

Deism Today

Fall 2010

Deist Alliance Quarterly Newsletter



The Natural Origins of Morality

by Joel Axenroth

Be sure to read Brandon Norgaard's response to Joel's essay beginning on page 2.



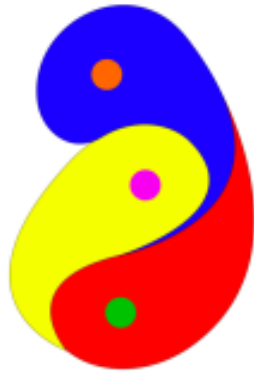
Welcome to the latest issue of Deism Today, the quarterly newsletter of the Deist Alliance. Here you will find authors familiar and new. Contact us at the Positive Deism discussion board.

This issue is devoted to a discussion of ethics as related to Deism.

Contents

- p. 1. - The Natural Origins of Morality
- p. 2 - The Transcendental Aspect of Morality
- p. 6 - Ethics - What Does God Say?
- p. 8 - Ethics, Deism, and Personal Responsibility
- p. 9 - True Situational Ethics
- p.12 - Credits, etc.

continued on page four...



The Transcendental Aspect of Morality – A response to Joel Axenroth by Brandon Norgaard

Joel Axenroth has put forth a very reasonable theory for the origins of morality in which personal moral judgments and the moral codes of groups and societies ultimately derive from the instincts that our species has adopted through evolution. According to this theory, which is known as evolutionary moral realism, the reason that species such as humans evolved moral instincts is because they encourage greater social cohesion among groups, which in turn leads to a higher chance of survival for such groups and for the species as a whole. While I largely agree with evolutionary moral realism, and I believe that moral instincts are an important component of moral judgments and moral codes, I also believe that there is a separate component of morality that transcends instincts and derives instead from the

qualitative nature of personal experience.

Evolutionary moral realism is a good theory scientifically, and it also works well within the sphere of Deism. This theory is helpful in the study of sociology, because the behavior of large groups of people can actually be quite predictable when one has a deep understanding of human instincts. What is most relevant to this newsletter is that evolutionary moral realism is helpful as an alternative to the divine command ethics of the revealed religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in which morality is assumed to derive from holy scriptures and/or the word of God. Because this theory is an alternative to divine command ethics, evolutionary moral realism is a good theory in the Deist spirit.

Now, a Deist who believes that God created the laws of nature would probably conclude that God is indirectly responsible for moral instincts because these seem to be determined by the laws of nature. The relation that God has to morality within evolutionary moral realism differs quite remarkably from the idea that God handed down moral commandments for us all to follow.

Despite the benefits of the theory of evolutionary moral realism to science and to Deism, I do not believe that our moral instinct is the only factor that make actions feel innately right or wrong. I acknowledge that many things we do in life and many of the choices we make are ultimately derived from our instincts, and that this is the case more often than we are consciously aware of. Our instincts do affect our daily lives in subtle ways, but some of our choices in life simply come from personal choices that do not derive from instincts.



Of course evolutionary moral realism does not claim that morality comes solely from our own personal moral instincts; it comes also from the moral norms given to us by our parents and friends and from the society that we live in. Evolutionary moral realism does, however, say that such moral norms do ultimately derive from moral instincts. It could be that some cultural norms originated generations ago and are still followed today, but these are thought to have been originally created by people who were driven by their moral instincts, which in turn were adopted by the ancestors of such people to provide better evolutionary fitness.

Where I differ from this theory is that I believe that people have always had personal moral choices and that the choices they made were not entirely determined by their instinct. Instead, I believe that people have an experience of good and evil that transcends their instincts. This is an experience that is qualitatively distinct from the mechanical workings of the brain. Each of us has such experiences all the time, and we call the ones that we find preferable “good” or some similar word, and the ones that are not preferable to us we call “evil” or something comparable. Our ability to recognize the effects that certain actions have on other people's experience, be they good or evil, is an essential component of what allows us to form moral judgments.

Moral instincts, which we have adopted as a species through evolution, play an important part in our moral judgments, but they are not the most important determining factors. Our positive and negative experiences, extended in our minds to hypothetically apply to others, are more important because it is

through such experiences that we can form individualized value judgments and moral choices. We all have the free choice to either empathize with others and to act in a way that will likely result in others having more positive experiences, or we can, on the other hand, choose to act in our own self-interest at the expense of others.

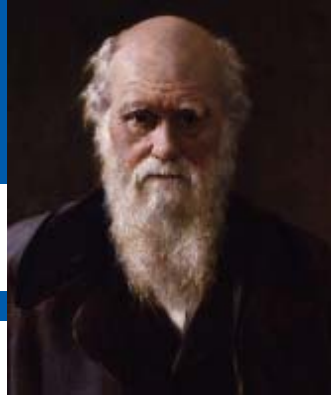
Our moral instincts only go so far in guiding us in our moral judgments. Many of our moral choices are our own. Biology only goes so far in describing and predicting human behavior on a personal level. Much of our behavior derives from our personal experience, which as I see it transcends biology. I do acknowledge that our experience is to a certain extent determined by the workings of our brains, but the actual experience itself is not biological, but transcendental.

I believe that the moral norms of the society in which we live were in large part derived from the personalized moral judgments of those who preceded us and laid down these rules. Of course these people's moral instincts did play an important part of their judgments in creating these systems of

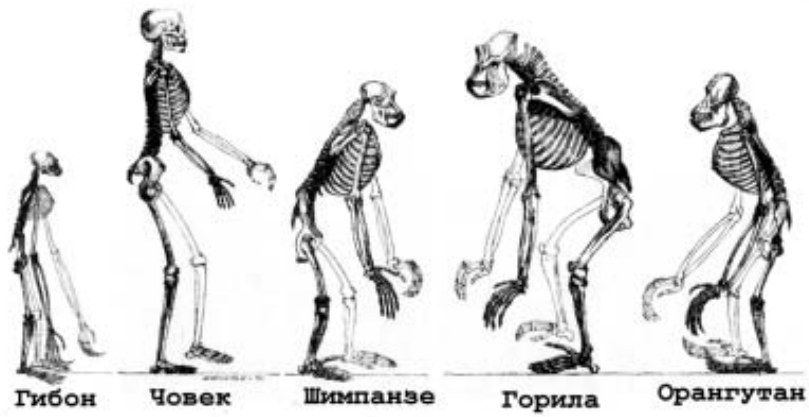
continued on page six...

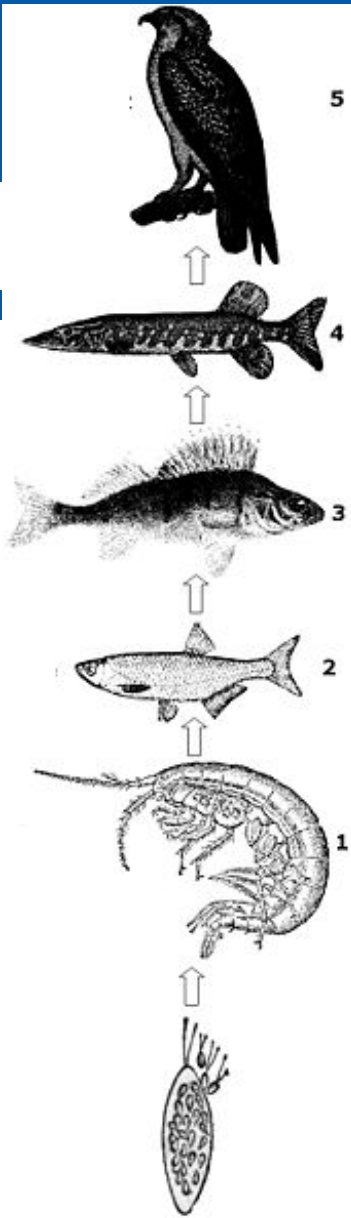


Fig. 41.—Chimpanzee (*Triglophus niger*).



...continued from page one





Ethics - What Does God Say? by Peter Hilbig

...continued from page three

morality, but this was not the most significant factor. The most important factor of all moral judgments is one's personal experience of right and wrong as applied to others and how one chooses to act in the moment.

continued on page seven...





Ethics, Deism, and Personal Responsibility

by Dave Gaddis

Ethics are principles of right and wrong that govern a person's behavior. Western society is founded on Judeo-Christian ethics, the underpinnings of which began with the original Covenant, evolved through prophets and the Ten Commandments, and culminated with the teachings of Jesus Christ. It seems like the majority of people are very comfortable being told what is right and wrong. When people adopt Deism they discover rapidly that Deism says absolutely nothing about ethics, at least not directly.

From Unified Deism, we know that Deism is simply belief that God exists based on reflective reason, personal experience, and observation of nature. How liberating! How terrifying! There are no Deist Popes telling you what you can and cannot do. Perhaps for the first time, new Deists are required to determine what is right and wrong for themselves. This is an incredibly daunting task for most Deists and it is easy to see why so many simply revert back to their Judeo-Christian conditioning. There is no problem with that choice, so long as the positions held by new Deists are based on their own judgment. Reflective reason and fellowship are two key tools that can help new Deists. If Deism itself makes no ethical claims, and ethics are simply up to individuals, what good is Deism in the conduct of our daily lives? To answer this question, there are two traits of Deists, explained in the Deist Flow, which can help: altruistic and courageous.

Across 13.7 BILLION years, only ONE distinct chain of

events, only ONE family line from the first human coupling till your conception could have resulted in you – JUST YOU! That alone makes you incredibly special and unique in all the cosmos. There is a catch, though. EVERYBODY else overcame the same odds to come into existence, and that is why Deists value and respect human beings so deeply. We reflected this in the Principles of Unified Deism by stating: “We believe in the intrinsic value of life and advocate honesty, prudence, compassion, and justice in our dealings with one another.” This is not a dogmatic commandment, but a perspective.

Deist altruism is more nuanced than the common definition of unselfish concern for the welfare of others. It captures selflessness as well as personal responsibility. While deeply empathetic and compassionate, Deist charity also demands that, whenever possible, others assist in their own salvation. Deist altruism recognizes the intrinsic value of life, striving to protect it in all its forms.

Courageousness in Deism is rooted in personal choice and responsibility. Deists realize they have to answer life's big questions



True Situational Ethics

The only ethics that actually exist

by Chuck Clendenen

for themselves. This is why fellowship in Deism is so important. We can learn so much from each other. Deists also understand that they are ultimately responsible for their own actions and choices. There is no get out of jail free card or divine forgiveness or Hail Mary's, we are the sum of our choices and actions. Imagine how much better the world would be if all people were courageous enough to think for themselves, make up their own minds, and take responsibility for their actions.

Neither prophets nor holy books dictate ethics to Deists. Altruism and courage bolster Deist ethics, but they rise by our choice. May the light of reasoned spirituality guide you.



I would like to begin this discussion of ethics by asking the reader a question. What is grammar? Don't cheat and read ahead! Grammar is a set of rules that explain how a language works, right? You studied English grammar (or the grammar of your native language) in primary school. Grammar explains how a language is structured, how to put together proper sentences with words in the correct tense, number, case, etc. Right? How many exceptions to the rules of grammar do you find in your native language? How good are the rules? Have you studied a foreign language? How hard was the grammar? Did the grammar rules have exceptions? How many verbs are "irregular" in the grammar of your native language? How many irregular verbs did you encounter in any foreign grammar you studied? What the heck does all this have to do with ethics?

Which came first, language or grammar? That is easy. Language, of course, came first. Which grammars were created first in the West? Greek was first, and Latin was next. Later grammars were built on the models of the first Greek and Latin grammars, and later grammarians forced other languages to fit into those Greek and Latin grammars. This has led to serious problems in the teaching of language, English in particular. English is not a grammatical language in the same sense that Greek and Latin are grammatical. In grammatical languages words are inflected, i.e. the form of the word changes, usually the ending, to tell the listener what role the word plays in the

continued on page ten...

nine



sentence. In English, the grammar is not very important. It is the word order (the syntax) that is important. Most English speakers are terrible at grammar, but they can tell you instantly whether or not the word order sounds right. Grammars are artificial constructs devised to explain how language is actually used. Grammars are full of exceptions.

Which came first, the need for moral social behavior or formal systems of ethics? Obviously we have had to learn how to get along with other people as long as we have lived together in groups or societies. Moral codes or ethical systems are artificial constructs that were devised later in our history to explain and guide human social behavior. Systems of ethics vary widely, since each represents the cultural norms of the society in which it developed. Right and wrong behaviors are right or wrong for the culture in which the ethical systems originated. What is right in India is not the same as what is right in Turkey or Polynesia or the United States or Kenya. Right or wrong also varies over time. What was moral in Victorian England is very different from what is right in 21st century England.

Rules of behavior, moral codes and systems of behavior are made up of broad generalizations, just as rules of grammar are, and they have just as many exceptions. We do not consult some sort of grammar book in our heads when we speak, and we don't consult some set of ethical rules in our heads when we act. We say what sounds right, and we act in ways that feel right. We have to stop and apply some thought, and sometimes some research, when it comes to a fine point of grammar or word usage when we are writing. And even

then, sometimes we will find experts who disagree on what is correct usage. We sometimes find ourselves in the same predicament when trying to decide on a moral or ethical course of action. Just as it is difficult to decide which turn of phrase sounds better, it can be extremely difficult to decide on the right, just, or moral choice. In the case of word choice, the worst that can happen is that we may confuse our audience. A wrong moral choice can be catastrophic and life-altering.

Opting whether to split an infinitive or not is a trivial choice. Deciding whether to have an abortion or give a child up for adoption will have a life-changing impact on several people. And here is where my clever analogy starts to break down. Where there may be similarities in the methodology of making grammatical and ethical decisions, the gravity of our ethical choices can be enormous.

You make hundreds of grammatical decisions every day without thinking about them. Your speech patterns are ingrained and automatic. You make scores of ethical decisions every day, and you agonize over very few of them. In both cases, you act viscerally. You go



with what sounds right or feels right. So, can you change your personal code of ethics? Certainly you can, but it takes effort. You have to first consciously apply the rules of your new moral system when making ethical choices, and then you must keep applying these rules consistently over a significant period of time until your choices become automatic. And you will still find yourself falling back on old ways occasionally, especially when you encounter situations where you do not know specifically how the new rules apply.

As we have become Deists many of us have had to shift to a new paradigm by making a conscious decision to change many of our behaviors. We no longer follow old patterns unquestioningly. We think things through, and we decide whether what we were taught originally about proper behavior still fits us. Developing new habits takes real effort if we are to make these new behaviors truly our own. We must develop new patterns and repeat them time and again until they become automatic. This is the only way we can genuinely recreate ourselves as Deists. Whatever form our moral code takes, it never covers every situation. We act viscerally, and if we are forced to deliberate over a moral dilemma, our written

codes often fall short and cannot provide the detailed guidance we need. We must make the right decision in any given situation, and even if we know the rules, we don't always choose to follow the rules too rigidly. The difference between having a strict moral code and devising your own is not really so great after all.





Your newsletter needs YOU!

The Deist Alliance is looking for authors. We all certainly express ourselves regularly in the discussion forums available at Deist Alliance sites such as PositiveDeism.com, Panendeism.org, Naturesgod.org, EnlightenedWorldview.com and Unifieddeism.com. The newsletter represents one more way we can spread the word about Deism in a positive fashion.



Deist Alliance

<http://deistalliance.org>

Credits:

Credit for authorship is given for each article.

Unless otherwise noted, from Wikimedia Commons.

p. 2 - YingYangYuan by Samuli Waegelein. CC license from Wikimedia Commons.

Remaining images public domain or copyright One Eyed Jack. Used with permission.

Editor's Note:

The views expressed by the authors of the articles in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the views of all Deists or of all the members of the Deist Alliance.

Credit for authorship is given for each article. Images not credited above provided by the editor or by One Eyed Jack. All other images are in the public domain or released under the Gnu Free Documentation license, most often from Wikimedia Commons or by the editor.

My profound thanks to all who contributed. All credit goes to those who devoted their time and energy to this project. Any mistakes are mine.

--Chuck