

Is ethical (normative) behaviour natural?

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Nothing by Richard Seymour

(<http://www.taoism.net/supplement/taopoems.htm>)

All creation was preceded by Nothing.
"Nothing", therefore, is the substance
From which all things come,
And to which they shall return.

That infinite Nothing gave rise to nature.
Nature's perfect symmetry is instinctive.
Whatever upsets that balance can be said to be wrong.

We are all part of nature.
As such, that instinct is part of us.
To contribute to the balance of all things,
Is to live in harmony with one's self.
To move against the effortless flow,
Is to cause disruption to our surroundings,
And so to us.

It is rather difficult to provide a simple answer to the question whether ethical behaviour is natural. However one assumption being made is that, if we concede that the natural is something which is accessible to all human beings, then anything could be perceived or considered to be natural

Ethical behaviour involves norms ... the famous 'ought' as in 'I ought to do this' or 'I ought not to do that'. Is it possible to 'naturalise' this elusive 'ought' when there exists a plethora of different views which are mainly proposed by philosophers in an attempt to explain and at times regulate ethical behaviour?

One key concept is that ethical behaviour is a central element of human behaviour. Even those who behave badly appear to have some sort of awareness that the actions they choose go against the grain and are likely to cause harm to others. However if we take this position to one extreme, we tend to be led to the position that continuous unethical behaviour results in some sort of 'de-sensitivity' where action that may initially cause the alarm bells of our conscience to peal may, when unethical behaviour is persistent and continuous, create less of a sense of wrong-doing in the person who repetitively acts against what is considered to be 'good behaviour' and may risk losing the sensation which is often felt (or the feeling may be diminished) when harm is done either to oneself or to others as a result of unethical behaviour.

Immanuel Kant had suggested the use of what he called the 'categorical imperative' which invokes the famous maxim 'do unto others as you would have others do unto you'. Could we say that this sort of

behaviour is entirely natural? There is no simple answer to this question and a great deal depends on our view of humanity and our place in the world. Moreover the 'true' meaning of the term 'natural' could be further questioned ... what is 'natural'?

One view of ethical behaviour as natural was proposed by the philosopher John McDowell. He suggests that although the realm of human action, intention and thought is *sui generis*, i.e., in a realm of its own, yet it is a completely natural part of a natural world. McDowell suggests we consider the concept of 'second nature' which he draws from Aristotelian ethics. A newborn child comes into our world as a natural being, however from the moment of birth it is '*bildung*' or enculturation which begins to inculcate ethical behaviour and norms into the child's behaviour. This is further re-inforced through the child's upbringing, education, language and other cultural and contextual aspects which act so as to facilitate the metamorphosis of the child into a mature and natural human being.

Although McDowell's position has been criticised, it possesses some interesting and useful aspects which lead us to consider the possibility of ethical behaviour as natural. After all, why should it be otherwise? Human beings form part of a natural world and act and re-act in conformity with the natural world they inhabit. Second nature is as natural as our 'first' (physical) nature. It helps us to live in harmony with other beings and with everything that surrounds us.

Human beings seem to learn from an early age to 'follow' or 'adopt' the norms and ethical behaviour of the group to whom they belong. Peer pressure is part of this. Young people seem to want to belong to 'their' group and to follow the norms of that group ... for better or for worse. How natural is this? Maybe the interpretation of what is natural is more questionable.

If we take a babies learning curve or dogs we see that from the beginning the main driving force behind their behaviour is 'want' or 'need'. A baby wants food, a baby wants warmth, a baby wants comfort. Babies soon learn that these things come from following patterns of behaviour. Dogs also learn these things in much the same way. When there is a need then certain compliances are profitable. A dog learns that if it fits in with a 'society' through positive interaction with others, the end result is fulfilment of its chosen needs. Survival is natural. A communal organisational route towards mutual security becomes the most profitable long term arrangement. This in turn becomes the passed down standard that evolves, largely due to its success, to survival of those who learn to adapt most and who acquire power within their group or society. As a means of survival of the group or species this appears to be natural.

Ethics may be considered as part of the process of evolution in a concerted attempt to promote healthy interaction within group or society. The choice of following an ethical route in a modern society must be determined on the vulnerability of the individual in any said group. An individual must conform if they value the benefits of belonging in a group or else risk being spurned (rejected). Individuals may choose to conform, against their desire at times, for the benefit of their own family or group within a society. Those who largely spurn ethical values either do so because they do not recognise the benefit to themselves or to others or alternately prefer to run the risk of getting away with it, often because of the charitable nature of the said society and that they also believe they are strong enough to cope with being rejected. In many western societies with a greater disposable income per head it is easier for individuals to support themselves outside social assistance from other members of their group. It is in this sort of example that looseness of ethical values may emerge, this is regrettable, as selfishness without regard to others is so

prevalent. A slip from the right path by a poor impoverished person trying to support a family may be understandable. If one is to consider what life would be like for ourselves in a world with no ethical adherence, it is very likely that it would not appear as a natural place to live in, nor a natural place to bring up children. Natural is what we have standardized as natural and ethics are still part of that 'naturalised' image for most.

***The Power of the Sage* by Richard Seymour**

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You can bribe one who is greedy;
Shame one who is guilty;
Flatter one who is vain;
Threaten one who fears;
Steal from one who values possessions;
Tempt one who has desire;
Break one who is unbending.

The sage is none of these things.
This is the source of his strength.