

MORALITY IN ANIMALS? YES, NO, MAYBE

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- A teenage female elephant nursing an injured leg was knocked over by a male elephant. An older female saw this happen, chased the male away, and returned to the young female. The older elephant used her trunk to gently touch the younger elephant's sore leg. Ian Douglas-Hamilton, who has studied elephants for more than four decades, has observed numerous instances of empathy. In one, he describes how Grace, of the Virtues family, attended to Eleanor, matriarch of the First Ladies family. Eleanor was ailing, unable to stand steadily. When she fell, Grace gently touched Eleanor with her trunk and foot and then lifted her back to her feet. As Douglas-Hamilton writes in his field observation: "Grace tried to get Eleanor to walk by pushing her, but Eleanor fell again . . . Grace appeared to be very stressed, vocalizing, and continuing to nudge and push Eleanor with her tusks. . . Grace stayed with her for at least another hour as night fell." After Eleanor died, a number of elephants visited the body, some touching and some just standing for a time near the dead matriarch. A female named Maui "extended her trunk, sniffed the body, touched it, and then tasted [Eleanor's] trunk. She hovered her right foot over the body, nudged the body, and then stepped over, pulling the body with her left foot and trunk, before standing over the body and rocking to and fro."
- Rats in one cage refused to push a lever for a food reward when they saw that a rat in an adjoining cage received an electric shock as a result. Rhesus monkeys, in a similar experimental setup, refused to pull a lever for food if another monkey was shocked. One monkey in the experiment went twelve full days without food.
- A male Diana monkey who learned to insert a token into a slot to obtain food helped a female who couldn't get the hang of the trick, inserting the token for her and allowing her to eat the food reward.
- A troop of captive Chimpanzees has made remarkable behavioral modifications to accommodate Knuckles, the only known captive Chimpanzee to survive with cerebral palsy. Young chimpanzees would normally be subjected to intimidating displays by older males, but Knuckles is rarely subjected to such treatment. Even the alpha male is tolerant of Knuckles and often grooms him gently.
- Capuchin monkeys show "inequity aversion." Researchers Sarah Brosnan, Frans de Waal, and Hillary Schiff found that these monkeys—especially the females—carefully monitor equity among peers. In one study, individuals who were short-changed during a bartering transaction—those who were given a cucumber instead of a grape—became angry and refused to cooperate with researchers. Sometimes the monkeys would even throw the cucumber at the researchers. Frans de Waal has argued, on the basis of such research, that human tendencies such as reciprocity, division of rewards, and cooperation aren't limited to our species. "They probably evolved in other animals for the same reasons they evolved in us—to help individuals take optimal advantage of one another without undermining the shared interests that support group life." (de Waal 2005)

- When various animal species play, they engage in behaviors that maintain the fairness of the game: dominant animals will “play” the subordinate (e.g., a dominant wolf will show its belly), and larger, stronger animals will self-handicap (an adult wolf will only bite a youngster very gently). Highly aggressive coyote pups bend over backwards to maintain the play mood with their fellow pack members, and individuals who break the rules of play are ostracized and ignored.

- Primatologists Robert Sussman, Paul Garber, and J. Cheverud concluded, based on an extensive review of the literature, that the vast majority of primate social interactions are affiliative rather than agonistic or divisive. The animals are much more likely to play or groom each other than they are to pick a fight. For example, in prosimians—the most ancestral of existing primates—an average of 93% of social interactions are affiliative.

- Christine Drea and Lawrence Frank found that captive spotted hyenas will cooperate with one another to acquire food, even without specific training. Drea and Frank found that the hyenas modified their cooperative behavior to accommodate various partners—in other words, the hyenas showed behavioral flexibility while cooperating.

- In 2007, scientists presented what they called “unequivocal” evidence for empathy in mice. The researchers found that mice who watched cage-mates in pain were themselves more sensitive to pain. Neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp said of this research, “If it turns out that the ‘empathetic’ effect in mice is mediated by the same brain mechanisms as human empathy, then the evidence would be truly compelling that [the mouse model] actually reflects evolutionary continuity in a pro-social mechanism among many different mammalian species.” (Ganguli 2006)

These are just a sampling of the vast and growing literature on what scientists call “prosocial” behavior in animals—behaviors that benefit others individual and help to maintain social harmony and connection. The scientific study of animal behavior in natural environments has, since Darwin’s day, taught us much about these prosocial capacities. Animals¹ can be altruistic and cooperative. They are empathic and often show kindness toward one another, and certain species even appear to have a sense of fairness. As evidence for a range of prosocial behaviors in animals accumulates, the question lingers enticingly in the background: are these behavioral patterns the evolutionary roots of human morality? Are they, perhaps, a kind of “proto-morality” as Frans de Waal suggests? Or are they even evidence that humans are not the only creatures with a moral sense, as Darwin provokingly suggested over a century ago?

While these prosocial behaviors seem clearly related to morality, there is disagreement about exactly what the relationship is. Some maintain that these capacities amount to morality among animals.² On this view, the behaviors we see in animals—and which are shared by the human species—represent the core components of moral behavior. Morality has evolved in many species of social mammal, and the unique features of human morality are simply species-specific modifications of broadly

¹ Here and elsewhere when we say “animals” do something, we generally mean that the behavior has been observed in at least one species. “At least some animals do X” would be a more accurate phrase, but we prefer the simpler syntax.

² Bekoff, Marc and Jessica Pierce. 2009; Waller, Bruce N. 1997; Shapiro, Paul. 2006.

evolved behavioral patterns. The difference between human morality and animal morality is simply a matter of degree.

The weight of philosophical tradition, on the other hand, has pulled toward an alternative account of morality. On this view, morality is a capacity unique to humans, and humans are different in kind from animals in respect to moral behavior. Although prosocial behaviors in animals may reveal the evolutionary roots of human morality, animals cannot and do not have morality because they lack the capacities that are essential constituents of moral behavior—especially the capacity for critical self-reflection upon values. Human morality is distinguished from animal capacities by the greater generality of human moral norms, and by the greater rational self-awareness and choice that it requires.

In this paper, we explore these two opposing views of human and animal morality. We'll first present the view that animals have morality, and that morality is evolutionarily continuous behavioral phenomenon. We then explore the more common view that morality is unique to humans. We'll look, in particular, at various qualities of human morality that have been posited as unique and essential components of moral behavior.

Our final conclusion is that while human capacities and animal capabilities are different, the jury is out on whether the differences amount to a difference in kind or, as we have discovered for so many features posited to distinguish humans from animals (referential language, tool-making, self-awareness), only a matter of degree. Ultimately, whether animals have morality depends on both philosophical and empirical questions that have not yet been fully answered.

Morality in non-human animals

The behavioral evidence for morality in animals has been catalogued in a new book by ethologist Marc Bekoff and philosopher Jessica Pierce. They argue in *Wild Justice* that morality is essentially the same phenomenon, whether observed in humans or in other mammals. They define morality as “a suite of other-regarding behaviors that cultivate and regulate complex social interactions within a group of animals.” This suite falls into three rough behavioral “clusters,” or groups of related behaviors that share some family resemblances: the *cooperation* cluster (including altruism, reciprocity, honesty, and trust), the *empathy* cluster (including sympathy, compassion, grief, and consolation), and the *justice* cluster (including sharing, equity, fair play, and forgiveness).

Bekoff and Pierce argue from a framework of evolutionary continuity. Moral behavior can be understood as nested levels (like a Russian doll), with a taxonomically expansive and evolutionarily more ancient inner layer shared broadly among a range of social mammals, and newer adaptations that have evolved in conjunction with the increasing complexity and nuance of cognitive and emotional capacities, and in response to the particulars of social organization and other evolutionary pressures within groups of animals. The behavioral specifics of morality vary from species to species, so that morality must be understood as species relative. Wolf morality must be

understood on its own terms, as must human morality. Human morality, as a case in point, has unique features: it is shaped by our use of symbolic language, our capacity for reflective judgment, and perhaps also by other cognitive skills that have evolved in humans alone, in conjunction with the unsurpassed scale and complexity of our social organization.

According to Bekoff and Pierce's scheme, the mere presence of empathy, cooperation, or a sense of who deserves what are not, in themselves, enough to constitute a system of morality within an animal species. Rudimentary forms of empathy and altruism, to take just two examples, are ubiquitous in nature. Altruism is found in insects and even slime molds, and the "emotional contagion" that represents a primitive kind of empathy is widespread among group-living animals such as deer, ground squirrels, and sparrows. Thus Bekoff and Pierce distinguish between the larger category of "prosocial behavior" (actions that benefit another individual) and the much smaller category of "moral behavior." In evolutionary terms, prosocial behavior forms the core behavioral repertoire of morality, and is much more broadly distributed than morality. Many prosocial behaviors, such as parental care and communal nursing, fall outside the narrower "moral" category.

To help distinguish between the moral and the merely prosocial, Bekoff and Pierce offer what they call "threshold requirements" that help mark a tentative line between those species that do and those that don't display moral behavior. They admit that this line is imprecise and is likely to shift in light of future research (undoubtedly, they claim, to include even more animals on the moral side of the line). The first requirement is that all three clusters of behavior must be present in some degree, with a sense of fairness being the most stringent requirement since it appears to have evolved in a small number of species and requires a fairly high degree of social intelligence. Other threshold requirements include a level of complexity in social organization, including established norms of behavior to which attach strong emotional and cognitive cues about right and wrong; a certain level of neural complexity which serves as a foundation for moral emotions and for decision-making based on perceptions about the past and the future; relatively advanced cognitive capacities (a good memory, for example); and a high level of behavioral flexibility.

As an example of how Bekoff and Pierce draw this line between prosocial and moral behavior, consider the cooperation cluster. Although cooperative behavior is ubiquitous in nature, the highly complex forms of cooperation that might constitute moral behavior are evidenced in only a few species of social mammal, including wolves, chimpanzees, bonobos, baboons, manqué monkeys, hyenas, dolphins, whales, and rats. These complex forms of cooperation include: a) Reciprocal altruism, which involves a complex system of exchanging favors and is evidenced, as an example, in grooming interactions among baboons and chimpanzees. b) Generalized reciprocity, or providing help to an unfamiliar and unrelated individual, based on previous experiences of being helped. (Generalized reciprocity has long been thought to be unique to humans, but a study published in 2007 by zoologists Claudia Rutte and Michael Taborsky reported generalized reciprocity in rats) c) The formation of complex alliances, such as we see in dolphin and chimpanzee societies.

At least in Bekoff and Pierce's scheme, morality is best understood as a characteristic of a social group, rather than a quality possessed by an individual animal. Furthermore, morality refers not to a well-identified and singular property, but rather to a whole range or "suite" of physiological processes and behaviors. Pierce has suggested in other writings that would perhaps be good to do away with the term "morality" because it suggests a single property when in fact the term refers to a varied group of behaviors which are, moreover, contingent upon the particulars of species, social expectations, age, gender, and many other contextual features. (Pierce 2008) But for the time being, the language of morality is the best we have. The main point that Bekoff and Pierce take pains to make is that animals exhibit these behaviors as much as humans. Each species differs in the particulars of its moral behaviors, so human morality is different from chimpanzee morality, which is different from wolf morality. But if we are to use the term "morality" at all, we should use it of all of them equally, while understanding that particulars differ. If the core of morality consists of other regarding behaviors (such as altruism, empathy, and a sense of fairness) that "cultivate and regulate complex social interactions," then to the degree that animals exhibit these behaviors we should admit that they are moral beings. Pierce also makes the pragmatic argument that an integrated vocabulary (using "morality" for both human and animal behavior of the appropriate kind) will nurture dialogue among biologists, philosophers, psychologists, neuroscientists, and others who study morality. Interdisciplinary work among these many fields is important and desirable.

What might be unique about human morality?

Let us turn, now, to the more philosophically accepted and traditional view that morality is unique to humans. We'll explore what have generally been taken to be the essential features of morality—the capacity for critical self-reflection upon values, rationality, self-awareness, and autonomous choice—features which presumably have no counterpart in non-human animals. Research conducted over the past decade in neuroscience, social psychology, and empirical philosophy has raised questions about whether critical self-reflection, rationality, and autonomous choices are really as central to moral behavior as the philosophical tradition has long assumed.

The first feature is noted by Frans de Waal in his very interesting book *Primates and Philosophers*. de Waal references Westermarck, though the roots of these ideas in earlier ethical philosophy seem obvious. Mere emotions, however beneficial to others, are not sufficient for morality according to this theory.

Emotions such as gratitude and resentment directly concern one's own interests—how one has been treated or how one wishes to be treated—hence they are too egocentric to be moral. Moral emotions ought to be disconnected from one's immediate situation: they deal with good and bad at a more abstract, disinterested level. It is only when we make general judgments of how anyone ought to be treated that we begin to speak of moral approval and disapproval. It is in this specific

area, famously symbolized by Smith's (1937 [1759]) "impartial spectator," that humans seem to go radically further than other primates (de Waal 2006)

According to this theory, morality requires generality and impartiality, and these may very well be distinctive of human morality, thus drawing a clear line between humans and other animals. Morality requires not just that you feel altruistic toward your own child, but that you see this as an obligation that you have toward other beings appropriately similar to your child. It is this generality that converts beneficent sentiments into the distinctively moral sentiment that is reinforced by a feeling of obligation. Because you are responsive to a general and impartial standard, your behavior is not simply rooted in emotion but is supported by obligation. Ideally your emotions and your obligations coincide, but if that fails, you can nevertheless recognize the obligation. The possible discrepancy gives rise to those familiar foci of moral thought, the moral choice, the gap between duty and desire, the test of moral integrity.

A second element is often added to the theory just described: the requirement that one adopt one's general standards by some process of rational thought. We shall incorporate this feature by introducing the term "moral values" and using it to mean "considered preferences among actions and the personal sources of action."³ "Personal sources" include all the internal characteristics like emotions, desires, and dispositions that account for how one acts. *To have a moral value then is to have a considered preference to act in some ways and not others*, and so to have a considered preference that one have the emotions, desires, and other dispositions that conduce to realizing these preferences.

The result of combining these two elements is as follows: to have morality is to have moral values, i.e. considered preferences to act in certain ways. Further, those preferences, those ways of acting, are not regarded by the moral agent as just idiosyncratic. They are thought to be general ways of acting that are obligatory for the agent and anyone similarly situated. For simplicity of reference we will call this the theory of moral autonomy.⁴

What difference do values make?

³ Among our predecessors in this line of thinking are Frankfurt, Harry 1971, and Watson, Gary 1975.

⁴ Although the thinkers we cite as sources for these ideas do not connect them, we think these two features of morality are logically connected, and specifically that the requirement that our moral values be rationally justified entails the requirement that they be general and impartial. This is because reasons are themselves general and impartial. If R is a reason for one person to prefer to act in certain ways, then it is a reason for anyone similarly situated to prefer to act in those ways. Hence moral values necessarily acquire generality and impersonality because they are justified by reasons that, in order to be reasons in the appropriate sense, must themselves be general and impartial. "Similarly situated" is, of course, a phrase in need of analysis if one wants to know what constitutes a good moral reason, but one we do not need to supply here because we are not trying to provide a substantive moral theory.

Why does the formation of values matter so much to human morality. One way of explaining this is to say that values make the difference between being pushed blindly by the strongest impulse and choosing among one's possible responses. It is the difference between acting on your strongest desire simply because you have no other level of thought, and having thematic awareness of your desires, and preferences about which ones to act on. It is the difference between, say, acting out of anger, or, alternatively, recognizing that you are angry, remembering that—no matter how it feels now—you know that deeds done in anger are nearly always regretted, and choosing whether to inhibit the angry response.

Another way of making explaining the significance of values is to say that values give you freedom with regard to your ends or purposes. Christine Korsgaard, puts the point this way:

Kantians are among the philosophers who believe that a deeper level of assessment [than choosing on the basis of the strongest desire] and therefore choice is possible. Besides asking yourself how to get what you want most, you can ask yourself whether your wanting this end is a good reason for taking this particular action...

Why do I say this represents a deeper level of intentionality? In the first place, an agent who is capable of this form of assessment is capable of rejecting an action along with its purpose, not because there is something else she wants (or fears) even more, but simply because she judges that doing that sort of act for that purpose is wrong...Now if we are capable of setting aside our purposes when we cannot pursue them by any decent means, there is also a sense in which when we *do* decide to pursue a purpose, we can be seen as having *adopted* that purpose. Our purposes may be suggested to us by our desires and emotions, but they are not determined for us by our affective states, for if we had judged it wrong to pursue them, we could have laid them aside. Since we choose not only the means to our ends but also the ends themselves, this is intentionality at a deeper level...Another way to put the point is to say that we do not merely *have* intentions, good or bad. We assess and adopt them. We have the capacity for normative self-government, or as Kant called it, "autonomy." It is at this level that morality emerges. The morality of your action is not a function of the content of your intentions. It is a function of the exercise of normative self-government. (de Waal 2006)

The last two sentences in Korsgaard's statement are worth dwelling on. According to the theory she represents, morality is not determined by the intention or purpose of one's action. An action is not moral solely because its purpose is to avoid harm to, or provide a benefit for another. An action is moral only if it both has a moral intention and it is the product of one's values, i.e. one's considered preference for acting in some ways rather than others. Morality requires that we reflect on, reason about, "assess and adopt" the ways we act. Korsgaard and the champions of the theory

of moral autonomy believe that humans alone have these capacities, and so that morality is a distinctively human capacity. This claim, that humans and humans alone form moral values is the focus of the rest of our paper

Challenges

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Though it represents the mainstream of western philosophical thinking, this separation between humans and animals is not without its doubters. Like Pierce and Bekoff, Bruce N. Waller argues that morality does not depend on the thematization of thoughts, feelings, desires and actions that the tradition claims to be necessary to the formation of values.

Other animals may not conceptualize their motives quite as elegantly: they may not know they are intending to act altruistically...That does not bar them from forming and acting on such intentions. Proper intent—‘acting for the right reasons’—is essential for moral behavior; reason and deliberation is not. (Waller 1997)

To support this claim Waller argues that people often take moral actions spontaneously and without deliberation, which makes these actions indistinguishable from moral or pro-social behavior of non-human animals.

Consider two respondents to the question “Why did you risk your life to save the children from the burning building?” First, “I heard the screams, considered what I should do, and decided it was my duty to attempt a rescue.” Second, “I heard the screams, and immediately felt I had to rescue the children. Reflections on duty had nothing to do with it.” The former may be virtuous, but not more virtuous than the latter.

Profound commitments and enduring characters are not exclusively (nor even typically) the product of rational reflection. To suppose that such nonreflective commitments must be superficial or transitory or spurious is to grossly overintellectualize the development of character....just as there might be grounds for questioning the moral virtue of someone who must call duty to mind before acting to rescue an endangered child, likewise one might be less confident of the steadfast virtuous character of an individual who requires reflection to reach such basic moral commitments as care for the unfortunate. (Waller 1997)

Jonathan Haidt, a psychologist who studies morality has also questioned the traditional emphasis on reason, deliberation, and thematization in human moral action. Haidt’s theory is too complex to summarize here, but he draws on psychological

research from a variety of areas to support his social-intuitionist model of moral judgment. According to this model people ordinarily arrive at moral judgments by intuition, where that is defined as “the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good-bad, like-dislike) without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion.” In this model “moral reasoning is an effortful process, engaged in after a moral judgment is made, in which a person searches for arguments that will support an already-made judgment.” Further “Because people are highly attuned to the emergence of group norms, the model proposes that the mere fact that friends, allies, and acquaintances have made a moral judgment exerts a direct influence on others, even if no reasoned persuasion is used.” We could add that even if reasons are given, a person’s judgment might be affected more by the desire for group approval than by careful attention to the validity of the reasoning. The model does not deny that moral reasoning by oneself or with others can influence moral judgment, but posits that this is a relatively rare occurrence.

The core of the model gives moral reasoning a causal role in moral judgment, but only when reasoning runs through other people. It is hypothesized that people rarely override their initial intuitive judgments just by reasoning privately to themselves, because reasoning is rarely used to question one’s own attitudes or beliefs...

However, people are capable of engaging in private moral reasoning, and many people can point to times in their lives when they changed their minds on a moral issue just from mulling the matter over by themselves. While some of these cases may be illusions (see below, the post-hoc reasoning problem), other cases may be real, particularly among philosophers, one of the few groups that has been found to reason well (Kuhn, 1991). (Haidt 2001)

Evaluation

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The claim that much of our moral action is not accompanied by conscious deliberation, reflection on values, or reasoning of any kind, seems plausible to us. To begin with, think about how much of moral life consists in simply not doing immoral things. Now realize that a moral person will frequently fail even to consider doing what would be tempting for an immoral person. Moral persons do not normally go through the day restraining impulses to assault passersby, to steal from those around them, to kill people, to cheat, or even to tell significant lies. Part of what it means to be moral (not a saint; just a person of ordinary good character) is surely that most of these things don’t even present a temptation, in fact don’t even occur to us.

Further, when morality calls on us to do something rather than to refrain, many of us think that the person for whom this action seems obvious, intuitive, easy, is a more attractive moral ideal than the person who does the right thing only after complex deliberation. And it is also surely true that most of the time, good people act just this way. The bottom line is that moral dilemmas and the accompanying

deliberation, however important and character-testing they may be, are the exception in moral life rather than the norm on which our understanding of moral life should be based.

We think there are two ways of understanding the claims Waller and Haidt make about the significance of the account we have just endorsed, namely the claim that conscious deliberation about values and obligation is the exception rather than the rule in a normal moral life. The first, which we will dispute, is that traditional claims about the importance of reasoning, thematization, and the formation of values are undermined if most moral decision making is spontaneous and intuitive, that is if people do not reflect at the moment of action on what their values tell them to do. The second claim, which we think is more serious, is that the process of forming values—as distinct from particular occasions of acting or failing to act on those values—is less rational, and more animal-like, than the tradition suggests. We shall return to this claim below.

With regard to the first point, think about the notorious idea of Immanuel Kant that to have moral merit an action must not only accord with one's duty, but must be done for the sake of duty. (Kant 1785) This notion is notorious because it has often been interpreted to imply that a morally praiseworthy act must feel burdensome or unpleasant to the agent, or at least that the agent must consciously think that the action is a duty. Such actions are to be contrasted with things done with pleasure, and with acting on spontaneous inclinations or emotions.

We are not sure what Kant thought about this, but his deep point—that intentions matter—does not turn on supposing anything about what goes through the mind of an agent at the moment of moral action. To get the point that intentions matter, you need only to recall the cad Cal Hockley from the movie Titanic, who picks up a lost child only to be able to get a place in a lifeboat for himself. What Hockley did, taking a lost child into a lifeboat seems like a morally praiseworthy result, but Hockley is a cad not a good person because his goal was to help himself, and helping the child was incidental to that goal.

Whatever the full complement of reasons for why we care about intentions, surely the core is that we want to know not only what the person did in one instance, but what s/he will do in other instances. And to know this we need to know the motive, principle, or values on which s/he acted, not just what action s/he performed. Motives, not actions in isolation from them, tell us what a person will do in other instances.

Kant's point, then, is that an action that accords with duty—rescuing a child from a sinking ship—deserves moral credit only if it was motivated by a good moral value, which the cad's was not. Since the deep reason for this is our interest in what an agent might do in other circumstances—that is in what values govern his actions—it is a mistake to think his thought processes at the moment of action are the focus of inquiry. How he perceived the situation matters, for that helps reveal what values moved him to action, but whether he thought *consciously* about his values or “duty” does not.

Kant's point, then, can be interpreted as concerning an agent's motive or value. He need not have meant that one must actively think of one's motive at the moment of action. He might well have maintained only that one must have the appropriate motive in the dispositional sense. This is because if we are right that people tie moral judgment of an action to the agent's motives because motives tell us about the agent's settled preferences for how to act in a way that no particular action does, then the agent's thoughts at the moment of action are irrelevant to the real point, namely what the agent's values are.

The larger point here is that the traditional account of the crucial importance to human morality of self-awareness, reason, and the formation of values is not threatened if we recognize that one's values frequently serve as dispositions to action rather than occurrent elements at the moment of action. More plainly, it matters to our moral judgment of a person whether he saves a child because of expectation of personal advantage or because of concern for the child's welfare. But it does not matter whether at the moment of choice he asked himself whether he values the welfare of others. It is sufficient that he does have such a value, and that it has an appropriate role in explaining why he saved the child.

The second way of understanding the critique offered by Haidt, Waller, and others is concerned not with the role of reasoning in particular moral actions but rather with its role in the formation of values. Here if the claim is true it is more significant. To the degree that the formation of values is itself done without conscious deliberation, this strikes at the heart of the traditional distinction. That distinction depends upon claiming that we differ from the other animals to the degree that we do something they cannot: namely to form, to "assess and adopt," considered preferences among actions. Take away the consideration—the conscious weighing of reasons for favoring this kind of action over that one—and the claim collapses. Our values will be as much a product of unreason, of chance, of the influence of whatever forces happen to get the upper hand as are the desires of non-human animals.

Is this claim true? Is the "consideration" of values less significant in actual moral life than the moral autonomy theory suggests? Haidt's theory says it is, and he draws upon results in several branches of psychology for evidence.

Another line of argument is based on familiar facts about moral reasoning. We all understand, for instance, that we get our original moral values from those who raise us. This usually means someone's family and community, though in special circumstances the significant people in a person's moral education (or miseducation) could be others. If we rationally consider our values, this will be an operation that supervenes on moral values that we have learned by a wholly different process of socialization, or even indoctrination. Initial acquisition of first values clearly does not involve reasoned appraisal of those values.

Further, this initial socialization seems to have quite a bit of inertia to it. People make marginal adjustments in their values, but relatively few radically change values they successfully acquired when young.

To decide whether the undoubted human ability to reason about moral values is distinctively human, one thing we need is careful phenomenological observation about the process by which we decide upon our mature values. That the values we first acquire are the product of rational reflection and acceptance seems obviously false. To the degree that humans exercise moral autonomy, that must be in maturity. So to what degree do we do this?

Trying to answer this question confronts us with the problem that the task inevitably falls first to philosophers (though psychologists could take it up), and we are hardly a representative group. Further, philosophers might be biased by our education in favor of the theory of moral autonomy. Less pejoratively, we could say that our observations may be infused with theory, as it is a commonplace of epistemology that observations typically are. Additionally, since ethical theory is the professional province of philosophers and since philosophers are trained to examine and reason about ethical matters—arguably more than any other group in the culture—we hardly constitute a representative group with regard to critical examination of ethical values. If any group of people in the culture could be expected to reflectively exam its values, surely it would be philosophers. But what we do may not be what others do any more than our concern with metaphysical questions shows that ordinary people spend their lives worrying about how *events* differ from *states of affairs*.

Finally, as Haidt suggests, the fact that people can often produce some sort of elementary reasoned justification for their moral beliefs is not definitive evidence that these reasons explain why they hold their beliefs. These rationales could, be rationalizations. It is possible that people the correct explanation for why people hold the the moral values that they do is not that they are convinced by the justifications they would produce if asked, and they might continue to hold those beliefs even if their justifications were shown to be inadequate. From a moral point of view, this is not necessarily a bad result. It is more important that people hold good values than that they have good, reasoned justifications for their values. And it is a familiar phenomenon for all sorts of beliefs. We are often convinced of beliefs for which we struggle mightily to give evidence. This might even be a description of an important part of the philosophical enterprise: looking for the rational justification for what we are already convinced is true.

So an alternative to the theory of moral autonomy is the notion that morals are first and foremost what the etymology of the term suggests. “Morals” is generally thought to derive from “mores,” meaning manners or customs. The manners and customs meant here are not those that are distinctive of a single person but those that are shared by a group. Perhaps the theory of moral autonomy is too individualistic, and we should instead see morality as primarily a matter of group custom.

On this view, moral values are primarily the possession of a group which transmits those values to its members. The members of the group are introduced to a wide range of moral practices, including the practice of asking members to account for their behavior by explaining their reasons for acting. This is the beginning of moral reasoning, a practice that, once mastered, can take place in an individual’s mind with an imaginary interlocutor. But the desire to belong to and to be accepted by the group

may not be not only the initial motive that leads people to learn the morals of their community and to take part in the practice of accounting for their action and demanding accounting from others, it may be a powerful continuing influence on the moral values that one accepts.

A bit of indirect support for this idea is available from Tim Scanlon. Although his theory belongs in the moral autonomy tradition, Scanlon implicitly acknowledges the importance of our desire to be accepted by a group. In What We Owe To Each Other he writes:

When I ask myself what reason the fact that an action would be wrong provides me with not to do it, my answer is that such an action would be one that I could not justify to others on grounds I could expect them to accept. This leads me to describe the subject matter of judgments of right and wrong by saying that they are judgments about what would be permitted by principles that could not reasonably be rejected, by people who were moved to find principles for the general regulation of behavior that others, similarly motivated, could not reasonably reject. (Scanlon 1999)

Scanlon is, of course, emphasizing justification and reason, not concern for one's standing in a social group. But if we step back a bit and see the process of considering and giving reasons not as an impersonal process but as a situated social phenomenon, its links to a particular moral community are clear. We learn the practice of justifying our moral beliefs and actions from a community (or, in a complex society, perhaps communities). The community has a role in how much we learn to reason about moral matters. And it certainly has a role in what kinds of reasons we learn to give and accept—whether, for instance, it is the Ten Commandments to which we appeal, the Categorical Imperative, Sharia Law, or “what Jesus would do.”

If we look at moral life from this perspective, the process of “considering” moral values begins to look a lot less like impersonal reasoning and a lot more like concern for one's standing in a moral community. Moral reasoning does not disappear, but it is less common, less prominent in moral life, much of which is more habitual, intuitive, and emotional than the received theory of moral autonomy would suggest. Further, when we do reason, it is largely as a community member concerned with her standing in the group, not really as an “autonomous” moral agent concerned with impersonal standards of reason. The game of asking for and giving reasons for moral beliefs and actions is one we learn from our group. Much of it may be, in any case, rationalization for actions and beliefs we hold as socialized members of the group, not as autonomous reasoners arriving at independent conclusions. The kinds of reasons we think relevant will be largely determined by our groups, so that as members of gangs or warrior clans they will be concerned with honor and image, and if we are members of the Kantian philosophical tribe they will be about the Categorical Imperative and respect for persons.

In such a view neither the “consideration” of moral values nor the validity of such norms disappears. Rather, the consideration is dispersed, something that resides in the community rather than in the individual. Norms may be valid in the sense that they succeed in embodying wisdom that makes for better lives for members of the group. But it is not true that each individual considers and justifies these values for herself. Good or ill, they reside in the group, are transmitted to members by the processes of socialization, and will be reconsidered and rejected only by group processes. Groups, of course, cannot think in the strictest sense of the term. If consideration and reconsideration of values takes place in a group, it is through the agency of individuals. But individual insights will alter values of others only insofar as they are absorbed by and transmitted by the group. And if individual insight and moral innovation is a relatively rare occurrence, while most people most of the time reflect the beliefs and values of their moral community, then for ordinary people it is only the moral innovations that spread in the group that matter. Most of us, most of the time, are conformists concerned to obey moral norms in order to maintain standing in our group, and so dependent on the group for the quality of our moral values. Living up to those values is an individual matter, but the ones we hold will seldom be different or better than the ones held by our moral community.

The question for philosophers interested in the differences between humans and other animals concerns the degree to which our undoubted human capacity for rational reflection on our values and their justification is in fact exercised. How much critical reflection do ordinary people engage in? How much of it is about the rational grounds for a value, and how much of it is about how one’s values will be accepted by others in the group? How much of value change is like value acquisition, mostly a matter of adopting the behaviors and attitudes that garner approval and acceptance by whomever one identifies as most important to please? In short, to what extent does the theory of moral autonomy describe our actual situation, and to what extent does it put forth a theoretical ideal that is not much realized in practice?

This matters because if human morality is mostly habit and group conformity, then it begins to look a lot more like the prosocial behavior we already know non-human animals manifest. It remains to be seen whether any animals ever cross the threshold to critical reflection on their pro-social behavior. It seems clear that any such crossing, if it occurs, is modest. But we have not yet looked carefully enough to be sure whether the threshold is ever crossed or not. Only forty years ago it still seemed possible to define humans as the only tool-using species. We now know that some other animals not only use tools occasionally, they also sometimes shape them to at least a small degree. It seems not impossible that research could discover that similarly some non-human animals can at least in some minimal way form reflective preferences about their actions.

What we are looking at here is not an erasure of the difference between human morals and animal morals. The human possession of language, the degree of human self-awareness, and the superiority of the human mind for abstract thought undoubtedly create a large difference between human morals and animal morals. But is this a difference of degree or a difference in kind? We think the jury is still out on this

question and that if we can cast off the theoretical prejudices that prevent us from looking seriously for evidence to answer it, we may come better to understand ourselves, our place in the natural world, the animal cousins with whom we share it.

Conclusion

If Pierce, Bekoff, Waller, and others are right, then the essence of morality is a core repertoire of behavioral patterns and responses—a kind of fluid and very nuanced moral intelligence that allows animals, including humans, to live harmoniously in large and socially complex groups. More often than not, moral behavior takes place below the radar of conscious awareness. Human morality has unique features—for example, human morality is mediated and expressed through symbolic language, and humans alone seem to engage in reflective consideration of moral values. But morality itself is a broadly shared phenomenon.

Alternatively, if morality requires the generality, impartiality, and rational consideration posited as essential by the theory of moral autonomy, then the question is more complicated. We have rejected one attempt to undermine that theory. We have argued that the theory of moral autonomy can safely grant that many, even most, of our moral actions are not accompanied by reasoned deliberation. They may instead be based on intuitive judgments, at least so long as those judgments represent values that are themselves the outcome of reasoned consideration. The essence of the theory is that we consider our values, not that we consider each of the actions that embody those values.

Pushing the consideration of actions up a step, however, only raises the same question. To what degree is the theory of moral autonomy a descriptive theory about the moral life of ordinary people, and to what degree is it a moral ideal to which few people approximate in practice? Ordinary people undoubtedly have preferences for general ways of acting that they regard as obligatory. But to what degree do they consider or choose these preferences rationally? Formation of moral values is prized by the theory of moral autonomy because the process of rational consideration raises choice of moral values above blind conformity to desire. To the degree that we can consciously choose what our values are on the basis of good reasons, humans are something new in the world that animals are not, or are with vanishingly small frequency. We have the power to choose not just our means, but also our ends. To the degree, however, that these ends or values are themselves just the product of unreflective desire or blind conformity, their newness and importance diminishes. Levels of reflective self-awareness are but epicycles, unless at some point they lead beyond desire to impartial reason. The Copernican revolution envisioned by the theory of moral autonomy is endangered to the degree that moral life becomes only a complicated variation on animal social life.

This is where we leave the theory: with a research agenda. If moral life is simply good actions, or even good actions with good intentions, then non-human animals can claim at least a share of it alongside people. If moral life requires moral autonomy, then it is unclear to what degree either humans or animals can lay claim to

it. From the human side, we need to pay closer attention to the phenomenology of moral choice, specifically the choice of our moral values. We have given reasons for questioning the extent to which most people most of the time can be said to choose their moral commitments on the basis of rational consideration. This is, however, a tentative suggestion in need of philosophical study. On the animal side, it is an empirical question whether animals ever cross the threshold to reflective choice of general and impartial standards of action. After 2500 years of moral philosophy even basic questions remain unanswered.

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