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### Survival and Comfort: An argument against Good and Evil

Rene Descartes, and others, discuss the existence of good and evil as an objective truth, but when investigated further, it seems that good and evil do not exist, and that our sense of morality is more accurately derived from the evolutionary concept of survival. In his first meditation, Rene Descartes outlines his methodology for finding and deriving knowledge, which includes the method of throwing out all previous ideas and beliefs he held. This method for obtaining knowledge is plausible, and while I will not go into detail on Descartes' proofs, one flaw in his proofs is the assumption of the existence of good and evil.

The existence of good and evil seems so fundamental to our lives and in society, we have rarely asked the question of what it really is, and if it really exists. It might seem obvious to state that there are things that are good, and things that are evil. For instance, it may seem that saving a drowning child is an act of good, or murdering an innocent puppy is evil. One way of arguing for the inexistence of good and evil is to add context that justifies the action. What if the puppy had behavior problems and attacked babies? What if the drowning child were a murderer and would possibly kill you if you saved them? These initial arguments against the possibility of good and evil through circumstantial evidence seems to be shaky at best. In most circumstances, the drowning child won't be a murderer, nor would it cross most peoples minds

to not save the child. There seems to be no real alternative to this idea that saving the child is, in fact, good.

We are, however, missing a crucial idea in arguing against the existence of good and evil. We never ask the question of 'why' we feel we should save the drowning child. Why do we have a strong feeling that saving the child is good, and killing a puppy is bad? It seems that almost every human on earth has this instinct, something that we call empathy. The problem is we assume this empathetic feeling exists because of a cosmic existence of good and evil. This existence of good and evil might only be discovered by intelligent beings, hence why only the most intelligent of primates have a sense of it. I believe that this is a very poor argument, especially for something that seems so widely accepted as true.

What I propose is the same methodology that Descartes approached his meditations with, where I throw out everything I know about morality, and try to derive why exactly we hold such empathy. If good and evil do not exist, there must be some other logical explanation as to why we have empathy. Why do we pour resources into others to help them, even in cases where we might not have anything to gain? To answer this, I turn to the idea of evolution.

Evolution can be defined as the adaptation of a species through random mutations over generations. Evolution favors the mutations which have the highest rate of survival across as many domains as possible. Mutations that result in poor survivability eventually lead to the species' death. Through mutation, species' physically and mentally change. Prior to primates, evolution did not largely favor a large brain, thus keeping cognition levels low. Larger brains take large amounts of caloric resources to maintain but do allow for increased problem solving and

better socialization. This mutation seems logical to survival based on the species ability to make more complex decisions, but the ability to socialize is where advanced primates, specifically humans, far surpass other species.

Socialization is also seen in other species like ants and bees, however, there seems to be no level of empathy or 'good' in those species. Both ants and bees will kill an incompetent queen, and if a worker is unable to complete a task, there are no additional resources given to that worker to survive. This has worked for ants, as ants have existed for more than 140 million years. Ants seem to be a counter example to empathy as an evolutionary trait, why should we give large amounts of resources to the disabled or incompetent? It seems that helping others in need rather than letting them die off would increase our chances of collective demise. This may be evidence that there is no evolutionary advantage to empathy, and that humans only discovered good and evil because of their massively increased cognition over ants and bees.

Have you ever been in a situation in which for just a moment, you needed the help of another? After receiving that help, did you ever help that person later on? Most people would certainly answer yes to both. There are many instances in our lives that we received help from someone and returned the favor later. In fact, our society functions on this concept, we work and receive payment in which we can buy goods from others, goods that we do not have the means to create ourselves. While empathy is not present within ants, it does have overwhelming benefits for humans. Ants as a species can survive without helping every disabled ant because they can reproduce fast enough that a single mistake which kills a single ant does not affect the whole colony. Their lifespan is short while their reproductive rate is high. Humans,

on the other hand, would not survive as a species if we did not assist each other collectively. Without empathy leading to socialized life, we would individually die at a faster rate than we could reproduce. Humans are also essentially useless for the first five years of our lives. It is necessary to our existence as a highly cognitive species that social safety nets be created to help one another from dying.

Imagine you are with some friends stranded outside during the cold of winter. You all require a fire near you to keep you warm during the night. However, you would not get enough sleep each night to survive if you had to wake up every 30 minutes to add wood to your fire. Instead, to survive, you each take turns waking up and adding wood to everyone's fire before going back to sleep. Each person understands that there is a usefulness with sticking together and working towards a mutually beneficial goal of staying alive. Evolution found that the best way for humans to survive is through this social structure, and our brains developed a process of releasing certain chemicals to make us *feel* like we should help others.

This feeling of empathy, I argue, is what we derivatively call good and evil. Killing a person for an unjustified reason is *evil*, but only because our brain tells us it is wrong to murder for no reason. If humans happily went around murdering any inconvenient person, our chance of survival would decrease. In fact, when this does happen, it is deemed unacceptable, and those individuals are put into prison. However, this is not because murder or killing another of the same species is bad, but evolutionarily we have the *feeling* of it being bad because it would likely lead to our demise. There are plenty of other species that will fight and kill others of the same kind, but survive because they can live as individuals and can reproduce faster than they are killed. Lions, tigers, and bears are all known to kill each other over territory and food. They,

however, can survive individually and do not require socialization to live. They also have multiple kin born in the same timespan of a human, allowing for much higher rates of repopulation.

This argument can be summarized in the following premises. A species existence depends entirely on its survivability alone. If a species would lose individuals at a higher rate than it can reproduce, it would die. Humans would not be able to survive as non-social creatures as they would die faster than they can reproduce. The socialization strategy of empathy in humans prevents humans from dying faster than they can reproduce. Therefore, empathy exists within humans solely to survive as a species.

There are some possible responses to this argument for empathy as the reason we feel good and evil. First, we could deny the first premise on the idea that our existence depends on just survivability. We could argue that there is a deity of some kind that created us and is the justification for our existence. This could work, but without evidence for such deity, no such claim can be made.

Next, we could deny the idea that if a species loses individuals at a higher rate than it can reproduce, at some point the species will not exist. However, there again does not seem to be a logical argument here. If you have a barrel of water with a hole in the bottom, and the water flows through the hole faster than water added to the barrel, it seems obvious that at some point there would be no water in the barrel.

Potentially the best counterargument is that humans could survive as individuals, with no socialization. There is no concrete evidence suggesting our complete inexistence if we were

not social beings, however, evolution will always favor the *best* mutations, not just the ones that survive. I would respond by arguing that even though we could survive alone without empathy, like lions, tigers, and bears, we would not be able to survive as well as we do with empathy. Empathy allows for our exchange of goods, allowing individuals to survive by becoming an expert at one niche. People survive today even though they have no idea how to grow or hunt for food, but specialization has allowed for advancements in technology where we only need to depend on a small part of our population for food. Empathy also allows us to build relationships that can assist people in dire situations. In Polynesian cultures, they trade necklaces made of shells. These necklaces are highly valued because of the people they were once worn by, and when someone needs extra food to survive, they will often seek assistance from previous owners of that necklace. The necklaces act as a token of friendship, and through this friendship, people can make it through strenuous situations where they might have died otherwise.

The idea that socialization exists solely to prevent us from dying faster than we can reproduce could be attacked in the way that socialization is employed. If we pour large amounts of resources into every person, regardless of what they have done, it could be argued that we would use up unnecessary amounts of resources on some people. It seems that absolute empathy for everyone regardless of their situation will not work. However, I would argue that humans do not have absolute empathy. If someone is in a coma where we know they will not wake up, but are surviving because of thousands of dollars in resources each day, we do not keep pouring such resources into them. It seems unnecessary to do so. If someone rapes and murders someone, we do not pour resources into their comfort, we jail them for life, and in some instances, we execute them. There seems to be an evolutionary balance between no

empathy and absolute empathy that we employ. It is at this balance that we find what our individual and collective morality is, the line between what we think of as good and evil. Our morality is dependent on our current spot on the empathetic scale, societies will thrive when they find the balance of empathy that allows for a higher collective survival. In the USSR, people were jailed or sent to work camps for doing very little wrong. That led to a destabilized society that eventually collapsed. Other countries such as Denmark have found a great system of rehabilitation for criminals and has led to some of the lowest rates of crime and death among their population.

A final counter argument might be that we do things out of empathy that seem 'good' even though it does not immediately add to our survivability. I drive 30 miles each Saturday to buy my girlfriend a coffee while she is at work. Why do I do this? She would be completely fine without it; it is unnecessary to her survival. There seems to be empathy that humans exhibit which does not contribute to our survival. However, driving and buying my girlfriend coffee builds a stronger relationship between her and I. Evolutionarily, this strengthened relationship goes beyond her. I am now loved by her family and friends, thus extending the circle of people who would help me in a dire situation. Having many connections increases my individual survivability, as does hers. Evolution rewards me with an explosion of happy chemicals in my brain that makes me feel love and satisfaction. Humans found success through having deep relationships with one another for survival reasons, and these seemingly unnecessary acts increase our credibility in our society, and thus survivability.

Most people in society believe in the existence of good and evil, and in doing what is right. However, when we evaluate where this feeling, empathy, comes from, it seems more

logical that it stems from evolution rather than some cosmic law. Acts of empathy, that do not benefit our survival directly, exist because they build relationships which help us empathetic individuals to survive. There is a balance between having no empathy and absolute empathy that humans have, as it does not benefit us to help murderers, but to help children in need instead. It is at the spot between no empathy and absolute empathy where our highest level of survivability exists, that our current moral sentiment can be derived. By understanding that good and evil do not exist outside of our own minds, but as a means to survival, we can better understand what morality really is, and how to live as a functioning member of society.