

Final Caution for Moral Irrationalists

• ‘Then is there no evil for men? Each man tells himself that what he does is good, at least for himself.’ – Caine
• ‘A man may tell himself many things but is a man's universe made up only of himself?’ – Master Po

References