

Expanding Horizons of Morality from Man to Animal – A Critical Appraisal

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ABSTRACT

Morality is a strong instinctive force which develops from within and cannot be externally imposed. It leads to the creation of a strong conscience which recognizes actions that are virtuous and generates happiness for the maximum numbers. Man is regarded as the most evolved and superior species and hence a group of scholars argue that humans possess traits of morality while other animals do not. They also claim that men are born with a universal moral grammar which is significantly influenced by environmental variables. However, another group of theorists assert that humans and animals have the same origin which makes the presence of a rudimentary moral sense common to both. They consider morality as a set of largely primitive psychological instincts which are inherited and present in both humans and animals. Researchers and scientists have validated the claim made by the latter group of theorists by stating examples of moral actions and complex emotions which are witnessed by all species. Experiments prove that non humans too possess an innate sense of affection, care, honesty, fairness and guilt. Hence morality can be considered as a vast domain that includes in its ambit all species. It however undergoes minute changes on moving from humans to animals as they have different ways of living and working.

1. Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi once quoted, "Morality is the basis of things and truth is the substance of all morality." This statement generates a series of contradictory thoughts and explicates the subjectivity of the concept. Morality cannot be truthfully defined as everyone has their own understanding of what is right and wrong and how one should live their life. It essentially means rightness or goodness. It indicates conformity to the right conduct. As a branch of psychology, morality refers to distinction between proper and improper behavior. It encompasses the degree to which an action is acceptable by the society. The root word for Moral in Latin is "mos," meaning "customs" wherein customs are not merely habitual ways of acting but are ways approved by a group or society. They are regarded as permitted standards of morality and acting contrary to them brings severe disapproval. Morality is not just any old topic in psychology but close to our conception of the meaning of life. Moral goodness is what gives each of us the sense that we are worthy human beings. Since inception the word is popularly used in colloquial language to depict righteousness. It is not only universal but also all pervasive in every dimension of an individual's existence. This is because it provides a solution to the conflicts that beset the agent and also helps them ensure happiness of the greatest number. Hence morality is an internal force rather than an external drive. The internal sanction lies in the pleasure coming from a good deed and of suffering that should result from a bad action. Morality pricks the conscience of a being if he indulges in a wrong action. Thus morality is not in the physical world like matter or mass but it does exist in some form, there for us to discover.

2. Development of Morality in Humans

Man being a social animal is not a mere spectator of activities going around him. Societal norms, customs, religion and language along with intelligence and instincts maneuver the behavioral pattern of an individual. Evaluation by friends and family enables a human to differentiate between proper and improper behavior. Distinction between right and wrong gradually leads to the development of a natural feeling as to what is desirable and what is detrimental. Hence morality is much larger than the inherited moral sense. The external influential factors play a crucial role in shaping the moral disposition of an individual. From infancy, through childhood to adolescence and adulthood, the way and manner children interact with people in the environment leads to their moral development. According to Opara (2004), environment can be described as anything that is not genetic. It can be physical or psychological. The physical environment deals with the material aspect like homes, schools, community and significant others such as parents, peers, siblings. The psychological environment consists of the feelings, attitudes and expectations of those around the child.

They create the emotional climate or atmosphere within which the child lives and learns. A human child gains an understanding of honesty, respect for oneself and others, tolerance and self-control. He also becomes aware of what conduct leads to social goodness.

2.1 Morality begins at home

Home is the first environment in which a child moves. An infant's likes and dislikes attitude and behavior, expectations and emotions are shaped in early childhood. Children tend to imitate their parents or other elders and end up replicating their good or bad deeds. The first signs of morality in children are glimmerings of empathy and compassion. Babies often try to soothe others who are suffering, by patting and stroking. They also tend to develop a clear distinction between the heroes and villains of the various tales that they hear. According to Kohlberg, young children base their morality on a punishment and obedience orientation. Depending on the actions conveyed by parents, toddlers tend to understand that compliance is the norm. In other words, little kids follow rules because they don't want to get in trouble. A child may not understand that hitting someone is wrong but he knows that he will be punished for doing that. Appropriate positive or negative reinforcement by parents strengthens the morality of a human child. Hence family is the workshop, where for better or for worse children develop an internal pattern of beliefs that shape their character and influence their level of morality.

2.2 Role of Schools in promoting Moral Development

A school is a child's first encounter with the outside world. It enhances a student's moral behavior aiming at providing them with a sense of belonging and a higher level of reasoning. It instills in them virtues and standards and a clearer sense of right and wrong. Schools promote moral literacy by pasting charts on values and reiterating its importance in classrooms, during assemblies, and at other school events. Students also benefit from performing community services, being reminded of important virtues, and practicing good habits. However, the moral development of students does not only depend on explicit character education but also on the maturity and ethical capacities of the people with whom they interact—teachers, coaches, and other adults in the school premises. Students are exquisitely sensitive to the qualities of their teachers. Educators influence students' moral development not only by being good role models but also by monitoring how they interact with the children on a daily basis. Ability to appreciate a student's perspectives, moral energy and idealism, generosity, empathy, impartial behavior and abundance of affection sets a teacher apart from the rest. In schools, children tend to develop a sense of fairness and understand the necessity of rules. They become interested in what's good for the society at large as they develop their abstract reasoning abilities. As per Njoku (2004), the real purpose of education is to change behavior and inculcate the seeds of morality in young minds. Hence the role of educational institutions in a child's moral development can never be undermined.

2.3 Role of Community in Moral Development

Moral development is influenced by the cultural ideology existing in one's community. A community can be regarded as an association of individuals that have a common shared belief, interest, attitude or religion. As per a community only those actions of man are considered to be right and moral which are in accordance with the manners and customary standards of the society. Dutta (1980) described customary standards of behavior as the approved ways of acting, common to a group and handed down from generation to generation. They imply the judgment of a group and are to be followed. The elderly people, priests, various institutions connected with moral and religious teachings and the chiefs of different associations are the main custodians of a community that create the acceptable moral standards. Such morality is common to all men of the community. There is a need for children to learn their community norms to encourage good moral behavior. Several researchers believe that one's moral code develops through social interactions. Regular and repetitive interactions with other members of a community instill in an individual the ability to regulate impulses, behavior, and/or emotions until an appropriate time, place or object. As a member of a community man learns kindness, consideration, generosity and the willingness to help others. Hence, psychologists agree that morality develops with constant interaction between biological inheritance and environmental forces.

3. Universality of Morality and Moral Principles

In the opinion of James Seth, morality is the universal element in human activity and can be well distinguished from the technical and accidental elements. Moral Rules are meant for everybody and must be thought of as a standpoint from which principles are considered as being acted upon by everyone. Morality is not the preserve of an oppressed or privileged class or individual. It is meant to be taught to all members

of the group in such a way that everyone can act in accordance with the norms. Prohibitions of rape and murder, for example, are felt not to be matters of local custom but to be universally warranted. Anthropologist Donald E. Brown collected a list of human universals which includes many moral concepts and emotions such as empathy, fairness, generosity, rights and obligations, proscription of murder, rape and other forms of violence, honesty, shame and taboos. These variables are common to the human race irrespective of caste, creed, sex, religion, nationality or any other basis. Hence men are born with a universal moral grammar that forces them to analyze human action in terms of its moral structure, with significant influence of the environmental variables.

4. Extending morality from humans to animals

Since decades an important debatable subject has been that how far the circle of morality can be extended. It has witnessed a definite expansion and now includes women, as well as people of all races, religions and classes in its ambit. However the inclusion of non humans – animals is still arguable. A group of philosophers opine that distinct and superior traits justify the existence of morality in humans and its absence in non-humans. In contrast to this view, a group of theorists have argued that while humans are different in a variety of ways from other animals, these differences do not provide a logical defense for denying presence of morality in animals. The former group of philosophers is a strong believer of ‘speciesism’ – the view that only humans are moral. They strongly assert that humans have developed moral systems as well as a wide range of other valuable practices which distinguishes them from the rest of the animal kingdom. However, the latter group argues that humans definitely share a genetic make-up and a distinctive physiology but this is unimportant from the moral point of view. An eminent author, Budiansky rightly writes that morality is a set of largely primitive psychological instincts, rather than a sophisticated system of language-based laws and philosophical arguments. This definition is broad enough to encompass much of the animal world. If one reduces everything to its simplest form then one can realize that a man and an animal has the same origin which makes the presence of a rudimentary moral sense common to both. A number of actions such as developing family ties, solving social problems, expressing emotions, starting wars, rejoicing over victory and love for family are common to the Homo sapiens and other species. This is because human behavior and cognition share deep roots with the behavior and cognition of other animals. Hence efforts to establish the uniqueness and superiority of humans are quite futile as morality is an evolved trait common between man and other species.

5. Emotions and Morals – The Commonality of humans and animals

Several researchers and scientists identified a range of actions and emotions with a moral inclination which are common to man and animals. Virginia Morell, a science writer travelled around the world to gather evidences that animals can act and feel much the way humans can. Prolonged study on animals in their natural environment helped scientists to conclude that animals experience the primary emotions – anger, love, jealousy, hatred, care, sadness - as the humans do.

Affection towards family is not unique to only humans. Many species of non-humans develop long lasting kinship ties and display extensive love for their folk especially little ones. Animals such as chimpanzees, baboons, wolves, and elephants maintain extended family units built upon complex individual relationships, for long periods of time. Meerkats in the Kalahari Desert are known to sacrifice their own safety by staying with sick or injured family members so that the fatally ill do not die alone. Most mother animals exhibit acute aggression if there is any attack on their children. Attentive polar bear mothers usually give birth to twin cubs and sticks by them to protect them from adversities. They can even kill predators that approach their young ones.

Similar to humans, animals live in socially complex groups and solve various problems that inevitably arise in such groups. Elephants, chicken, horse, goats move with large numbers of their kind and are well adjusted with their existing social hierarchies. One of the ways that non-human animals negotiate their social environments is by being particularly attentive to the emotional states of others around them. When a conspecific is angry, they either console it or move out of its way depending on the temper levels. Wolves also live in tight knit social groups that are regulated by strict rules. As members of groups animals always extend a helping hand to those in need. A laboratory experiment trained Diana monkeys to insert a token into a slot to obtain food. A male who had grown to be adept at the task was found to be helping the oldest female who had not been able to learn how to insert the token.

Strong evidences support the assertion that animals experience profound grief when their loved ones are in a state of distress. Darwin reported in *‘The Descent of Man’* that *female monkeys of a particular sort die of sorrow at the loss of their young. Animals also refrain to indulge in acts that can inflict pain or harm to their*

fellows. The impulse to avoid harm is found in rhesus monkeys, which go hungry rather than pulling a chain that delivers food to them and a shock to another monkey. Laboratory experiments prove that rodents also prefer to starve than opt for food which would harm others of their kind. Such high levels of morality are absent in the so called 'superior' species – humans – who are a strong believer of the phrase – 'survival of the fittest'.

Discipline and behavioral norms are held in strong regards by the animal kingdom. Researchers suggest that certain animals have a sense of outrage when social codes are violated. Chimpanzees punish their chimps for not adhering to the social rules. A bear effectively disciplines her cub and imparts all the necessary group lessons. Among coyotes, cubs which bite too hard are ostracized by the rest of the group. Similar to humans, animals respect authority which is clearly visible by observing a pack of wolves that reveal how the chief has the last say and also demonstrate fairness.

Hence it is well evident that humans are not the only species to experience complex emotions and have a sense of morality. Animals ranging from mice to chimpanzees are also governed by moral codes of conduct. Non humans all around the world possess an innate sense of affection, care, honesty, fairness and guilt. Thus morality is a vast phenomenon which cannot be exclusively reserved for the homo sapiens it has its presence well felt amongst all species.

6. Animals are also moral creatures - Resolving the Dilemma

A group of researchers are strong holders of the opinion that animals don't know the difference between right and wrong and that they are amoral. An amoral creature has no moral standards, restraints, or principles. They argue that some species do exhibit morality towards others of their kind but are indifferent when animals of other species are in distress or adverse situations. This is because non humans are incapable of imagining the feelings of other animals and empathizing with them. A number of species have also been accused of being immoral i.e. conflicting with generally or traditionally held moral principles. Intentional violation of standards and engaging in unscrupulous behavior is regarded as immoral behavior. Predators are categorized as immoral creatures as they vanquish the smaller and weaker animals that are incapable of fighting back. Wolves who act morally within their own family packs are apparently insensitive towards the feelings of prey animals, and also target a solo weak creature in bigger groups. The Italian philosopher, St Thomas Aquinas taught that animals acted purely on instinct while human beings engaged in rational thought. This meant that the moral status of animals is not developed and comparable to those of humans. However, a large group of researchers still stand for the defense of the animal kingdom and strongly affirm that animals are moral, compassionate and responsible creatures. Instances of man acting immorally are much greater in number than those of animals. Humans among themselves take advantage, bully, cheat, abuse, violate rules and engage in many other selfish practices. Evils such as terrorism, murder, drugs, rape, theft and discrimination are rampant in the human society. Similar to pack family animals, man is also protective and empathetic towards his own family, tribe, ethnic group, race or nationality but tends to forget the distinction between right and wrong when the decision involves outsiders. Hence man cannot be given the status of a morally advanced or superior species.

7. Epilogue

Morality is the judgment to distinguish right from wrong, vision to see the truth, courage to act upon it and integrity to stand by it at any price. It is a vast domain that has witnessed a definite expansion to include all species. It might undergo minute changes on moving from humans to animals as the latter have a different way of living and working. However, this does not confirm the absence of morality in animals.

Ernest Hemingway rightly said about morals, that it is what makes one feel good and experience inner happiness.

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