



ALTRUISM AND EMPATHY, ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF ETHICAL NORMS IN HUMAN SOCIETY

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Abstract

In the present paper, we aim to analyze concepts such as empathy, morality, generosity, and sociability and their influence on the content and applicability of ethics and moral rules. We will argue that moral rules are necessary in all groups and societies and that, their content is strongly linked to our human nature. In the first part of the paper, we will refer to the traditional theories that explain how we came to accept laws and rules in our individual lives (JJ Rousseau, Thomas Hobbes). In the second part, we will argue that rules and norms are necessary for any society to function properly and, these rules (in different shapes and with various contents) have accompanied mankind since the very beginning. People did not come to accept rules at a certain moment, society has always had rules, and sociability is in our nature. The rules and laws changed through centuries and millenniums and became more complex as society evolved, but they were always there, as we always lived in groups, not alone individually.

Keywords: ethics; social norms; sociability; altruism; empathy

1. Introduction

The existence of any kind of social organization implies, first, the necessity for the members of that group to have a natural inclination towards coexistence, and then, second, a set of moral and legal rules that make possible the survival of the group and the preservation of the social order. For this reason, we believe that ethical and moral norms are inherent in any form of social organization. Also, although the

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norms are imposed by the group and learned by the group members from an early age, they could not be maintained and respected if they were not perceived/felt to agree with the characteristic features of the group members and their nature.

Human society is based on the bonds that are conventionally established or exist naturally between people. One of the most essential features of the human being, along with reason and the ability to communicate and transmit complex information, is sociability, or even hyper-sociability, as some contemporary authors state (Haidt, 2022). Of course, the human race is not the only one characterized by a high degree of sociability among its members, but no other known species has been able to develop through such a complex collaboration between its members.

Classic Theories regarding the Human' Social Life and Sociability

Over time, many theories and explanations have been formulated to show us and justify the source of human sociability. Some of these theories start from the idea that human beings are physically fragile, and that sociability was a choice designed to protect us from various dangers and ensure the survival of the species.

In this sense, philosophers such as Jean Jacques Rousseau and Thomas Hobbes argued that the formation of society is the consequence of the conclusion of a pact, a contract, or an understanding between the members of a social group. Such a theory implies that things were not like this from the beginning. In their original, natural state, humans lived in isolation from one another, but at some point, they realized the potential benefits of living in society and decided to organize themselves that way. The advantage of the natural, pre-social state of man would be the total freedom the individual enjoys, and the lack of constraints imposed by living with others.

According to these theories, initially, human beings would have lived in a natural state that did not involve the existence of a society. The image of this "natural" state has been presented differently by philosophers. For example, for Jean Jacques Rousseau, the man, in his natural state, was good and innocent (Rousseau, 2007). Then when he concludes the social pact with his fellows and surrenders, in exchange for the protection that the state will provide, a part of his natural freedom, the man loses something of the essence of his natural good condition. The opinions of the French philosopher started from his experiences in society (not too positive or happy) but also from observing how human society works within the state. Thus, Rousseau observed that the laws of the state which are necessary for the functioning

of society are not always just or not properly applied, in many types of government the rulers tend to become tyrannical and abusive, etc.

Through his work, Rousseau offers solutions for the social problems of humanity and shows that those who govern in the state can and must be replaced if the exercise of power is abusive and rather oriented towards satisfying their interests and ambitions than towards satisfying the general interest.

Another philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, considered that in the natural state, before the formation of society, man was very aggressive with his fellows: *homo homini lupus* (Hobbes, 2017) and, that because of his selfishness, man is constantly at war with his fellows. Thus, "the natural state is a state of war of all against all. Because people have the same needs to satisfy, while material goods are limited because each can claim superiority over others, bloody conflicts will necessarily arise, which could put the human species in danger" (Hobbes, 2017).

We can observe the fact that, if in Rousseau's opinion society is the one that perverted human nature, in the opinion of the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes society is the one that tempers the aggressive and selfish impulses of man, making it possible to live together and respect the rights of other fellows.

Now would be the time to return a little to the ideas of the ancient Greek philosophers, more specifically Aristotle, who considered that man is by nature a social being, *zoon politikon*, and that the state is before the individual (Aristotel, 2001). This theory is closer to contemporary scientific theories. In Aristotle's opinion "by nature the city is something before the household and to each of us, because necessarily the whole is before the part. For if the whole is suppressed there will be neither foot nor hand but the name, as if speaking of a hand of stone; for such a one shall be abolished. All are defined by their function and power: consequently, when they are no longer in their respective ways, they can no longer be said to be the same, but only to bear the same name. So, the city exists by nature and is something before the individual, that is clear. Since each, being isolated is not independent, it will be in the same state as the other parts about the whole; he who, due to self-sufficiency, is incapable or without any need of communal living, is in no way part of the city, so he is either a beast or a god" (Aristotel, 2001 pp. 7-8, 1253a, 20, 25).

Contemporary philosophers and psychologists support Aristotle's idea of human sociability as an intrinsic feature of man. It is unlikely that there has ever been a state of human being in which he enjoyed absolute freedom and was not part of any social group. Historical, anthropological, and biological evidence indicates that *homo sapiens* has been social and sociable since its emergence. That there was no state of

nature, good or bad, in which man lived in isolation. But philosophers like Rousseau and Hobbes felt the need to explain how human society works, or how it should work, about the injustices and abuses that existed in society at the time of their works and before them.

Although the ideal to which we must strive is that of a greater Good, if not a supreme Good, historical reality has shown us that too many times, in society, abuse and injustice have triumphed. So, philosophers have tried to establish the idea of a world where individual freedom is respected as a fundamental value, and the existence of society, of the state, is justified by respecting and/or maintaining this freedom and human dignity.

If we are naturally sociable, it means that we naturally trust each other, cultivate this trust, communicate, and respect ethical, moral, and legal norms because, in their absence, there would be no framework in which sociability can manifest itself.

In his 18th century *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Smith, 2017), Adam Smith showed that “all decent and generous behavior proceeds from our feelings of attachment to our fellows, and that the sight of others in dire straits, it creates a bond which he called *mutual sympathy*. [...] *The theory of moral sentiments* suggests that good behavior and conscience are inherent parts of our psychological profile and that they flow quite naturally from social relationships. In other words, distinguishing good from evil is an *innate* human ability and a reaction that comes from deep within us (Zak, 2014 pp. 35-36).

Adam Smith was not the first scholar to support these ideas. But, in that era, the dominant philosophical theories focused on much more abstract ideas, basing the individual's need to act correctly and well on a set of rigid norms, on building the model of ideal societies in which everyone fulfills his obligations and his rights be respected, etc.

Contemporary Theories Altruism and Sociability and their Influence on Ethical Norms

Contemporary science shows us that by our (biological) nature and to survive as individuals and as a species, we human beings have fostered this cooperative and moral behavior. Such behavior was favored for the survival of the species and was cultivated by human communities that harshly sanctioned those who were very aggressive and lacked mutual sympathy or, what we now call *empathy*. In primitive

societies, the harshest sanction applied to an individual was not the death penalty but exclusion from the group. It was abundantly clear that the survival of a single individual in nature was extremely difficult, the dangers being many and often unpredictable.

As Steve Hilton states "in recent decades, great advances in science have given us a better understanding of who we are as humans – how we think, how we feel and how we behave, and why. Neuroscience, social psychology, behavioral economics: currently being active in these fields means being able to start analyzing how you can organize things more logically, but starting from the scientific data you have. These observations not only tell us more about humanity, but they also tell us that making things more human is something in itself natural.

For example, evolutionary biology shows us that throughout human history we have become increasingly empathetic. [...] Increasing our ability to communicate and collaborate has strengthened our ability to understand each other's realities. The better we know each other, the more we extend our system of fundamental rights protection to ever larger categories of people" (Hilton, 2016 pp. 16-17).

Even if over time moral norms were imposed on religious or legal grounds, i.e. they came from outside, and their non-compliance led to the application of harsh sanctions, these norms could not have been respected by most people, if they were not in relation with our biological nature. Kindness, altruism, and generosity are cultivated socially but, at the same time, they also find an echo inside us. Generous and altruistic behavior does not only occur when others notice us or when we have something definite to gain. On the contrary, sometimes altruism comes with personal sacrifices. And so, it becomes clear that being kind, empathetic, and altruistic is not against human nature but, perhaps, it is exactly the essence of this nature.

As society has evolved, so has our ability to be empathetic. But this would not have been possible if we had not from the beginning had a natural inclination towards empathy, which is necessary for all beings who live their lives in groups. The group or society has the mission to protect us from harm (both from ourselves and others), to ensure a satisfactory standard of living, health protection, access to education and so on.

On the other hand, psychological studies have shown that human nature is both empathetic but also selfish, altruistic but also greedy. We are a mixture of good and less good traits. Living together, through moral and legal norms, regulates our behavior in such a way as to encourage what is positive, and discourage what is

negative. This also happens as an effect of evolutionism, of the need for the survival of the species, but it would not be possible if it were not also written into our genetic code, in our biology.

The studies carried out by ethologists and biologists on different species of animals and their mode of reproduction have proven that the process of reproduction involves one's vulnerability in front of the chosen partner to procreate. Moreover, they indicated that mutual trust and moral behavior are ancient and necessary elements for biological reproduction and species survival. These experiments lead to the idea that mutual trust and moral behavior are specific to many species of living beings and are not exclusive to human beings. This conclusion was also reached by Paul Zak, who shows that "the fact that the precursors of trust and reciprocity are so ancient, that the ancestral DNA of our moral behavior is imprinted in the cells of our entire body, and that everything is rooted in reproduction, it suggests quite a lot clear that what we call morality today is not some late, civilizing idea, or an accessory contrary to our nature, but has deep connections with survival itself" (Zak, 2014 p. 48).

Therefore, altruistic behavior, mutual trust, and morality are not exclusively human. These traits are specific and necessary to most living beings, the difference between what is manifested in the human being versus the other species being rather one of degree or intensity, by no means of nature.

Empathy studies have shown that when individual is exposed to a series of images involving pain, they will perceive that pain as if it were happening to them. It is not about actually feeling that pain, but its simple image evokes in the mind of the viewer what he would feel if the said thing happened to him. This process is physiological and is explained by the presence in the human brain (and other species) of some neurons called "*mirror neurons*". Therefore, our sociability, altruism, generosity, and trustworthiness are part of our very brain chemistry. When we are generous with others our brain secretes a hormone called oxytocin which makes us relax and feel good. When someone around us is in pain, we feel that pain as if it were our own and the natural desire is to remove that pain. This is empathy, and "the source of empathy is the initial release of oxytocin, followed by the release of dopamine and serotonin – which makes the experience pleasurable and, at the same time, induces our desire to repeat it—and culminates in the resulting social engagement" (Zak, 2014 p. 81)

John Decety, professor of neuroscience, has identified four essential elements of empathy, that is, our ability to put ourselves in the other person's shoes and feel

what the other person is feeling. These four processes of empathy were also described by Professor Zak (2014 p. 82): the first process involves shared effect (the kind of reflected reaction about what we perceive/observe happening to the other), the second refers to the understanding that the other people around ours, they are entities distinct from us. That is, being able to differentiate between us and the other, we still perceive the suffering as if it were our own, but we do not mistake it for our own. The third process involves our ability to put ourselves in the shoes of the other, the mental flexibility we are capable of. The fourth element is our ability to regulate our reactions and emotions to respond appropriately to what is happening.

Our empathy and generosity, however, manifest themselves in different doses in different situations. Thus, if we have a lot of suffering or are in a very stressful situation, this prevents us from paying attention to the other and becoming empathetic to their suffering. We are also not as willing to help anyone in a difficult situation. We are ready to risk our lives for someone close to us, but we will not do this for anyone (except perhaps soldiers, firefighters, or those specially trained for such activities). We also have more understanding and empathy for children in troubled situations than for adults. The latter are held responsible for their own choices, and if they end up in difficult situations, it is usually their own fault.

Hence the need for social norms and rules. Biological mechanisms usually work correctly, but we can't help everyone, we can't trust everyone. The brain must weigh in each case what would be the correct conduct, how to proceed, etc. Who can we trust to look after our children while we are at work, who can we choose as a partner so that we get enough help to raise and educate the children, who can we trust with our possessions, etc. The world we live in today is safer than in the past, but that doesn't mean we don't face dangers. The quality of our lives or even the preservation of life itself involves effective choices and actions. Our survival as individuals depends on these choices and the survival of the group depends on the imposed social rules. The moral and legal norms of a society aim at exactly this: better and safer living conditions for group members, strengthening and stability of the group, and controlling antisocial behaviors that endanger individuals or the group itself.

Discussions and Conclusions

Empathy and altruism go hand in hand. It is a natural human tendency to offer help, when we can, to those we perceive to be in a state of need. Although the idea of doing good to others, of being generous is a commendable one, specialists warn us that we must be very careful when we offer help to others. So that this help does not

prove to be a danger to our people, it is advisable to weigh things well. Thus, in his book *The Moral Molecule*, Paul Zak relates the case of a guard in an American penitentiary who believed that every person deserves a second chance. In that penitentiary, there was a prisoner who had been convicted for the rape and murder of a female person and who, following the psychiatric evaluation, had been diagnosed as a psychopath. The guard campaigned to give this psychopathic inmate a second chance and offered to take him into his home. The result was very bad for the guard because, after a few months, the former inmate raped and killed his daughter. The guard was extremely disappointed in the betrayal of trust, and the prisoner showed no remorse for the deed but simply stated serenely that this was his nature (Zak, 2014 pp. 151-152).

Of course, not all cases are so dramatic, and usually, the help offered does not backfire on the altruism. However, this does not mean that we should not be careful.

Peter Singer, a contemporary philosopher has developed a very interesting and useful concept: effective altruism. Effective altruism implies the idea that when we want to make a generous gesture, a donation, we should not donate the amount of money or the respective thing to the first person who appears in the way, but document ourselves, analyze cases, and donate to the one who is in the greatest need or in such a way as to help as many people as possible.

Effective altruism is defined as “a philosophy and social movement that uses evidence and reason to find the best solutions to make the world a better place”¹. In today's world, it is not very difficult to be an effective altruist. There are many sources of information on the Internet and banking services so that the money available for charitable acts can be given to reliable organizations that will distribute it most effectively.

Generosity, altruism, empathy, and trust are fundamental aspects of our biological makeup, of our being that make possible and sustain our existence as individuals and as a species. But the chemical regulation of the brain is not so fine that these mechanisms work in perfect dosage, which makes social, ethical, and legal norms necessary for the proper functioning of human society. Most of the time, and for most people, the mere idea that there is a punishment that can be meted out for violating a moral norm is enough for the norm to be obeyed. There are also deviations.

¹ Effective altruism, https://koaha.org/wiki/Altruismo_efficace accessed on 30.12.2022.

The social assistance system includes those people in need who, due to their young age or disabilities, cannot manage their lives on their own. Social protection is a form of generosity that we show at the group level in the idea of giving help to those in need.

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