

## RELIGION

Religions are theories about the meaning of life. Commonly they have three interwoven elements: a morality, a theology and a feeling of ecstasy.

Some sort of morality, or code of conduct is a pre-requisite of the success of an intelligent social animal with a long period of youth and adolescence. Unless there are rules of behaviour that are widely obeyed it is difficult for communal activities to take place or for the next generation to be brought up. The precise form of the rules does not matter too much but they need to include a concept of group loyalty, and precepts as to individual relationships and the regulation of sexual matters.

Behaviour which is to the advantage of the group is not always to the advantage of an individual when rationally analysed. It is because the rational analysis or even pseudorational analysis, in both of which man is versed, might cause the rules to be broken to an unacceptable extent that it is very useful to be able to tie them to the supra-human sanction of a religion.

Rules that are simply a biological convenience thus come to be inextricably involved with particular theologies in a relationship that is sometimes so clearly rationally indefensible that its existence may seem to damage the theology. Why, for example, should the truth of particular mannerisms be related to the number of wives appropriate to a male, however important this may be to the local group organisation?

The critical strength that a morality needs to have to ensure the continued existence of a group depends on how near the group is to the borderline of survival; provided the group morality keeps at least up to this critical strength, a good deal of failing from the optimum code of behaviour is tolerable. If one's society is nourished by North Sea oil it can, if desired, afford to emulate Sodom and Gomorrah, but it cannot do so if it is based on goats nibbling at thorn scrub. There is a sort of regulating mechanism in that when a group is outstandingly successful the rules relax, and this relaxation tends to a decline of a group. In other words too

much luxury tends to lead to decadence.

Generally speaking morality abjures the individual to behave in such a way as to make life tolerable for other members of his group, which might for different people be anything from a small cabal up to the world community. The rules are different for those outside his group; for example it has commonly been quite in order to kill them, even when a formal state of war has not existed. The elimination or subjugation of competitor groups is an important evolutionary mechanism.

In sexual matters morality is aimed at maximum effective reproduction, by providing stable family situations in which children can be brought up, and by discouraging practices such as homosexuality that do not lead to production of offspring. The overriding requirement is that the next generation of the group be safeguarded, but within that framework the detail of the rules can vary widely; the rigidity of their application depending on such factors as climatic rigour.

If man were governed by the dictates of rigid inborn instincts, like an ant, no concept of morality would be necessary.

It is partly because his behaviour is not automatic that he has been able rapidly to adapt himself to a very wide range of circumstances, without the necessity of waiting for mutant forms suitable to each. It is however, not the case that a large brain capable of a degree of reasoning is intrinsically incompatible with the existence of an instinctive code of conduct. Once a group morality is established it is able to perpetuate itself in a form that owes little to the power of reason, and indeed is comparable to an implanted instinct.

It does, moreover, seem that certain aspects of behaviour are inherited and can therefore be regarded as truly instinctive. Mother/child and male/female relationships almost certainly require no tuition, although this may not be easily demonstrable. The same applies to the banding habit and youthful aggression amongst males. What is demonstrable though is that the occasional individual will show a wider degree of compassion than is taught by its local morality -

compassion to insects for example – and, if one searches back, one may well find that this is an inherited trait and therefore a matter of interest rather than of free will.

Can all morality be regarded as arising from mere biological convenience?

If the rational man can believe that this is so he is potentially highly dangerous to his fellows, unless he takes the further step of admitting that he is so conditioned by his local morality that he is unwilling to break it. Is there however, something deeper?

The natural existence in some individuals of wider degrees of compassion than is biologically necessary has been referred to; it may in some cases even be wider than is biologically desirable where it relates to a group enemy such as a grey squirrel, a rat or (for an American Indian) a colonising white man.

Compassion of this type is potentially much more widespread than one might suppose, but it gets itself suppressed by the inevitable actions of the enemy. It is difficult for example, to remain on sympathetic terms with a mosquito that regards one as a legitimate meal, even though one recognises that the mosquito is obliged to seek food if it is to remain alive. Man also has to seek food whether or not he regards rabbits as pleasant fellow creatures with personalities of their own.

This conflict between biological necessity and instinctive sympathy is not a long-term dilemma. It can only be resolved one way if the individual is to continue to form a part of his group breeding stock. The fact of widespread instinctive sympathy remains however, and is a demonstration that there exists a degree of friendly relationship between living things that is outside of biological needs.

The concepts of 'good' and 'evil' are widely used by proponents of group morality. Have they any meaning except in terms of the biological necessities of particular groups? As commonly used, the terms are highly subjective. A rat cannot sensibly be regarded as evil when all it is doing is trying to pursue its group interest

however inconvenient this may be to another animal. One thing for sure is that the concepts 'You are good and will go to heaven' or 'You are evil and will go to hell' are gross oversimplifications, even if it is conceded that there may be such places. Any individual's day is full of incidents where options to obey or disobey the local morality present themselves. Usually he will conform and is therefore 'good', sometimes he will transgress and is therefore 'evil'.

Some of the transgressions will be in respect of what might be called technical matters of biological necessity, for example public or private decency, or group loyalty, which cannot really be regarded as of any significance except to the group interest.

Other conformities or transgressions will relate to an individual adopting a different position on the local norm on what might be called the 'scale of compassion'. A totally compassionate man cannot exist because he would be unwilling to kill any other living organism, including plants, to keep himself alive. Further along the scale one finds vegetarians, then the average meat-eating man who deplures abattoirs but avoids them, to the egoist, the sadist and the sadistic murderer. It is a complete scale, but a sort of multidimensional one, because a vegetarian may eat his wife and a huntsman may be kind and considerate to children. There is a local norm on this scale and there is also a lower level that is acceptable to the group. A man profiting from a purchaser's inexperience is just about acceptable, but one who takes money and renders no service is not. Many would regard a man who extends his compassion beyond the human race as a fool; others would put the sensible cut-off as being beyond the warm blooded vertebrates, or perhaps the fringe of the animal kingdom. The views of the individual betray his position on the scale.

This 'scale of compassion' runs from total consideration for others through indifference, to total antipathy to their wellbeing, and an intelligent individual may well be able to conceal his true position on the scale in the interests of his standing in the group. Moreover each possesses an instinctive 'conscience' that is a mechanism tending to drag him up the scale, which is the bridge linking good and

evil, if these terms have any real meaning?

It is quite difficult to see any factor other than the obvious ones of heredity and environment, and indeed what other factor should one seek? Individual free will? An individual is free to make decisions within the constraints imposed upon him by his heredity and his environment. Has he in himself a conscience, an ability to struggle against tendencies towards the cruel, evil end of the scale?

OK, this is part of the character that he has acquired from his heredity and his environment. It is in any case a matter of cell chemistry and physics. There are plenty of character-changing illnesses whether natural or induced. Dr Jekylls can become Mr Hydes.

All of this seems to point to the conclusion not only that an individual slithers around on this multi-dimensional scale of compassion, but his control of the slithering is limited to that which with circumstances have chosen to endow him. He may be endowed with compassion or he may not, his conscience may be more or less active, just as he may be endowed with an ear for music or he may not. It would be a bit unfair to be condemned to eternal flames just because the scheme of things has been stingy in dishing out the endowments, and of course this is just another of the canards that groups evolve to keep the troops in order. This conclusion is no invitation to licence. Each individual will gravitate to the position on the scale at which he is comfortable, and the group will react to him accordingly.

The holiest of holy men will slaughter countless organisms each time he blows his nose or moves his foot. If he is a vegetarian he feeds upon plants. Does a plant enjoy being boiled alive or dissolved in gastric juice?

The fact that the holy man regards these actions as permissible relates to his personal position in the scale of compassion; others regard it as permissible to put their enemies in extermination camps, perhaps even to make lampshades of their tattooed skin. Clearly there is a difference on the compassion scale, but each

individual gravitates towards his comfortable place.

Do the concepts of Good and Evil mean anything? Extreme goodness is a measure of compassion or identification with things outside oneself; it relates to oneness. Extreme evil is the opposite; the individual standing in positive opposition to all other interests. It is further back along the scale of compassion than individual or group selfishness that occupy the middle ground; it is antipathy to oneness.

There is then this tendency to move together to oneness and this complementary tendency to split apart; and no real evidence that the individual has any right to claim a personal say as to his true position between the extremes. It seems to be a scenario of equal and opposite forces balancing each other and equalling zero. Why should one's instinctive 'conscience' pull towards oneness? Because demonstrably all things are one thing. Why should the forces of disruption pull the other way? Why should positive and negative separate from nothingness into quantifiable forces? Both of these questions lead us beyond our boundary of comprehension, but one thing that seems highly probable is that if plus and minus cancelled out, and good and evil cancelled out, nothing would remain but emptiness. The fabric of the physical universe is an expression of these opposing and interacting forces. Their existence is a condition of all being.

There is no scrap of objective evidence that human society on average has, or will, move an iota from its generally central position on the scale of compassion. This scale is one of the facts of life that all religions incorporate in their theology in order to appear credible and relevant, and for biological reasons many do so by urging towards the middle ground where group interest is best served. Group leaders willingly support this urging, and humanists can accept it as a factual matter, pausing only to be surprised that religious leaders attempt to claim suzerainty.

It is notable that organisms other than man rarely stray from this middle ground where their own interests are paramount. A fox sometimes slaughters more chickens than it eats, and a dolphin sometimes rescues a drowning man; it is

however generally impracticable for a lion to be altruistic and wasteful of its own potential larder to overdo the killing. Even a snake keeps to the middle ground. Primitive man probably had little option in this matter either.

Only modern man, with his complexity, his large brain, and his reserves of spare time and energy, has the ability significantly to explore the extreme limits of the scale of compassion. In this respect he is unique, and it is his practical knowledge of the extremes that adds greatly to the range of his experience. His slippery floundering in his extended scale of compassion is one of the energy sources that run the dynamo of human culture, even though it may be very uncomfortable for those who get knocked over in the process. Would we wish to confine our range of experiences to those of a herd of cows, or even a pride of lions?