

March 1, 2025

Where Does Morality Come From?

By Phil Johnson

Can evolutionary thinking really explain the foundation for morality? Is morality just a form of behavior? According to biological interpretation morality is addressed solidly as a form of behavior and those behaviors are divided up into other behaviors. These behaviors include foraging, mating and nesting, play, grooming, securing territory, and other group interactions. According to biologists, nonhuman species may exhibit behavioral stages of evolutionary development concerning morality. Making morality as a form of behavior makes it possible to observe the development of morality in other species. It would not be known if the behavior is genetic in nature or environmental. Humans and animals both learn and respond to environmental stimuli, especially repeated stimuli.¹ The science of biology is not able to discover, justify, evaluate, or determine the existence of any ethics or moral standards based on evolutionary thinking or its history. It cannot be presumed objectively based on human nature. Biologist would have to borrow from other disciplines to determine whether a behavior was moral or not.

Since we have severely limited understanding of how genetic coding programs behavior, we do not know if or how genes do or do not generate a “moral compass” for humans. Evolutionists must then turn to philosophy to explain what cannot be explained by the theory of evolution. The trouble with this is it is no longer objective in nature but now is subjective. The scientific method cannot be applied in solving the problem of where morality came from; and even if there was a philosophical argument that explained morality, it would be subjective in nature and not objective or absolute. Just as any moral statements made by philosophical means would be subjective.

Philosophers have established three divisions to identify morality: outcomes, motive, and systems. Philosophers do not even agree on the principles for defining “good.” There is general recognition of three basic approaches. Consequentialism focuses on the outcomes themselves. This would be the greatest good for the most people, sort of like Spock saving the Enterprise in the movie. Deontology is the motivational aspect, focusing on why the act is done. This would be considered sympathy or virtuous intent, your reason behind the selfless act. The third philosophical thought is that morals are based on mutual consensus of values within a group or society. This is basically a learned response and is not necessarily internalized in the spirit of the person. Their morality is based on staying out of trouble and not getting caught.

Evolution cannot express, give, or generate any moral values. Natural selection generates no cause and effect leading to morality. Cooperation and helping behavior are simply puzzles to evolutionary dogma. Evolutionary thinking interprets moral behavior solely in terms of outcomes, ignoring completely motive or intent. Some behaviors are instinctive or inherited. Evolution implies that people and organisms cooperate when there is a mutual benefit to do so. This implies mutual cooperation between species when there is a mutual benefit to

both. There are symbiotic relationships where both are benefited, but there are also parasitic relationships where only one of the participants is benefited.

Humans and other animals can experience both symbiotic and parasitic relationships. We need our good gut bacteria to aid in digestion, and newer studies are indicating we need healthy gut biome for good health and a clear mind. There are no morals in dealing with our gut bacteria or if a person gets infected with a parasite. While behavior may imply morality in a biological sense, that would imply parasites are intrinsically bad. Genetic relatedness may in some cases explain the willingness to help another organism if that organism develops a need or is threatened. In some species such as bees and ants there is cooperation to perpetuate the species. Genetic relatedness cannot explain the willingness to help in all situations.

Some cases of self-sacrifice are based on reciprocity, or when a favor is given a favor is owed. The potential for reciprocity is a must. Reciprocity can occur at different levels and different costs and consequences. The chance for never having the “favor” returned is a drawback to this kind of cooperation.

Understanding moral outcomes does not address what most people consider to be the most fundamental to morality, moral sentiments. Mental phenomena present a special challenge for science since they are not directly observable. In observing behavior, we tend to personify animals, giving them human characteristics and motivation. This can lead to extreme errors in the study of animal behavior, and biologists must be careful in documenting behavior as a clear response to stimulus and its response.

Darwin proposed the moral sense as an inevitable outcome of four elements: social instinct, memory, language, and habit.² There are recorded cases of higher primates saving human children, yet there are also cases of higher primates killing human children. Only behaviors can be studied in animals without ever really knowing what motives or instincts they act upon at any given time.

Do thinking and feeling have a neurological basis? Consider the story of Phineas Gage as written by Douglas Allchin:²

Perhaps the most fascinating case is a man who lost some [of] his social and moral bearing due to an unusual brain injury: a railroad worker in the nineteenth century named Phineas Gage. Gage was using his tamping iron to compact an explosive charge when it detonated prematurely and sent the 1.5-inch-wide rod up under his cheek bone, through his brain, and out the top of his skull. Gage remarkably survived, but he had lost some of his brain, and with it, some of its function. Whereas before the accident Gage had been “quiet and respectful,” afterwards he became “fitful, irreverent, indulging at times in the grossest profanity (which was not previously his custom), manifesting but little deference for his fellows.” The attending physician profiled the dramatic change, noting that “the equilibrium or balance, so to speak, between his intellectual faculties and animal propensities, seems to have been destroyed (quoting Harlow³).

He lived twelve and a half years after his injury. Upon recovery he was able to hold down various jobs, but he had his struggles. Figure 1 (from Harlow) shows how intense his injuries were.

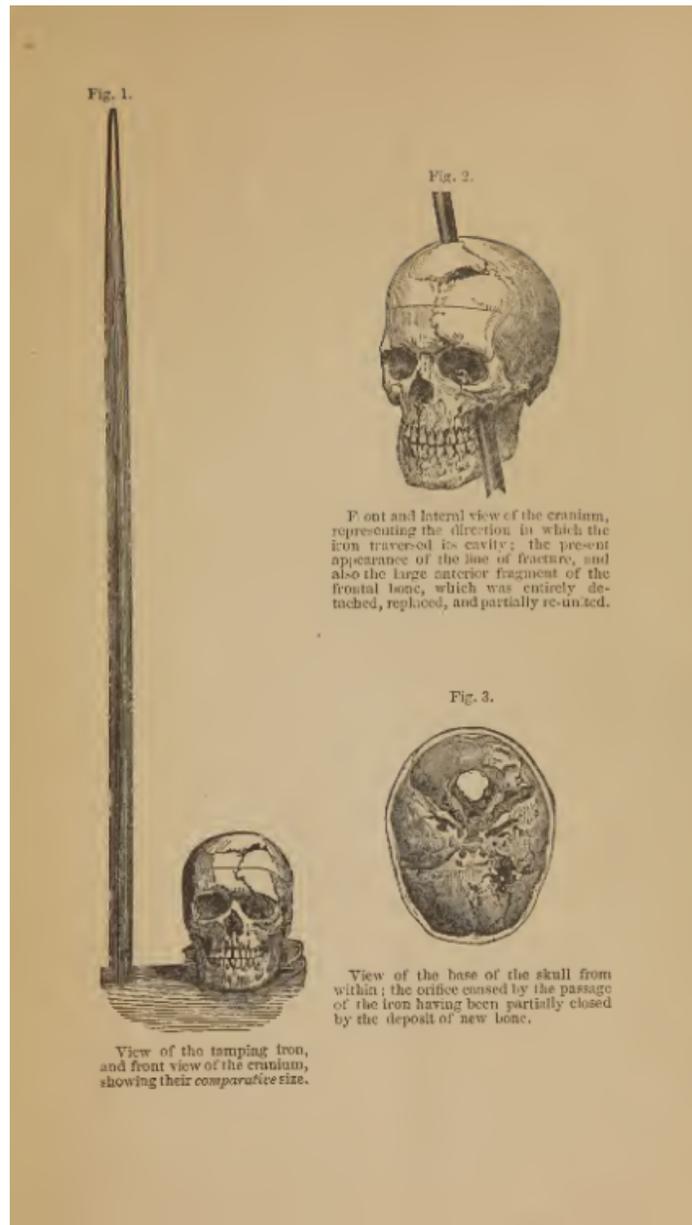


Figure 1.

Are we nothing then but what our DNA determines us to be? Do our brains contain all that we are? We really do not know exactly from a biological point of view how everything is related to behavior and thought. To try to determine morality from observational science there are assumptions made; and in the case of morality, psychologists claim that man is basically good. That has to be assumed before any study of morality can take place. Evolution even goes as far as to say cooperation and helping behavior may be intentional, but of course cooperation at the psychological level is still susceptible to cheating or defection.

Evolution says that social organization and language are an important perspective on moral behavior and address the interaction of organisms in their societies. Relationships that arise can shape behavior in many ways. Of course, the most profound problem with explaining moral behaviors is "cheaters," which really boils down to

selfishness. In a societal situation, cooperation enforced through punishment yields strong compliance. Society and morality may ultimately be forces in evolution as much as they are products of it.²

Evolutionary thinking has led to many very immoral consequences such as wars, hatred, and racism. Since there is only one race, it is more a hatred based on lack of understanding. Evolutionary ideas are subjective at best and depend on interpretation of knowledge we have and knowledge we may gain in the future, changing the very foundation of what it now claims to be true. Morality based on evolutionary thinking is totally *subjective* in nature and not understood.

Evolutionary psychology states that man is basically good; but in contrast Jeremiah says, "The heart is more deceitful than all else And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?" Man is not basically good; He is desperately wicked. When we were created, we were given many abilities, which include the ability to think, communicate, and experience both the natural world and supernatural world by having fellowship with God. Adam and God walked together in the garden before the fall. After the fall and flood, things changed drastically, so much that the Creator no longer had the relationship with man that He had before. God set aside a nation by which to give His perfect law and to send the promised one as a redeemer. Our redeemer had to be a man, a perfect man, to meet the law's requirements for redeeming lost human beings. Jesus Himself said he did not come to abolish the law but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17).

The law can be divided into three sections: Moral Law, Civil Law, and Ceremonial Law. The Ceremonial Law was for the nation Israel to separate from every other nation in the world. It was law governing washing, eating, and how to service the temple. The Civil Law was the same concept of civil law throughout history. The Moral Law is from the character of God and tell us how to know right from wrong and what is moral in this life. God does not need the law; He is perfect. The law has many purposes! First it is to point us to Jesus Christ, it shows us His promise and character. It is for our benefit to protect us from our own sinful desires. A man does not instinctively know morality from immorality.

Some say let your conscious be your guide; but without external wisdom from the Creator, the conscious does not know what is right and wrong, and with time a person can sear their conscious to silence. Is your conscious God's gift to help you know right from wrong? Unknown, but for sure the Scriptures are His gift to teach you right and wrong. They are the only objective source for knowing the truth and the only source to know what is moral.

The Scriptures say that one day either in death or rapture we will all be separated from this fleshly container. Our essence will be who we are before our Father, our Creator. Jesus said He was the truth, the way, and the life and that no man can come to God but through Him. (John 14:6) If we want to walk in a moral character to earn our salvation, we simply will never be able to do so. We want to walk in a moral character to please Him who already redeemed us. When asked what the most important commandment was, He told them: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." The second was to love your neighbor as yourself. "Upon these two commandments hang the whole law and the prophets."

(Matthew 22:37–40, NAS) Salvation is in grace through faith. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this *is* not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast.” (Ephesians 2:8–9, NAS)

Morality cannot be explained from a scientific point of view. Science has limitations in many areas. Morality is *objective* and does not change because man decides to change it. Morals are based on God’s character and are immutable. They are given in His word; that is the only source to know it.

References

¹ Pavlov’s dogs are a well-known case.

² Allchin D (2009) The evolution of morality. *Evolution: Education and Outreach* 2:590–601 <https://evolution-outreach.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1007/s12052-009-0167-7> Accessed 2025 Feb 14

³ Harlow JM (1869) <https://dn790000.ca.archive.org/0/items/66210360R.nlm.nih.gov/66210360R.pdf> - page=24&zoom=auto,0,-14 Accessed 2025 Feb 14