

Beyond Cosmic Dice

Excerpts

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Humans are special, not because we are made in god's image, and commanded by the Bible to rule over the earth, but because we have the amazing ability to choose a future in which we thrive and develop in a just society while coexisting with a healthy natural world. If we fail to seize our opportunity to create such a future, we will be no more than bacteria with library cards. The choice is in our hands, not god's. We are special if we choose to be, if we ourselves decide to use our big brains to manage wisely our relationships with one another and with our environment.

The very foundation of our moral code is fundamentally flawed. The current code of ethics predominant in modern societies, shaped largely by divine command theory, is based on false promises of eternal salvation or threats of damnation, not on a morality inherent to the human condition. As a result, a moral vacuum has developed, creating a society with deeply-rooted destructive behavioral maladaptations. War, overpopulation, unrelenting poverty, destruction of the environment, indifference to the needs and rights of other life forms and intolerance of our fellow humans all result, to an important extent, from an obsolete religious moral code.

Human beings are not inevitable, and our brief existence is not preordained to be extended into the distant future. If Homo sapiens is to have a continued presence on earth, humankind will reevaluate its sense of place in the world and modify its strong species-centric stewardship of the planet. Our collective concepts of morality and ethics have a direct impact on our species' ultimate fate.

That religious morality has failed is made clear by humanity's current fate, and the sad state of the planet. Religion has had 2000 years to prove itself worthy as a guiding moral force. Yet the result of that 2000-year experiment is war, poverty, hunger and suffering across the globe as humanity consumes itself; in addition, after two millennia, we see over-population, depletion of non-renewable resources, and accelerated degradation of the environment because our current moral foundation is not suited to guide us away from that destruction.

Our inner life, our own thoughts, our acts of kindness, and our responsibility and honesty are immune to the random events in the world around us, blind to the inherent purposelessness of the universe. The world can be seen with amazing clarity upon realizing that life is not manipulated by some unseen force, but instead is guided by an individual's power to make decisions and a personal choice to be moral. There is tremendous joy in understanding that the purpose and meaning of life are self-derived.

Many of humanity's problems originate in the hubris of imagining ourselves at the center of the universe, separate from and better than other animals. But human beings are neither special nor inevitable. As a minor branch on a vast evolutionary bush, modern humans have been roaming the earth for no more than a few hundred thousand years of the earth's 4.5 billion year history. If the earth's lifespan were one year, humans would come on the scene only during the last 50 minutes of the year. Ours has been a truly brief presence, barely a cameo on the stage of life, with too little time to demonstrate if the evolution of large brains is a successful strategy for long-term survival of the species.

When Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, he exposed the world to a momentous discovery every bit as significant and disorienting as when Copernicus discovered that the earth was not the center of the universe. For the first time in history, human beings were seen not as creatures of divine origin, but instead as a natural product of evolution, an animal like every other on the planet. Imagine yourself back in that amazing year. The day before Darwin's book was published, you woke up thinking yourself the image of God; the next morning you realize you have the face of a monkey. Not everybody immediately embraced this rude demotion. Resistance to the idea was inevitable. But have absolutely no doubt: evolution is one of the most extraordinary, successful, thoroughly documented scientific discoveries in human history. Evolution through natural selection is an indisputable fact, just as we now know that the earth revolves around the sun.

Thanks to Darwin, natural selection allows us to understand the development of nature's diversity and complexity without resorting to divine intervention. Through Darwin's insights, we can understand that life on earth began as a natural event, and that evolution is a random process with no direction or drive. The male peacock would probably agree that any rational design would have relieved him of the burden of a ridiculously large tail, which leaves him vulnerable to predation. But because natural selection is uncaring, the poor bird now has a tail just big enough to attract painfully picky females (something to think about the next time you are pumping iron

at the gym), and just small enough to make the competing male next door a greater temptation as somebody's lunch.

Perhaps unwittingly referring to bacteria, Mathew 5:5 says that "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth," and indeed they shall. For regardless of the fate of humanity, bacteria will survive. Bacteria can easily live without us, but we would die quickly without them. If we were able to kill every bacterium in our body, we would be dead within a month. It is the height of folly to claim that evolution was driven toward humans anymore than toward any other living being. Humans are nothing but a short-lived biological aberration, with no claim to superiority. If evolution had a pinnacle, bacteria would rest on top. When the human species is a distant memory, bacteria will be dividing merrily away, oblivious to the odd bipedal mammal that once roamed the earth for such a brief moment in time. Our claims to superiority and our self-promotion to the image of god are simply embarrassing in the face of the biological reality on the ground. There is a loss of credibility when you choose yourself for an award.

The human brain is extraordinarily adept at posing questions, but simply abhors the concept of leaving any unanswered. We are unable to accept "I don't know" because we cannot turn off our instinct to see patterns and to discern effect from cause. We demand that there be a pattern, that there be cause and effect, even when none exist. So we make up answers when we don't know. We develop elaborate creation myths, sun gods, rain gods, war gods, and gods of the ocean. We believe we can communicate with our gods and influence their behavior, because by doing so, we gain some control, impose some order, on the chaotic mysteries of the world. By making up answers to dull the sting of ignorance, we fool ourselves into thinking we *explain* the world. Religion was our first attempt at physics and astronomy.

The idea of powerful gods controlling each important aspect of our lives would not by itself be satisfying. We want to put a face to the power; we want to be familiar with the deities that control our fate; we want to know them so that we can communicate with them and solicit their interventions. We are all Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz*, seeking to reveal the nature of god, hoping to strike up a conversation with whoever is in charge. By no coincidence then do our gods take on human form, usually idealized. Male gods are typically buff, in great shape, with washboard abs and thick biceps, while their female counterparts conform to the ideas of beauty at the time, usually in all cases sporting large breasts.

Advances in science, which explain the mysteries of nature's wrath, remove the need for multiple gods of rain, sun and harvest. If we know the sun is a star sustained by thermonuclear reactions, we need not invoke a sun god. If we know that rain is caused by evaporation and condensation, we can discard our rain god. We understand that thunder is caused by lightning as a consequence of atmospheric ionization, relegating Thor to the pantheon of gods now myth. As gods are the child of ignorance, knowledge is a lethal potion strong enough to kill the most powerful force.

We will show that morals are not derived from religion, nor god's grant of free will, but instead arise from inherent characteristics embedded in human nature as a consequence of our sociality. What we view as moral behaviors – kindness, reciprocity, honesty, respect for others – are social norms that evolved in the context of a highly social animal living in large groups. The evolution of these social norms enabled a feeble creature to overcome physical limitations through effective cooperation. Morality is a biological necessity and a consequence of human development. Religion, however, has masked and corrupted these natural characteristics with a false morality that converts intrinsic human benevolence and generosity into cheap commodities to be purchased with coupons for heaven. Good behavior is not encouraged as a means of advancing our humanity, but instead is enforced with threats of eternal damnation.