

EPISODE 43

NATURAL MORAL LAW

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is Episode number 43 of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Now for the past few episodes I have been presenting evidence both supporting and illuminating the understanding that we humans have evolved to be hypersocial animals. And today I will go over one last piece of evidence, a piece which—should you still be doubting the validity of the idea—will, at least in my opinion, offer inarguable proof.

And it all has to do with natural moral law.

Now on several occasions throughout this podcast I have pointed out that in a rather large way they have been lying to you when you have read those accounts about the wonders and the legacy of the Age of Enlightenment. That instead they have actually been telling you about that portion of the Age of Enlightenment which happens to agree with the thoughts of Jeremy Bentham, which were then filtered through the mind of John Stuart Mill. And the prime example which I have given on those several occasions is the plain historical fact that one of the, if not *the*, central consuming subjects in the intellectual debates of the 18th Century was over the existence and the nature of Natural Moral Law.

And this is because, as a result of the incredible progress of the Scientific Revolution, and the discovery of clear and (usually) simple mathematical relationships which underlay the physics of the material world, it also made sense to many thinkers that a similar process of inquiry might well explain the workings of what we could also broadly term the spiritual, psychological and/or moral realm.

And there was a whole spectrum of thought about the answers to this question.

One approach was adopted by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Following in Descartes' footsteps, he believed that, just as in mathematics, pure Reason alone (once one had determined unimpeachable assumptions) was sufficient to come to the proper conclusions about proper morality.

But one did need to be an intellectual giant like Kant to agree with this approach. Many of the so-called 'positive' deists, while believing in an impersonal God which had created a smoothly working Universe but which had then, however, stepped aside, nonetheless agreed that Reason—which had also been created by that impersonal God—was the way forward in resolving our moral dilemmas.

Among mainstream Christian theologians there were two distinct attitudes. Optimistic ones believed that God had instilled in man a keen moral sense to do what is right, but that either society or our own laziness and selfishness had then put up barriers to this. Pessimists on the other hand looked to the Garden of Eden and Original Sin, concluded that we were all hopeless reprobates with little moral compass, and taught that our only salvation lay both in following the rules laid down in Scripture and in the gracious mercy of Jesus.

Then there were those whom we might call 'pre-psychologists', such as Adam Smith and David Hume. These two both recognized our social natures and our need for friendliness and empathy. But in the end they were unsure as to how this had come about, speculating that it was a function of our innate selfishness and self-preservation. Whatever the answer, though, they distinctly rejected the idea of God or Reason as behind it all.

Finally, hedonists such as Voltaire cynically thought that 'morality' was a con job hatched by the Church and/or the State so as to keep all the idiot masses in line while the priests and the aristocrats ran roughshod over them. Still they thought that natural law could be found by examining humanity in its original, pre-civilized state.

Not that these various understandings were necessarily clearly defined schools of thought. Rather the situation was such that a person's understanding of the nature of morality was often an accumulation of ideas from several of these different approaches. The situation was in flux. In other words, just as with Copernicus and Galileo, who did have some good guesses, but who also had some bizarre ideas about the nature of gravity and planetary motion which turned out to be completely off base, so, too, many of these thinkers were stumbling around in the dark with their thoughts. But implicit in all of this was the belief that with the application of logic and the scientific method previous ad hoc attempts by humanity to come up with the right moral code could soon be replaced with a true one that was unencumbered with superstition or haphazard traditions.

But you'll also recall that, of all these 18th Century personalities, Jeremy Bentham in particular didn't believe in Natural Moral Law. In fact, violent rejection of natural law was a central feature of Utilitarianism. Indeed Bentham coined the phrase 'nonsense on stilts' to describe natural moral law.

So that when, in the mid 19th Century, his acolyte John Stuart Mill laid the foundation for secular humanism, liberal democracy, economics, and the modern social sciences, the adoption of this utilitarian belief system meant that the very idea of Natural Moral Law was now actively denied.

With the result being that by the late 20th Century only rare conservative Christian theologians even considered the idea. And were you to bring up the subject of Natural Moral Law in, say, an anthropology classroom, you might well have been literally laughed out of the building.

So now let's go forward to the beginning of the 21st Century.

Paul Bloom is a professor and present day researcher in child psychology at Yale University. In particular what he studies is extremely young child psychology. And he has become known to the world outside of psychology because of several articles and a book which he has written describing research he has conducted that has established what he calls 'the moral life of babies'.

For instance, in one of his experiments a toddler is shown two very short 'plays'. In each one Puppet X is trying to push an object up an incline. In the first instance Puppet A comes along and helps Puppet X in its task. In the second Puppet B comes along and actively interferes with Puppet X. Later Puppets A and B are placed in front of the toddler, and the child is given a treat to give to one of them. Invariably the treat is given to the 'good' helpful puppet. Often the toddler even goes out of their way to physically hit the 'bad' non-cooperative one.

Okay, you may say, that doesn't necessarily prove anything. After all, by the time a child is a toddler their parents have had plenty of time to tell them about right and wrong, good and bad. They might also have picked up unconscious cues from the person doing the experiment on the right way to act.

So what Professor Bloom did was to next try the experiment with one year olds. And once he proved that they reacted in the exact same way he then set about to see what would happen with babies who were only three months old.

Now a three month old baby clearly can't tell you what it is thinking. It can't point. In fact, it is difficult to know if it is even able to process thoughts in any way that is comparable to us. As I will detail in a few episodes from now, by all biological rights a three month old baby is so uncoordinated and unprepared for the outside world that it shouldn't even be able to exist outside of the womb.

But around thirty years ago researchers figured out that a young baby can still look. And that the longer that a baby looks at something the more it approves of or it is surprised by that thing. So,

after adjusting the puppet plays to instead become a video in which humanoid geometric shapes helped or hindered each other, Dr. Bloom re-ran the experiment. And once again the helpers were liked and the hinderers were disliked.

By three month old babies.

I've obviously just given an extremely brief synopsis of the research. But trust me that the experiments have been run repeatedly, with multiple parameters and changes so as to deal with all possible academic criticism. And the results are about as clear cut as behavioral science can ever get. It turns out that morality isn't just a good idea. It turns out that we actually happen to be born this way.

Because remember that the toddlers and babies didn't have any skin in the little games that they were watching. They themselves weren't self-maximizing individuals who were in some way going to personally win or lose by the outcomes of what they saw. Their genes weren't going to be the victors in some biological contest. Rather what happened is that they not only completely empathized with the figure which was helped or hindered, but they sat there and made strong moral judgments about what they considered to be right and wrong.

Starting at the age of three months.

Now around fifty years ago it was taken for granted that, outside of tropisms such as a sunflower following the sun, or imprinted behavior such as that of a newly hatched chick following its mother, all other behavior had to be learned. As I alluded to earlier, how could the placement or expression of a gene (which, remember, just basically codes a protein, which is nothing but a large organic molecule) how could a gene make an organism *think* in a certain way? Or have its brain think *specific* thoughts?

But if, for instance, you take a gorilla which has been completely raised in captivity, and you show it a plush toy in the shape of a crocodile, a shape that it has never seen before, said gorilla will become totally beside itself in fear. Think about that for a moment. How else can you explain such a reaction other than that somehow the gorilla had been *born* with this very particular fear already established in its brain?

So even though it is still pretty difficult to conceptualize how exactly something that seems both somewhat intangible and of a higher level of thought, such as moral beliefs, can be somehow hardwired into our DNA, that does seem to be the case. And once we know this we can perhaps more easily include all of the other evidence and then conclude that now we have overwhelming proof that, rather

than starting out as self-maximizing individuals, we are in actuality born to be social and co-operative. To be hypersocial animals.

For example, in another study individual toddlers are placed in a room with their mothers. Someone then walks in with their arms completely full and tries to open a closet door. At least half the time, without any prompting whatsoever, the toddlers spontaneously get up, go over, and attempt to help out.

Even more interesting is the phenomenon psychologists call the 'equality bias'. When a three year old is asked to distribute treats such as candy between a character described as a doll's 'sister' and one described as a total stranger, the child will still scrupulously give each one half. If a six year old is asked to divide up an odd amount of treats—say, five or seven—to two fictional boys they will ask the experimenter to throw the extra piece away. Even if they are told that neither boy will know that he got less.

As we get older this internal sense of fairness seems to predominate. For instance the Dictator Game is an experiment from the realm of the interface between psychology and economics. In it a certain amount of money (say \$10) is given to a participant. They are then told that they can either a) keep all the money and go away, or b) give some of it to another anonymous participant who will never know whether or not the first participant had been greedy and had kept the money. Both economics and game theory will predict that the 'rational' response is to take the money and walk. Nonetheless most people do voluntarily share some of their money, usually around 40%. (And here's a big surprise: Women tend to give more than men do.)

Again this goes back almost to the womb. When fifteen month old babies are shown puppet shows in which there are even and uneven distribution of resources, their eyes show that they disapprove of the 'unfair' puppets.

Now if you are not aware of all this research, you might well be having trouble getting your head around the idea that Natural Moral Law actually does indeed exist. After all, one of the most pervasive and pernicious results of the Benthamite version of the Age of Enlightenment is the ideological belief that morals, ideas of beauty, etc., are all a function of culture and therefore only relative. In other words, that beauty is literally in the eye of the beholder. And it is probably even harder to get over this belief than it is to accept the idea that somehow morality is chemically coded in some microscopic gene which then expresses itself in the development of a brain, which then...

But, like it or not, the research by not only Bloom, but by many, many others, has pretty much proved the case.

And here are some other of the basic parameters of the universal traits/basic operating system which it has been determined that we arrive on this Earth with:

First off, whether we are born in New Guinea or New York (and assuming that we aren't suffering from mental problems) we all have an understanding of when people are being nice and of when people are being nasty. Of cooperation and of selfishness. We all have a sense of fairness and unfairness. We all have a sense of empathy and of compassion. And we all want to reward the righteous (those who are co-operative, fair, and compassionate) and to punish the wicked (those who aren't).

What's more, everyone on Earth smiles when they are happy and looks frustrated when they are frustrated. Almost all expressions of all emotions are universal. Even conceptions of beauty and ugliness are universal and cross cultural. These basic traits are definitely *not* culturally determined. They are somehow encoded in our genes.

Although note once again that I am also definitely not saying that we don't also arrive on this Earth without a tendency towards selfishness also. This is also the human condition. Because remember that Cambrian Moment paradigm. As a species we are only halfway there. So that when those young children are given the option to keep some of the treats that they are dividing up, they aren't necessarily so fair or generous. When the Dictator Game is tweaked so that participants are nudged to become more selfish, more selfish they will become.

But even if you want to be a total skeptic and argue that when participants share they do so because they are unconsciously fearing that someone is watching, or that they are on some level calculating that it is ultimately in their best interest to appear to be co-operative, you are still tacitly admitting that we do have an innate need to be co-operative. After all, a cat (or any other naturally solitary animal) doesn't suffer any internal torment when it doesn't share its food with others.

So the general trend should be clear: We are genetically predisposed to be communitarian, and we are also genetically predisposed to become annoyed, even angry, when others aren't. What's more, all of this makes perfect evolutionary sense, since of necessity a hypersocial animal would have to instinctively reward those who are co-operative. And it would also have to instinctively seek to punish those who act selfishly against the common good.

(And I should also point out that the fact that moral law arises out of evolutionary needs in no way means that we can't also logically deduce natural moral laws from the basic assumptions of our hypersocial human requirement for co-operation and social harmony. Because in this instance reason and evolution come to the same conclusion.)

Anyway an interesting corollary to all this is that we are also thus genetically predisposed to punish ourselves when we aren't being virtuous. As in guilt. For if we are born with a strong sense of Natural Moral Law, then that image of a white angel on our right shoulder telling us what we *should* do and the black devil on our left shoulder telling us what we *want to* do is not simply a function of culture or religion or any other environmental factor.

Once again, it turns out that we were born that way.

Speaking of religion, though...

Because as I've already mentioned, discussing the question of the existence or non-existence of God is deliberately beyond the scope of this podcast. The same holds true for the question of the validity or reality of the religious experience. Because the whole point of this podcast is to prove my case solely through rationality and science.

But even many atheists have found it difficult to totally dismiss the 'moral teachings' element in religion. For it just so happens that when you ignore the specific particular beliefs of religions, such as whether Krishna existed or whether Jesus performed miracles, and instead you look at the behavioral precepts of all the major world religions you will find a pretty similar list. Honesty. Integrity. Righteousness. Justice. Co-operation. Selflessness. Which not so coincidentally are also behaviors which would seem to be required in order to have a smoothly running hypersociety. And which are also behaviors which seem to dovetail with the Natural Moral Law that we now know that we are born with a propensity towards.

So what's going on? Well, keep remembering that—in terms of this Cambrian Moment's evolutionary sweep—we are only halfway there, as it were. Which is why those babies that have an instinctive need to reward co-operative behavior are also born with a need to punish those who don't co-operate, who aren't empathetic, who aren't fair. Because even in the best of societies and the best of situations, some people simply aren't going to play fair. Some will be like the free riders that we talked about in Episode 27, who will join the Co-op in order to get low prices, but who then don't show up to do any of the work. Still other people will actively lie, cheat, steal, and worse.

So that it would make perfect sense that we would also have a need to elevate the cooperative virtues with the explicit sanctity of Religion. With the imprimatur of God. Not to mention that, rather than merely suggesting good citizenship, the threat of Hell and Damnation might be a more vivid and effective way to keep such people in line.

All of which means that those Enlightenment thinkers who blamed Religion for the existence of Sin, Guilt, and Punishment in fact had it all turned around. In reality, at least in anthropological terms, the existence of Religion is actually a *result of* and a reflection of our inborn Natural Moral Law sense of Sin, Guilt, and Punishment.

Although since we have all been brought up to believe in this secular humanist ideology, to modern ears Punishment sounds so, well, mean. And in the popular mind people who want to punish others are seen as backward. Cruel. Medieval. Judgmental. Even as evil themselves.

On the other hand, think about this: So much of the entertainment that we watch, and thoroughly enjoy—all those television shows, movies, and videos—involves good guys punishing bad guys. And often the more visceral the fantasy punishment the better off we feel. After all, as we have just seen, even the youngest of babies almost instinctively want to punish the 'bad' puppets that don't help others, play fair, etc.

So let's not kid ourselves. For all of our modern sensibilities about how awful and insensitive the whole idea of punishment seems, it is difficult to deny that at the same time the desire to punish seems to be hardwired into our DNA.

Fortunately, though, throughout most of human history we have not had to rely on outright punishment, such as whips or chains or prison cells, in order to ensure that we all behaved properly and cooperatively. First, as I have been pointing out these past few episodes, we were also born with a tendency to be obedient and cooperative. Next, by all of us observing the group's social norms, which not so coincidentally also stress co-operative behavior, we gain a warm, positive feeling of social acceptance. Finally, it turns out that right at the start of our hypersocial phase, even before Mesopotamia and Egypt, religions were created which—through ritual and worship—codified and sanctified obedience and cooperation.

(In fact, recent archaeological findings in Turkey strongly suggest that coming together for religious rituals was in fact the *cause* of that first Neolithic banding together of groups greater than the Dunbar upper limit of 150.)

But, again, this podcast is not about religion per se. On the other hand, since religions and society wide sets of norms can both be included under the term ‘belief systems’, let me make an extremely important observation about those social norms, etc.

Because, as you’ll recall, one of the other widely held understandings of the 18th Century was the growing realization that so many of the particular religious and social customs that had been blindly practiced for the previous centuries had no intrinsic or practical value. Now a couple of episodes ago I gave the example of wearing hats in public in the year 1900. Now on the surface there was no real ‘point’ in this; it just looks like a weird case of socially enforced conformity. But if you recognize that the social purpose was to show mutual respect, then it does make a certain sense.

And way back at the beginning I gave the example of driving on the right hand side. Because logically you might as well flip a coin as to which side of the street you drive on. But, clearly, if society granted everyone the libertarian freedom to decide for themselves each day which side of the road gave them the most utilitarian value, (also keeping in mind how many people on a given day are high or drunk), the results probably wouldn’t be all that great.

So—and we’ll be getting into how our minds actually work very shortly—it turns out that, if nothing else, social norms are also a great way to keep us from having to experience decision overload every moment of every day.

But, let’s face it. Those 18th Century people did have a certain point. Because once you factor out all of those beliefs and rituals which do contribute to a smoothly running society, you are left with a whole slew of them which are silly, irrational, even counter-productive. Kind of like junk DNA, the evolution of any culture will necessarily accrue all kinds of meaningless customs, etc.

At the same time, though, those 18th Century people really didn’t have a clue as to how our minds actually work. So to many of them the simplistic response was to declare *all* customs and rituals to be arbitrary and meaningless.

Remember, however, the keen insight of Edmund Burke. Namely that a functioning, stable culture or society is not some randomly generated development. Rather it is the result of a long, slow process through trial and error of finding out what works and what doesn’t. And that therefore one should always be extremely cautious lest, in one’s haste to remove the arbitrary, one is also throwing out the baby with the bath water. Especially since, being imperfect humans, we tend to think that those social strictures which keep us from doing what we in our selfishness personally want to do are the ones which are arbitrary and meaningless.

Or, in other words, students shouldn't be allowed to grade their own work. Especially when what we're talking about is something as delicate and finely tuned as a culture or working society.

Okay. So now let me make a final point about social norms.

Because, like it or not, as humans we literally cannot exist without them. I've already dwelt on the reality that the collapse of social norms means a dissolving of social glue and a resulting collapse in personal meaning. Now I would like to add something else: In the absence of social norms, they will spontaneously develop.

For instance, take the phrase 'honor among thieves'. This refers to the common observation that even criminals who live outside the law soon develop their own precise, and highly enforced, code of conduct.

Or consider the Crips and the Bloods. Because it turns out that if, in an inner city, you strip away the norms of family, church, and culture, then gangs like these, which are indeed violent, but which, sociologists affirm, also supply a (perverse) sense of community, will spontaneously arise.

Now you might object that I am giving examples of groups where the niceties of life have been already stripped away. But does it then follow that this would also be the case where people have been more accustomed to civilized comfort and civilized life?

Well, remember the French Revolution. Because it started by attempting to sweep away all rites, rituals, social rank, basically anything deemed 'irrational'. Everyone was now to be addressed as 'citizen'. Churches were shuttered, priests were outlawed, and the new religion was specifically that of Rationality. Now not only distances were metric. Now there would be ten days in a week and ten hours in a day. And now, theoretically at least, the Rights of Man would be all that was needed to create the perfect society.

And what happened? Almost immediately, mob rule. That is to say, new norms appeared as if out of thin air. And, since there was no history or tradition to give them a whiff of authenticity, they could change in a moment's notice. Meaning that a faction which was seen as legitimate and in charge one day might be led to the guillotine the next.

And now let's take this up to the present. Because as I've pointed out several times, most recently just a few minutes ago, the ultimate logical end of liberal democracy is the removal of all those so-called artificial social norms, and their replacement by a set of universal human rights. With the

result that each of us will be totally free to pursue our (non-violent, of course) personal pleasures in whichever way we like.

And I'm trying to stay away from 'current events' in this part of the podcast. But if you strip away social norms from richer, more educated citizens, those who are supposedly more sophisticated, those who supposedly have more self control and inner compass, etc., if you do that then even stricter, more irrational social norms, such as political correctness, will arise.

And if by stripping away social norms you also supposedly strip away our inborn need to punish those who break them through the guise of 'tolerance', then even crueler and more irrational punishment, as in social media shaming, will spontaneously develop.

So that political correctness and social media shaming, which surveys show are highly disturbing to a large majority of the population, are not some strange aberration of so-called personal freedom. Instead they are easily predictable results of so-called personal freedom.

But even if you recognize the problem and want to do something about it, here's the worst part:

Because social norms only work if they apply to absolutely everybody.

If there is no option to opt out.

Up and down the entire list of norms.

Because moral codes don't work if they are merely a suggested check list. After all, as you'll recall from the logic of collective action, not to mention common experience, if we all had the option not to do what which we find difficult or uncomfortable, we all would. But if everyone then did that, everything would also immediately fall apart.

What's more, this also seems to apply to that which is stupid or unnecessary, those customs and rules which I labeled as analogous to junk DNA. *You* may have enough intellectual integrity to separate the stupid from that which you simply don't want to do. But the plain fact is that most of the rest of us don't.

Which is no doubt why our brains evolved to have Natural Moral Law in the first place.

And which is why, when we get to the end and the What To Do About All This part, we'll find out why the modern mind and the modern world are in such trouble.

Because there is no room for ironic detachment in all this. There is no room for individual moral codes. A vague idea of 'doing good' is a non-starter.

Because our brains didn't evolve to be that way. They can indeed do nuance. But only up to a certain point. It is far more important that they have that sense of right and wrong.

So, considering all this, how are we ever going to get *that* toothpaste back into the tube?

Okay, I don't want to give away the ending. But a solution is possible. And, in short, it involves separating out the meaningful social norms from the meaningless ones. Just like certain people started off trying to do in the 18th Century. After all, if we knew that our society's norms in the end really were for the good of all, wouldn't we then be a lot more inclined to 'take one for the team' when those norms conflicted with our personal desires?

Of course, there's still that small problem of separating the real wheat from the real chaff. And the short answer is to refer back to the ancient philosophers' concept: Wisdom. Although if you find it difficult in this postmodern world to get your head around that qualitative answer, then let me add this. We can also do what 18th Century minds couldn't, by fully understanding what 21st Century Science has been trying to tell us about the real parameters of the human condition.

Which, of course, is what this entire section is about.

Now for the last few episodes I've been covering some of the ramifications which arise from the reality that our true hypersocial nature is directly opposite that of the 18th Century's vision of innately selfish individualism. So, starting with the next episode, we're going to start taking apart yet another of the Age of Enlightenment's overly simplistic, and also quite simply wrong, basic ideas about human nature.

Namely just how it is that our brains and our minds actually do work.

Although getting into all of that is going to have to wait for the next episode. Because this one is now finished.

Once again, though, as always, I would like to thank you so much for so far having listened.