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Moral Language Regulation

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Introduction

In *The Descent of Man*, Charles Darwin identified a moral sense as the cornerstone of what it is to be human. He suggested that, to a social species, the evolution of an ethical brain was essential. This is because no interdependent tribe could succeed if immoral acts, like murder, were to become commonplace. Although the author goes on to claim differences in morality between humans and other animals are a matter of degrees, crucially he suggests only the former can regret actions. Moreover, only they can categorize them in terms of rightness or wrongness. Methods of policing have been observed in other species such as chimpanzees. Yet it seems only humans are able to construct formal moral frameworks, like legal systems, to regulate aspects of life that are not directly linked to reproductive fitness (e.g., obscenity, blasphemy, and copyright legislation). This exception to the general rule within nature suggests that moral systems are a recent adaptation.

Another trait considered distinctly human is the capacity for language. Other animals harbor elaborate communication systems enabling them to alert peers to environmental features, and in some instances, there is even evidence of them attaching distinct sounds to particular targets. For example, vervet monkeys have been found to produce acoustically different alarm calls in the presence of different predators (Seafarth et al. 1980). Yet human language is thought to be remarkable because of its flexibility, i.e., the ability to combine symbols into understandable structures (Hauser et al. 2002). Humans appear to have been uniquely endowed with the recursive computational mechanisms required to create infinite

combinations from a finite set of elements. It is this combinatorial property that has led to the emergence of these two capacities to be considered in parallel.

A Link Between Language and Morality

In addition to the recursive properties of language allowing humans to generate speech creatively, Poulshock (2006) reasons that they let humans moralize creatively. In as much as speakers can use terms to name an unlimited amount of concepts, the author argues they can also discuss them or catalogue them in terms of being positive or negative. People can moralize about cultural etiquette, or important contemporary concerns (e.g., current affairs or the use/abuse of modern technology), along with relatively inconsequential topics (e.g., if a comedian has gone too far). They can also moralize about events that are temporally displaced (e.g., dwelling on past events or considering future ones) or the consequences of things we may never do (e.g., “if I were to do X then Y will be the result”). What’s more, the author points out that speakers can use language to meta-moralize about the nature of morality itself and whether or not it is actually moral to moralize.

Even if nonspeaking animals were to have the cognitive apparatus required for constant reflection, Poulshock argues it is unlikely they would be able to share or enforce morality. For instance, he asks, how would a clan with limited linguistic resources share nuanced ethical judgments beyond approach and avoidance behavior (e.g., violence is acceptable when used for self-defense)? In the absence of language, or paralinguistic features, the author claims it would not be possible to share these values or communicate an intricate social etiquette for others to abide by. Instead, the direct transference of beliefs and values is most easily achieved through oral or written means. Principles can then be supported by consensually agreed ethical frameworks which are shared within a given population.

Thus Poulshock hypothesizes the uniquely human property of language paved the way for the equally unique property of morality to be shared culturally or intergenerationally. Furthermore, he writes, a recursive communication system that is open to temporally and

spatially displaced events can enforce moral behavior with linguistically encoded promises, threats, rewards, or punishments. The result is a socially constructed code which is capable of informing conduct, as well as providing individuals a criterion to evaluate others. On a microlevel, the ease of transmission means communities can establish their own unique information-sharing networks. Members can then be selectively raised or socialized to a specific moral tradition. The author cites the example of religious organizations promoting moral precepts through the use of language. For instance, the Deuteronomic tradition teaches followers to memorize commandments, verbally impart them to others, proselytize with nonbelievers, and record their values in the form of memes (e.g., paintings or signs). Accordingly, our language instinct has historically been treated as critical to the internalization and spread of a moral code.

Ergo Poulshock claims the evolution of language has allowed for members of a community to widen their influence to guide or manipulate the behavior of peers. Linguistically enabled morality lets individuals or groups benefit from cohesion and cooperation through cost-efficient means. It also eases the rapid communal good or bad marking of members, depending on their compliance. The second reason prompts another possible factor in the relationship between language and morality: formal or informal legal structures.

Knight (2008) studies this proposition in detail, theorizing language and the rule of law developed in tandem. Each is thought to stem from adaptations designed to enforce cooperation between strangers. So instead of viewing morality as a product of language, he contends the two capacities are synonymous in evolutionary history. To illustrate this notion, he juxtaposes the lack of shared morality in primate societies, where conflict is physically resolved, with the self-governing egalitarianism of hunter-gatherer ones. The difference, he suggests, is that the latter are not bound to the same laws of signal operation that are limited to acts of the body. Instead, the advent of language has enabled them to signal in the abstract. This means that humans can utilize institutional beliefs (i.e., protocols) so that important behaviors such as sexual activity and competition can be regulated without conflict. To paraphrase Goodall (1982), this difference may be why human societies exhibit law with order,

whereas chimp societies are run by order without law. The role of language in determining these conventions empowers human societies to transcend primate politics, where the key arbiter is dominance.

Boyd and Richardson (2009) also support the coevolution of language and moral structures. They argue that humanity's linguistically determined ability to set social norms is what led to cultural evolution, resulting in the beginning of distinct populations. Within each given group, the extent that conventional behaviors are adopted is influenced by the three Rs, i.e., the impact on reputation, the likelihood of reciprocation, and the possibility of retribution, if they go ignored. In a civilization comprised of small clans, the authors deduce that group-level cooperation would predict the attainment and survival of different communities. They argue that within social systems, where morality is reinforced by punishment or reward, reproductive success is determined by the extent an individual fits in with their community. Accordingly, mating competition would favor those with phenotypes supporting pro-social vs anti-social behavior.

Zlatev (2014) adds that an adaptation allowing individuals to be continuously tracked is core to this paradigm. Hence a communication system based upon displacement is highly advantageous for enabling others to compare opinions on fellow group members. Reputations can be systematically enhanced or reduced based upon the extent to which they deviate from ideals. He concludes that this led to the evolution of traits promoting pro-social behavior, like shame. This hypothesis is akin to Dunbar's (2004) gossip model, which claims one functional role of language is being able to identify individuals who reap benefits from a society they do not contribute to. In his framework, the benefits of being able to identify and share information about "free riders" are twofold. Firstly, speakers may be able to protect other group members from exploitation. Secondly, the spread of such a trait could deter those that wish to exploit them.

As well as the contrivance and enforcement of morals, Poulshock (2006) asserts another adaptive role for language is offering people a means to assess their behavior from its impact on others. Moreover, it lets group members make others privy to their own mental states. This bi-directional mind reading grants greater insight of moral relations than any closed communication system ever could. Similarly, Zlatev (2014) asserts that language and morality both emerged in tandem with capacities to share affective, perceptual, or reflective experiences, including joint attention and empathy. In addition, when met with convoluted circumstances, which can be expected in even the smallest communities, Poulshock (2006) argues oral and written exchanges support discussion and reconciliation. This is particularly common when an understanding of tensions requires third-level intentionality, i.e., knowing someone else who knows someone else who knows something (Dunbar 2004). Language can also be useful in instances where a trusted mediator can communicate an apology or peace offering on another's behalf: another scenario a closed system could not assist.

Moral Development

One way of testing a functional link between language and morality is to study the ontogeny of each trait. If a utility of language is the circulation of communal values, then both ought to emerge and develop simultaneously. However, research into this potential relationship is constrained by the need for subjects to possess the language skills necessary to describe their moral considerations. Consequently, young children are generally not suitable for testing. This means the modest literature has tended towards theoretical discussions.

Poulshock (2006) suggests parallels in acquisition are commonsense, since an appreciation of complex issues requires the vocabulary to comprehend and discuss them. He cites examples of stunted language and moral development in neglected children, implying a critical period for both that may be owed to crossover modules. Further indirect evidence of a functional link is shown by linguistic analysis from Snow (1990), who analyzed transcripts of 51 h of caregiver and child interactions. At two and a half, she found children spent the most time talking about bad behavior, whereas at three and a half, it was more good behavior. Finally, at four and a half, she noticed they became focused on "should" or "should not" discussions.

Based on this, Snow describes the ontogeny of moral sense as following a negotiation of the meaning of words and acts, predicting a correlation between linguistic and moral sophistication. Likewise, Hanfling (2003) advocates a connection, asserting that as children are introduced to concepts (e.g., bullying), they are also taught about their community's judgments of them (i.e., it is wrong).

Combined, these studies present a consistent picture of language providing a means for parents or guardians to introduce and contextualize specific actions. Children's moral maturation is then, by necessity, led by language. Its recursive and displaced properties are therefore critical to reinforcing schemas in instances when a behavior does not proceed the lesson. This does not necessarily suggest infants do not possess an innate sense of wrongness. Though it does suggest that the way concepts are first introduced to them goes some way toward determining how they are later regarded.

Conclusion

Humans are not only special in their capacity for language but also in their ability to design, internalize, and enforce communal values. The key suggestion from the work cited above is that societies based on the collective codification of morality can only be achieved with a flexible means of expression. Unlike their closest evolutionary cousins, people can reason and reconcile with each other in the abstract and establish institutions plus communal values. In particular, the recursive aspect of language and the option to converse over events and people displaced in time and space are thought to play essential parts in regulating morality. A related avenue not touched here is the assumption that, in addition to facilitating moral codes, language facilitates immorality by making deception easier with the option to lie. Although as Poulshock (2006) deliberates, this does not contradict its role in enabling, extending, and maintaining morality.

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