

Our lives are filled with activities that raise moral questions—geopolitics, socioeconomics, ecological change, discrimination, crime, and the many conflicts that arise through everyday interaction. These situations rarely fail to excite an internal motivation to distinguish right from wrong. David Hume stated, “Morality is a subject that interests us above all others: We fancy the peace of society to be at stake in every decision concerning it.”<sup>i</sup>

In the centuries that have passed since early modern philosophers like David Hume began to provide insight into our moral motivations, we have learned that these motivations were not necessarily created through any coherent design but most likely evolved through the trial and error of evolution over millions of years into an overlapping miscellany of potentially conflicting instincts.

Each new instinct and ability related to personal interaction may have evolved because it provided some evolutionary advantage. We may share a motivation for self-interest with many relatives of our ancient past. The ability to identify with other members of a group, to empathize, or motivations for impartiality and rationality, may have evolved among fewer creatures at various later times.

Our moral responses to judge or to act can be so intense that they can feel much like obligations. As if something is demanding we respond in a certain way. There is no obligation derived from any prior commitment or some external set of rules we should conform to but a subjective response that has the same motivational effect as an obligation. John Stuart Mill described the basis of morality as an instinctive reaction, “a subjective feeling in our own minds.”<sup>ii</sup>

Instinctive moral reactions can include self-interest, group interest, tribalism, retribution, impartiality, rationalism, and empathy. The strength of these reactions can make them difficult to

ignore. Our subjective responses can be so powerful that we can find it difficult to accept that others may have responses different from our own. Everyone might not feel the same reactions or to the same degree. Responses that we strongly feel represent an appropriate judgment or course of action can lead us into conflict and negative consequences.

If we were to see one individual harming another for no apparent reason, we may feel a sense of indignation. If the person being harmed were a member of our family, we may feel motivated to seek retribution. If we find that the action was itself motivated by a harmful action of our family member, we may feel conflicted and remorseful. We may be motivated to seek a peaceful resolution and some sort of agreement to avoid further hostilities.

Human social motivations reflect the ways we have evolved to help us successfully interact. This is not the only way we could have evolved. The chimpanzees, our closest living relatives, consist of two distinct species that have developed contrasting instincts regarding social interaction. The more peaceful bonobos commonly say hello by having sex while the more tribal and aggressive common chimpanzees occasionally eat each other's children. There is not necessarily a right way.

Evolved characteristics that enabled us to survive and eventually to thrive include a capacity to think abstractly about various future possibilities. Endowed with an extensive curiosity and an interest in experimentation, we acquired the ability to develop strategies to effectively achieve goals. Social changes also likely played an important role. Enhanced empathy and less aggression allowed humans, dwindling in number and struggling to survive, to develop collaborative relationships beyond tribal groups.

Our capacities for rational planning and empathy have helped us avoid extinction in our relatively recent past, perhaps within the last one or two hundred thousand years. Our ability to

wage devastating wars and disrupt the planet's climate and ecosystems questions whether they will provide us with any more than a brief reprieve. Our motivation to collaborate and develop tools and technology has given us great power. But this, when combined with some of our other enduring instincts, can have catastrophic results. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau stated,

Hence arose the National Wars, Battles, murders, and reprisals which make Nature tremble and shock reason, and all those horrible prejudices which rank the honor of shedding human blood among the virtues. The most decent men learned to consider it one of their duties to murder their fellows; at length men were seen to massacre each other by the thousands without knowing why.<sup>iii</sup>

### **A Moral Hierarchy**

The progressive evolution of our moral motivations over millions of years is echoed in each individual. Motivational theorists, such as Abraham Maslow and Clayton Alderfer, have explained the fulfillment of our individual potential in terms of a hierarchy of needs. They observe that obtaining what an individual needs to survive tends to dominate their motivations until these needs are satisfied. The moral implication is that self-interest is likely to trump other moral motivations when an individual is focused on survival.

Satisfying survival needs allows group-oriented needs to become more prominent. This includes needs for social relationships and esteem. Our need to develop relationships with family, friends, and other variously defined groups has been vital to us as a species deeply reliant on collaboration for survival. Our personal identities are often defined in terms of group commonalities such as demographic characteristics or religious or political affiliations. We so

easily develop strong group identities based on perceptions of shared attributes that they are often based on arbitrary characteristics or mere social constructs such as nationality or race.

Group cohesiveness can be reinforced by an instinct to identify and follow a perceived group leader. This allows a group to effectively mobilize and work as a team. Individuals will often be disposed to follow the instructions of a leader as long as they see this as benefitting the group or benefitting themselves. They commonly align their views to some extent with those of a leader or assume that the leader's views align with their own.

An individual's tendency to perceive themselves as part of a group may be heightened by a need to feel a sense of belonging and esteem and by tribalism. They may feel a sense of self-esteem by viewing themselves as superior or feel a sense of mutual esteem by seeing each other as superior, relative to individuals outside their group. Distinctions are reinforced by a propensity to exaggerate group differences. Overestimating the negative characteristics of those outside our perceived group can enable us to treat them cruelly and even kill them without remorse.

Conversely, we have an instinct to act impartially, or justly, rather than according to self-interest or group interest. Individuals can be intensely averse to perceived injustice, either an injustice perpetrated against themselves or against someone else, even someone with whom they share no apparent connection. As survival needs and group needs are satisfied, an individual can become more influenced by impartiality, as well as by rationality, and empathy. Realizing that our beliefs are not logical can result in a powerful motivation to align our thoughts and actions with reason, even when this conflicts with our other instincts. Empathy enables us to experience and be motivated by others' emotions. Prioritizing reason or empathizing with others allows us to be less partial to self-interest or group interest.

Being primarily influenced by higher-level instincts such as impartiality, rationalism, and empathy is generally the exception in society. Although ascendance through the motivational hierarchy may be associated with greater happiness and fulfillment, Maslow observed that people tend to spend most of their time focused on motivations associated with self-interest or group interest. There is no obligation for individuals to ascend this hierarchy, and there is no assurance that anyone, even if they want to, can consistently do so. Throughout their lives, everyone is consistently vulnerable to unsatisfied lower-level needs.

A hierarchy of moral motivations is not a sequential progression of mutually exclusive stages. We can be simultaneously motivated to act according to a combination of self-interest, group interest, or impartiality. Even when we intend to follow one, we may be imperceptibly influenced by the others. It is common for these interests to conflict, and it is generally not possible to see matters impartially once we know how the alternatives might affect our own interests or those of a group with whom we identify. Recognizing this, we turn to individuals who have no conflict of interest if we wish to satisfy ourselves that a decision will be impartial. This is one example of how, despite our limitations, we have the ability to successfully navigate potential internal and interpersonal conflicts.

### **Mutual Agreement**

It is a relatively complex ability to understand that others also have motivations and that their decisions can be influenced by our own actions. This ability has significant advantages for cooperative behavior, as it facilitates agreements between individuals or groups. When we developed this ability may predate our ability to speak or write. Language is estimated to have developed perhaps only within the last tens of thousands of years of human history, and writing much more recently. Successful social interactions among our ancestors through tacit agreements

may predate either ability, potentially by millions of years. We even appear to have evolved a distinct motivation to follow through on agreements and to feel a sense of betrayal if others do not. Based on the complex social interactions of other animals and our own interactions with them, it is apparent that they, too, may have the ability to form tacit agreements.

We continually use our ability to form tacit agreements in our modern, highly social society, often without thinking about it. To keep a busy shopping market from degenerating into chaotic brawling and looting, for example, tacit agreements are needed to navigate crowds, determine customer priority, and effectively and efficiently complete transactions. It is convenient not to have to document or even express every time we have some form of mutual agreement in our daily interaction.

Groups of any number can form agreements for their common purposes, which may or may not be formalized by words or written documents. We often formalize agreements when they are complex, involve many people, or have serious repercussions if broken. Written documents that govern actions are common, for example, for business transactions or for organizations of individuals formed to achieve a specific purpose.

## **Governance**

Governance is often about rules of engagement between individuals where there has not been an agreement. This includes unwritten customs and etiquette as well as laws and constitutions. Those rules that are formalized in laws and constitutions are more tangible but, in reality, no more binding. In fact, they generally consist in large part of rules that most individuals have never agreed to. Individuals might take exception to customs, conventions, or laws and not follow them—for example, if they see them as unjust.

Although there is no actual obligation to follow constitutions, laws, customs, or social conventions, we may have a feeling of obligation, or we might be forced, to adhere to a multitude of rules. Jean-Jacques Rousseau proclaimed, “Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.”<sup>iv</sup>

These chains, our presumed obligations, are of our own making. That people conform to rules does not imply that they agree with them, particularly if they are in some way coerced to do so. Rousseau explained, “To yield to force is an act of necessity, not of will—at the most, an act of prudence.”<sup>v</sup>

Coercion can take the form not only of legal consequences but also of more subtle forms of influence. John Stuart Mill observed,

The disposition of mankind, whether as rulers or as fellow-citizens, to impose their own opinions and inclinations as a rule of conduct on others, is so energetically supported by some of the best and by some of the worst feelings incident to human nature, that it is hardly ever kept under restraint by anything but want of power.<sup>vi</sup>

The motivation to follow the rules of a group may be derived not only from various forms of coercion but also from a practical preference to delegate most decision-making to others or because individuals may see the value in having rules and peaceful, cooperative resolution to differences. Individuals may see a tentative adherence to rules as a viable tacit agreement as long as they are tolerable and there is a reasonable possibility to change them. Thus, it is the potential for rules to be changed that makes governance legitimate. The potential to evolve and improve enables various forms of governance to have continuing relevance to a diverse and changing populace with evolving views.

Democratic governance may be seen as a form of tentative acceptance of rules. Still, if they are to gain even tentative acceptance, rules arrived at democratically must not be intolerably detrimental to the interests of individuals or groups, and those disadvantaged by rules must be able to see a reasonable possibility to change them. Support by the majority does not legitimize rules. Mill stated,

If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind.<sup>vii</sup>

All rules might best be thought of as never more than a work in progress. The strength of our moral instincts may tend to persuade us of the certainty of particular rules of conduct. But all that we believe we know about interpersonal conduct must be continually open to question lest we deprive ourselves of any truth we are capable of discovering. Just as in the physical sciences, continual examination is how we validate our beliefs.

Mill wrote at a time when it was widely thought that there was little left to be discovered in the physical sciences. Isaac Newton's *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* had revealed a few simple laws that provided an explanation for why all objects in the universe move through space the way they do, from an apple falling from a tree to the planets orbiting the sun. Over the following two centuries, upon this foundation, explanations with mathematical precision were developed for virtually all observable phenomena: heat, light, waves, magnetism, electricity—providing what Mill's contemporaries believed to be an exemplary demonstration of our ability to discover absolute truth.



By the beginning of the twentieth century, all mankind minus one were of the opinion that Newton's principles were an accurate depiction of the universe. That one, Albert Einstein, would eventually upend our very understanding of space and time with his theory of relativity. Decades before this revolution, however, when Newton's ideas were still commonly seen as irrefutable, Mill presciently expounded on the importance of continual questioning and our ability to learn from those with whom we disagree:

If even the Newtonian philosophy were not permitted to be questioned, mankind could not feel as complete assurance of its truth as they now do. The beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded.<sup>viii</sup>

The fatal tendency of mankind to leave off thinking about a thing when it is no longer doubtful is the cause of half their errors.<sup>ix</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 293.

<sup>ii</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism: The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Volume X (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 229.

<sup>iii</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality: The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, Volume 3 (Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), 55.

<sup>iv</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses* (Darlington, UK: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1966), 3.

<sup>v</sup> Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Discourses*, 6.

<sup>vi</sup> John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty: The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Volume XVIII (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 227.

<sup>vii</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 229.

<sup>viii</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 232.

<sup>ix</sup> Mill, *On Liberty*, 250.