The Supplemental Nature of Moral Principles

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Honors Thesis
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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the biological origins of morality that allow it to reach a level that is supplemental to our biological needs. Initially, the inherent desire for survival motivates all human action. Reliance on others for one’s survival is the fundamental connection between biology and morality. Starting with an evolutionary account of morality, this paper shows how moral sentiments are biological and the roots of moral behavior. From this basis, moral sentiments are refined into a mechanism responsible for the survival of a group of individuals. When a group acts as a moral agent, where moral principles are the fundamental ideas within the group, then a group is able to provide for the needs of all of its members. Reaching this state enables a group not only to survive, but also to flourish, where groups can be relatively secure in both their immediate and future survival. The progress made from biological animals to moral humans is through an underlying understanding of moral principles and their relationship to the functional nature of society. From this evolutionary perspective, moral principles are supplemental because they are based in, but not found explicitly within our biology. Moral principles also appear to be supplemental in relation to the development of moral reasoning within individuals. Through cognitive development, individuals become capable of higher levels of moral reasoning. At the highest levels of moral reasoning, a person becomes a moral agent, having an explicit understanding of the principles that enable societies to function. Reaching this level of moral reasoning is beyond what is necessary for individuals to fulfill their societal obligations, but beneficial in reassuring the functional nature of society. By looking at cognition as the product of the evolution of the human being, moral principles are a luxury earned through our social adaptations.
The Supplemental Nature of Moral Principles

Thomas Hobbes states that in the state of nature, human life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 76). If he is correct, then one is left to wonder how human beings continued to survive despite these constraints. For the evolutionary survival of the human species, at least one of these characteristics would have to change, the most obvious being the solitary aspect of life. Reproduction is one obvious example where the solitary life could not possibly provide for the survival of the human species. From this very basic need for others, one can build a morality that enables humans to escape the pessimistic notion of life in the Hobbesian state of nature.

In this paper, I am presenting an integrating account of the evolutionary origins of morality and the evolutionary origins of moral reasoning. To accomplish this task, I draw upon Wilson’s biological perspective on the connection between biology and behavior as the foundation to examine the ability of an individual to act upon moral principles. To progress from biology to moral principles, I examine the evolutionary origins of morality and use a cognitive developmental approach to study the origins of individual reasoning from moral principles. Starting with an evolutionary account, one can see the origins of morality within certain biological tendencies. With the help of natural selection, these moral tendencies are refined into more formalized rules concerning the interaction among individuals. Eventually, these rules become the sets of standards that enable a society to function—to survive. Based in biology, these rules become the morality used by society to determine right and wrong behavior. By applying the notion of morality achieved through this evolutionary account to the individual, one can see the supplemental quality
of moral principles. Through cognitive development, individuals can attain higher levels of moral reasoning in which motivation behind action progresses from basic biological subsistence to an understanding of right and wrong. Acting at these high levels, individuals can actually ensure that society is functioning in a manner that provides for all of its members. Because people are capable of this level of moral reasoning, humans have advanced beyond the biological animal concerned solely with preservation to a level of reasoning concerned with the maintenance of moral principles. This progress shows how moral principles are a luxury of the evolution of human nature because humans are capable of a form of morality that is supplemental to our survival. The combination of the evolutionary account and the application to the individual will clarify how morality is grounded in, but not limited by biology.

Before examining the evolution of morality, it is necessary to explain the meaning of morality. One way to understand morality is in terms of ethics. Anthony Flew suggests that there are two basic meanings of ethics. The first is the common understanding of ethics, defined as a set of standards a particular group uses to regulate behavior (Flew 112). The second he calls the philosophical understanding of ethics, which is an investigation of the theoretical principles and basic concepts that are or ought to be found in a given field of human interaction (Flew 112). The difference between these two notions reflects the two different viewpoints of morality that will be found in this paper. The common understanding of ethics encompasses the rules of behavior that enable society to function. Morality that comes from this sense of ethics conveys a member-of-the-group perspective, a form that will correlate with the end result of my
evolutionary account of morality. The philosophical understanding, on the other hand, suggests a form of morality composed of moral principles that are abstracted from the functional conception. This perspective of morality expresses the form of morality that will be used to explain the supplemental nature of moral principles. While these understandings of morality are distinct, they are not exclusive. An understanding of the first is necessary for the attainment of the second, as will be suggested through an account of socio-cognitive development.

To understand the movement from common to philosophic morality, one needs to comprehend the role of morality within a group. A group is a number of individuals that are bound together by a common function. Common morality is what enables the group to function. A group is a functioning group when it can provide for the needs of its members, which are those that provide for biological subsistence. While individuals are able to provide for some of their own basic needs, the individual cannot sustain the satisfaction of basic needs individually. Frans de Waal points to the need to cooperate in hunting and defense against enemies and predators as the basis for the necessity of living in a group (De Waal 80). As a result of the deficiencies of the individual, one is reliant on the group for survival. If individuals were not dependent on a group, then they would not be inclined to stay in groups because of the disadvantage of being situated among other individuals competing for the same basic resources, mainly food and mates (De Waal 170). Acting as a collective whole, the group functions, providing for the needs of its members, when each individual fulfills his or her role within the group. When the group fulfills its function, individuals have an incentive to stay in the group. Therefore, the group’s preservation relies on its ability to function. If self-preservation ties
individuals to groups, then groups, as a collective whole, are tied to individuals to carry out their roles that allow the group to function and to continue to exist. Self-preservation is the underlying value maintaining this interdependent relationship.

The relationship between individuals and groups affects the conception of “self” in self-preservation. Before reaching an understanding of the “self,” it is important to know what is meant by preservation. At a very basic level, preservation is biological subsistence. With an individual “self,” self-preservation would mean the biological subsistence of an individual. When a person aims at providing for one’s own self-preservation, that person cannot typically achieve such preservation without help from the group because of the interdependent relationship between the group and the individual. Because one is dependent on the group for the satisfaction of one’s basic needs, “self” incorporates both the individual and the group; creating a notion of “self” referring to a social individual.

While the individual relies on society for the satisfaction of needs, the individual is a member of many other groups that also rely on that individual to fulfill many different roles within those groups. Most of us are simultaneously members of many groups that serve various necessary functions within our lives (Ginzberg 138). As a result, the notion of “self” becomes difficult to define because an individual’s interests also include the interests of other groups. The notion of “self” becomes clearer within the cognitive developmental approach to morality. In this context, the recognition of an individual’s interests as present within the group’s interests comes with reaching higher levels of cognition. The individual within this context incorporates the group-oriented member of one group into the role one has to play within another. “Self” is not just a
function of the relationship between individual and group, but the individual and all the groups in which that individual has a role to fulfill.

Starting from the evolutionary account, the individual survival definition of self-preservation gives a basis to understand the motivation behind human action. For morality to emerge through human nature, morality will have to provide for survival or be a byproduct of some other biological mechanism that allows for survival. The set of standards that are the composition of functional morality have a direct relationship to survival as they establish the way the group works to provide for individuals’ preservation. If morality is comprised of something other than these basic standards, then there has to be some other means of integrating self-preservation into the tenets of morality for morality to have continued to be present within evolved humans.

The Origins of Morality

Evolution provides a necessary backdrop to understand the origin of morality. For morality to exist, it has to be grounded in some aspect of the human being. For it to evolve, some biological trait would have to have been refined through natural selection. E. O. Wilson believes that this biological trait is cognition, which is made possible by the human brain. Cognition is the ability to collect and analyze information in a manner that makes sense of the external world. As a biological adaptation, “the brain is a machine assembled not to understand itself, but to survive” (Wilson 105). From the evolutionary point of view, because the brain was built to survive in the world, it is only incidental that
the brain works at a level deeper than is needed to survive (Wilson 66). The disparity between the function of the brain to perform cognition and the result of the mind capable of using cognition in a manner not directly promoting survival implies the possibility of biological traits swaying from what is absolutely necessary.

Before one can understand the movement from cognition to morality, one needs to understand how cognition leads to moral sentiments. Frans de Waal defines three conditions as necessary to explain the materialization of morality through understanding. The first condition is group value, which he defines as “dependence on the group for finding food or defense against enemies and predators” (De Waal 34). If one is not dependent on the group to provide for basic needs, then one has no reason to align behavior with the rules that the group sets. The second condition is mutual aid, which is “cooperation and reciprocal exchange within the group” (De Waal 34). This condition establishes how the group is able to work together to provide for the needs that the individual is unable to provide for by oneself. The last condition de Waal describes as necessary is internal conflict, defined as the state when “individual members have disparate interests” (De Waal 34). Internal conflict suggests a difference between individual and collective interests and among various individuals’ interests, mandating the recognition of disparity between one’s own interests and the interests of another. Being able to act in a manner contrary to self-interest conveys the possibility of morality. These three conditions lead to morality when the individual recognizes both the advantages and disadvantages of group life and determines that the benefits outweigh the costs. As a result, a person will be willing to act according to the rules that the group establishes.
Conflict that exists within groups exists because of the disparate interests of individuals. The fact that individuals are willing to remain in groups despite possible conflict implies that individuals understand the need for the group. To compensate for the disadvantages associated with conflict, a group must provide for the survival of its individual members. Groups necessarily fulfill this role because natural selection could never arrange where groups were able to disregard the needs of individuals (De Waal 33). If groups fail to provide for the needs of individuals, then the individuals within those groups would either die off from the inadequate satisfaction of their needs or would have no incentive to stay in the group. While there may be instances when a person would stay in a group despite the disregard of one’s interests, there could never emerge groups that are indifferent towards individuals’ interests for prolonged periods of time because of the group’s reliance on individuals for its existence. When people realize that the group will benefit large numbers of people or will fail to preserve itself, one can trust that the group will provide for the individual. By trusting the group, one is able to become less egoistic and become more concerned for the community (De Waal 33). An individual who connects individual and collective interests will also choose to act in an acceptable manner in relation to how such behaviors allow society to function (De Waal 39). Since formations of groups are a biological tendency, evolution, through cognition, has created the prerequisites for morality: a tendency to develop social norms and enforce them, the capacity to feel empathy and sympathy, the ability to provide mutual aid, and a sense of fairness because these tendencies allow for groups to function (De Waal 39).

The biological understanding of cognition explains how certain behaviors are natural. The mind is a composition of genetic tendencies determined by epigenetic rules.
Epigenetic rules “comprise the full range of inherited regularities of development in anatomy, physiology, cognition, and behavior” (Wilson 163). Geneticists have calculated the proportionate contributions of genes across a large array of traits in sensory physiology, brain function, personality, and intelligence (Wilson 168). There is not a one to one correspondence between genes and certain behaviors, but genes that formulate epigenetic rules create certain behavioral tendencies within individuals.

“Genes prescribe epigenetic rules, which are the regularities of sensory perception and mental development that animate and channel the acquisition of culture. Culture helps to determine which of the prescribing genes survive and multiply from one generation to the next. Successful new genes alter the epigenetic rules of populations. The altered epigenetic rules change the direction and effectiveness of the channels of cultural acquisition” (Wilson 171).

Behaviors, that allow for the biological subsistence of an individual, are going to survive and dominate over behaviors that do not. Epigenetic rules express the biological basis of predominating behavior. As survival-based behavior dominates through natural selection, the end result will be groups composed of such individuals. If self-preservation, in the form of an individual’s biological survival, determines individuals’ behaviors, then the group has to function to facilitate that preservation. Individuals are social because certain behaviors are complementary both to the individual’s and to society’s survival (Wilson 210).

Moral sentiments initiate the emergence of behaviors that integrate individual and collective interests. Moral sentiments are emotions, such as sympathy and empathy, situated between instinct and a formalized notion of morality. Wilson describes these sentiments as originating in the dynamic relation between cooperation and defection (Wilson 275). He suggests that tendencies toward both cooperation and defection are genetic, making some people more prone to each behavior than others. The dynamic
quality of this relationship is apparent when an individual has to choose between cooperating with another and defecting from such cooperation. An individual who thinks cognitively is able to evaluate situations to reach a more desirable outcome for both that individual and the group than would a rationally self-interested individual. Through cognition, one can work through what appears to be conflicting interests to make them complementary. Such a compromise among apparently disparate interests requires cooperation. Genes that predispose people toward cooperative behavior should dominate those genes that predispose people toward defective behavior because cooperation is more apt to provide for survival. Through this process, natural selection gives birth to moral sentiments through the individual’s alignment of one’s self-interested behavior with the interests of a group.

Wilson uses the example of the prisoners’ dilemma to explain the emergence of certain behaviors from moral sentiments. The prisoners’ dilemma is a famous game theory situation where two individuals have to make choices simultaneously while not knowing what decision the other person will make. They are typically cast as two criminals who have committed a crime. While the police have arrested them and know that these criminals have committed the crime, the police do not have enough evidence to convict either criminal without the other confessing. The police offer a deal, illustrated numerically in table 1.1, that has the end result that while both criminals would be better by cooperating with one another and not confess, each person is better off confessing regardless of the choice made by the other person. In game theory, the choice that is better for a person regardless of the choice made by one’s opponent is known as an individual’s dominant strategy (Dixit and Skeath 85). Each criminal is much better off if
the other criminal does not confess, but is still better off confessing if the other criminal does confess. While confessing is the dominant strategy, if both people confess, they are both worse off than if they had both cooperated. Since this example is usually given in the context of prisoners or criminals, the assumption is that the criminals distrust one another. Even though both criminals would benefit from cooperation, the distrust that exists between the two makes them incapable of reaching the best solution.

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*Note: Payoffs listed in terms of years in prison with payoff for player one being listed first.

While the prisoners’ dilemma is truly a dilemma for the self-interested agent, the combination of reason and emotion inherent within human beings explains how one is able to reach a solution for this dilemma. Wilson defines emotion as, “the modification of neural activity that animates and focuses mental activity. It selects certain streams of information over others, shifting the body and mind to higher or lower degrees of activity” (Wilson 123). For two people to reach a solution to the prisoners’ dilemma, cognition cannot be just rational self-interest, but rationality embedded in trust.

Game theorists suggest that the only way for cooperation to occur in simultaneous games like the prisoners’ dilemma is when there is a mechanism that can enforce the agreement to cooperate (Dixit and Skeath 85-87). If such an enforcement mechanism did exist, neither person would have to rely on trusting the other, but would be able to trust that the enforcement of cooperation by society would make cooperation the rational, self-
interested decision. The existence of an external agent would change the payoffs listed in Table 1.1 to be more like those in Table 1.2. In the second situation, the rationally self-interested strategy is to cooperate. This change is not because of progress made in one’s cognitive abilities, but because of the existence of an enforcement mechanism. In the same manner that choices for these two prisoners are affected by the other agent and an external agent, moral sentiments evolve into a more refined form of morality because the people’s behaviors are susceptible to judgment and punishment by the group, the enforcing mechanism.

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*Note: Payoffs listed in terms of years in prison with payoff for player one being listed first.

Wilson’s use of the prisoners’ dilemma depicts the movement from moral sentiments to functional morality. Moral sentiments lead to the well being of individuals when cognition, the combination of emotion and reason, leads to decisions that provide for the well-being of the group rather than the individual. As societies emerge, they are composed of individuals capable of such cognition. As a result, the group can act as an enforcement mechanism because its members understand the need for cognitively made choices rather than rationally self-interested ones. The interdependent relationship between the individual and the group allows the group to punish those that do not do what is best for the group, like fail to cooperate. Cooperative behavior is beneficial because it is best for many rather than for just one. Moral sentiments, such as
cooperative behavior, give the foundation on which the group can function as they are implicit within the functioning of the group as the enforcement mechanism. Without the group, the individual would have no incentive to regulate behavior that compromises one’s desire to satisfy one’s own needs. In the case of the prisoners’ dilemma, if there is no enforcement mechanism, the cognitive individual that cooperates loses out if the other rationally self-interested individual chooses to confess. In such an instance, there is no unifying relationship between these two people forming a group--there are only two individuals. Thus, rules for behavior must combine rational promotion of self-interest and emotion in order to attain moral behavior within society. As long as the group’s ability to judge actions affects an individual’s way of satisfying one’s self-interest, then the group is able to formulate rules for individuals’ behaviors that are grounded in moral sentiments.

Biological tendencies are the origins of morality. At this level of progress, morality is a form of compromise to which one must agree in order to attain the resources necessary for survival. This form of morality fails to explain how morality can be distinguished from behavior that provides for an individual’s basic survival. It works to facilitate group interaction regardless of any external notions of right or wrong. Moral sentiments, the means to morality thus far, do not explain how a person can be moral in a manner contrary to one’s own self-interest.

The Function of Morality
The rules that determine acceptable behavior for individuals become the means by which groups function. As defined earlier, a group’s function is to provide for the needs of its members. One task included in this function is the distribution of resources. The receipt of a sufficient allocation of resources depends on an individuals’ ability to promote one’s interests in a manner acceptable for the rest of the group to function. For example, a person that hoards tools to build shelter might receive an insufficient allocation of food as a form of punishment because of the effect that person’s actions have on the rest of the group’s ability to function. In this example, the group uses resource allocation as its enforcing mechanism. Because the individual’s actions are unacceptable to the group, the group reciprocates through its distribution of resources. The individuals’ dependence on the attainment of resources from the group makes the individual sensitive to the needs of the group.

An individual’s dependence on a group encourages attachment. Humans are attached to others before they are even able to make conscious decisions. Attachment exists through inherent biological tendencies. Frans de Waal states that humans “have been endowed with a capacity for genuine love, sympathy, and care” (De Waal 16). For individuals to continue to be attached to others, the emotional basis of attachment must have a rational, self-interested, complement that corresponds to an increase in one’s ability to survive. Rationally, people are attached to the group because they are attached to others for the attainment of resources needed for one’s survival. The ability of the group to distribute resources presupposes the possession of those resources. For the group to attain these resources, each group member fulfills certain roles for the group and consequently attains necessary resources. When one recognizes the roles that each
individual plays in the group, does that individual understand the worth of others to one’s self-interest. Since all individuals within a group are in this same state, the distribution of the necessary resources relies on following the rules that enable society to function. At first, an individual follows these rules naturally, but for one to continue to follow these rules and curb one’s behavior, that individual has to trust that the group will provide for one’s self-preservation. When one’s cognitive abilities reaffirm one’s attachment towards others, one is able to trust in the functioning of society.

For morality to be more than the a group’s “compelling force,” individuals need to be attached to and value all other members of the group without the help of an enforcement mechanism (Ginzberg 138). All members of the group are dependent on the group and therefore on other individuals for their own preservation. While individuals naturally have a sense of attachment to others separate from any coercive efforts of the group, an individual needs a sense of attachment with all members of society for morality to provide for all of society’s members. A connection needs to be felt towards all and not just some for morality to progress beyond a bias towards one’s self-interest. Even though the “self” attached to others would include more than just one individual, morality would still be a compelling force rather than a determinant of right and wrong behavior.

Attachment is the result of emotions felt towards others. When individuals are placed in danger, other individuals’ are “vicariously affected by someone else’s feelings and situation” (De Waal 41). This emotional response to someone else’s situation is known as empathy. Through empathy, one understands the situation of others. The combination of empathy with a recognition of one’s dependence on that person makes one not only emotionally attached to the endangered person, but rationally attached to
that person as well. To promote others’ well-being, the individual acts sympathetically (De Waal 41). The combination of sympathy and cognitive empathy enables one “to picture oneself in the position of another individual” (De Waal 48). These emotions enable an individual to have an understanding of others’ needs and how one can help provide for those needs. While these actions can be reaffirmed by one’s rational self-interest, these emotions allow for feelings of attachment to others and progress to a more functional notion of morality.

Sympathy and empathy create an environment conducive to the establishment of trust. As suggested through the prisoners’ dilemma, when trust does not exist, cooperation is coerced. The importance of trust in cooperative behavior is seen in the emergence of reciprocal altruism. Reciprocal altruism is displayed when an individual performs an act for the benefit of another while causing a disadvantage to one’s self (De Waal 24). Such acts are also characterized by the fact that the performer engages in the act because the performer has, in the past, been the recipient (De Waal 24). The most important feature in reciprocal altruism, however, is the lag time between giving and receiving. Reciprocal altruism shows the relationship that exists between cooperation and self-interest. An individual willingly partakes in these exchanges because of an obligation felt from having been benefited in the past. Although motivated by the satisfaction of one’s past self-interest, acting altruistically implies a caring for others that does not cause direct or immediate benefit for the actor. By partaking in reciprocally altruistic acts, individuals create a system of reciprocally altruistic behavior that makes all individuals possible recipients of future benefits. Behavior is not curbed by an enforcement mechanism, but by the trust one has in the group’s ability to function in a
manner that allows one to shift focus away from the exclusive aim of one’s own subsistence.

The emergence of empathetic and sympathetic behaviors expresses the incompleteness of the individual conception of “self” in self-preservation. A primary motivation behind actions is self-preservation. An individual is not only reliant on oneself, but also reliant on the group to provide for one’s survival. When a person feels and acts empathetically or sympathetically, that person is preserving one’s “self” through the preservation of others that are part of the group. Because these other individuals play a role in that individual’s survival, their preservation affects the preservation of the individual. Although empathetic and sympathetic behaviors do benefit the interests of the individual, they are not rationally self-interested behaviors, but emotional responses to particular situations. Others are extensions of the self for which one must provide in order to obtain self-preservation (De Waal 69). The expansion of the conception of “self” from the individual to include others is based in emotional responses, but can be understood according to one’s rational self-interest. The beneficial implications of these intrinsic emotions gives support for the biological tendencies that predispose us toward a social existence.

When the incompleteness of the individual notion of “self” is understood by an individual, one is able to choose rationally to promote collective rather than individual interests. The ability to reason according to collective interests occurs when an individual is already a member of a group. Through rational thought, one judges whether it is beneficial to continue being part of that group. To make an active decision, one must recognize the disparity that exists between how one would promote one’s interests
without group constraints and how one would act within such constraints, or the decision
would not need to be made. Displacement of the individual as the “self” in self-
preservation allows one to see oneself as part of a greater whole, but a distinguishable
part of that whole. If one were unable to distinguish oneself from the group, there would
be no need for checks on individual self-promotion. Because of this shift in the notion of
“self,” an individual can accept the rules of society that do not directly provide for the
individual’s interests.

The combination of emotional responses that promote survival with a rational
reaffirmation of such behavior allows for the emergence of social norms. As shown
earlier, emotions such as sympathy and empathy are natural reactions to particular
situations. These emotions lend themselves to the preservation of the group. When
rationality reaffirms emotional responses, one has a natural tendency towards behaviors
that promote the preservation of the group. From these natural tendencies, one can derive
social norms. When individuals understand that their behavior is checked by the
distribution of resources determined by the group, then those individuals recognize that
others’ reactions matter. As people come to monitor their behavior in accordance with
others’ reactions, there can be a sense of social regularity. From this social regularity,
there can also be a set of expectations about the way one will be treated and how
resources will be divided in the future (De Waal 95). Thus, social norms create stable
and predictable behavior patterns (De Waal 96). When social norms compel individuals
to constrain or change their behavior, then they act as determinants for what is acceptable
behavior in pursuit of one’s aim. The actualization of one’s social role as one’s aim
reflects how these norms construct what is right and wrong in regards to the functioning of the group.

The explicit application of these norms to one’s behavior expresses the shift from groups’ functional to personal morality. Abstraction of a personal morality from the functional morality of the group occurs when an individual is able to apply the groups’ judgment of right and wrong to one’s own behavior (De Waal 105). This process implies an internalization of judgment of what is acceptable and unacceptable. De Waal refers to Adam Smith’s impartial spectator as one holding a mirror up to decide how one’s behavior looks to others (De Waal 109). When people internalize this impartial spectator, then they are going beyond conforming to societal rules and actually internalizing them. This internalization allows an individual to attain a personal morality (De Waal 114).

Extraction of personal morality from the values found within societal ethics allows individuals to act explicitly according to an expanded notion of “self.” Evidence of this shift is seen when people partake in behaviors that promote group rather than individual preservation. De Waal points to bravery as a characteristic of behavior that could often be counter to an individual’s self-interest, but uphold a collective interest. While in appearance, bravery is counter to an individual’s subsistence, in reality, bravery has to be valuable to the actor for it to continue to exist. If bravery were counter to preservation, then those who acted bravely would die out, fail to reproduce, and eventually be weeded out by natural selection (De Waal 134). Because bravery still exists, it must promote the performer’s interests, if not immediately, then sometime in the long run either for the individual or his family (De Waal 134). Engaging in brave acts
that might lead to self-sacrifice implies that one is acting in a manner apparently contrary to one’s own preservation, but beneficial for another form of preservation. One such instance is kin selection, which is a helping tendency that spreads to one’s family if that help results in an increased survival and reproduction of kin (De Waal 134). There are many examples of kin selection where an individual will partake in an action that might harm the actor’s chances for reproduction, but will allow genes to pass on to the next generation (De Waal 135). While bravery might not preserve the immediate self, it preserves a group to which one belongs. When an individual acts in such a manner, then it becomes apparent that an individual is acting to preserve not the individual, but the group to which that individual belongs, e.g., a family. If such actions promote self-preservation, then “self” can no longer refer to the individual, but to the immediate group to which that individual belongs. Action motivated by the internalization of group value allows for the group to be the valued form of preservation within individuals’ actions (De Waal 169). The individual does not promote one’s own immediate interests, but acts in a manner to provide for the preservation of the group.

When individuals reach a level of cognition where survival alone does not motivate behavior, humans are no longer concerned with basic needs, but concerned with morality, the mechanism used to ensure people’s basic needs are satisfied. Within humans’ biological composition, there is no organic mechanism that is specifically designed to provide humans with morality. While not present physically, there are mechanisms found within humans that make them necessarily social and therefore necessarily moral. The difference between what is explicitly biological and what enables
us to be social and to continue to survive expresses the supplemental nature of morality as seen through this evolutionary perspective on morality.

The Theoretical Notion of Functional Morality

To see why moral principles can be viewed as supplemental as well, one needs to look at how individuals come to attain moral principles. To progress from the functional notion of morality to a morality of principles requires that individuals are capable of action disconnected from individual survival. De Waal alludes to this shift through the relationship between altruism and morality. When one acts altruistically, one is disregarding one’s own immediate self-interest. For such actions to exist, they must not have been weeded out by natural selection because they provide for some form of self-preservation. “The form of altruism closest to egoism, care of the immediate family” expresses how altruism can become somewhat selfish as actions are motivated by the promotion of those to which one is attached (De Waal 212). As one becomes more attached to larger groups of people, “the circle of altruism and moral obligation widens to the extended family, clan and group, up to and including tribe and nation” (De Waal 212). As people define “self” as the group, then biological subsistence cannot be the motivation behind individuals’ behavior because such behavior would be insufficient to provide for “self”-preservation.

The relationship between “self” and altruism suggests a valuation of others through an expansion of the notion of “self.” With this new conception of “self,” a person is not motivated by individual survival, but implicitly trusts that society will
provide for the individual. Because of this trust, an individual can value the group and
the rules that allow that group to function. Recognizing that a society functions only
when it provides for its members aids in the understanding of what is right as what allows
for functioning and what is wrong as what prohibits a society from taking care of its
members. An understanding of the value of the group to individuals gives a guide for the
determination of right and wrong. The ability of an individual to internalize the judgment
of actions as right or wrong in terms of their value to the group allows for the emergence
of personal moral principles. When people act with disregard for their individual
interests and act according to one’s determination of right and wrong, then they are acting
according to their moral principles.

The account of morality given thus far explains how biological traits lead to moral
sentiments and how moral sentiments lead to functional morality, but functional morality
provides the basis for the possibility of understanding moral principles. This account
merely alludes to how we come to attain moral principles. Because it does not define
moral principles as the necessary reasoning behind individuals’ behavior for a society to
function, these moral principles seem to be supplemental to society’s functioning. To
understand why moral principles are supplemental, we need an account that roots them in
biology, but explains their articulation as unnecessary. Lawrence Kohlberg’s account of
moral development expresses such a progression from self-interested behavior to self-
evaluating behavior.

Kohlberg’s cognitive developmental approach to morality explains how cognition
can lead to higher levels of moral development. Kohlberg defines cognitive structures as
the product of interaction with the outside world (Kohlberg 8). As one becomes more
developed, “patterns of thought become more complex, differentiated, and adaptive” (Colby and Kohlberg 5). The greater objectivity that corresponds to higher levels of development leads to the capacity for higher levels of moral reasoning. The ultimate endpoint of moral development is where the universalized principles of justice and equality exist (Kohlberg 9). At this point of development, a person’s morality is characterized by acting according to these principles, not because of the benefits received from acting according to these principles, but because of the value one places on these principles. Kohlberg’s definition of morality as emerging through cognitive development has many implications. One of these implications is that greater cognitive ability allows for greater moral development. His approach consists of six stages that are fixed points on a continuum. He groups these six stages into three basic levels: preconventional, conventional, and postconventional. If we look at moral development in terms of these three basic levels, moral principles emerge from the cognition of the social individual.

At the preconventional level of moral development, stages one and two, action is motivated by individual interest and the avoidance of punishment (Kohlberg 52). A person acting at this level is synonymous with the individual that cooperates in the prisoners’ dilemma. The individual acts in accordance with society’s standards because society can enforce obedience. Because the rules exist prior to the individual, a person’s determination of right and wrong comes directly from the group. One has not yet developed an internal mechanism for determining right and wrong, but relies solely on the judgments received by the group (Colby and Kohlberg 25). As a result, individuals see right and wrong as an intrinsic quality within certain actions, making their moral judgments simplistic. The simplicity of moral judgments is also a consequence of the
perspective individuals at this level use to examine situations. In this stage, an individual only perceives of one perspective—the only given by society. Having no variance between one’s own perspective and the perspective of the group, individuals do not recognize the possibility of divergent perspectives among different people. Without understanding the existence of multiple viewpoints, one fails to recognize the complexity of moral situations, making moral judgments appear self-evident (Kohlberg and Colby 25).

As a person moves from stage one to stage two, an individual is able to recognize different perspectives, but sees each person’s primary aim behind actions as the maximization of one’s needs and desires while minimizing negative consequences (Kohlberg and Colby 26). Because all people have these same motivations, a person can believe that one can correctly anticipate someone else’s reaction to one’s decisions. As a result, an individual can attempt to maximize self-interest by staying within the limits established by society (Colby and Kohlberg 23).

At the conventional stages of moral development, stages three and four, action is motivated by the acceptance of behavior in accordance to the values of society (Kohlberg 52). In the third stage, individuals recognize what is right and wrong as general norms among groups of people. These norms have been established by trusting that others will live up to expectations (Colby and Kohlberg 27). As the person progresses to the fourth stage, general norms do not come just from groups of people, but from society. An individual sees one’s self as an integrated part of the greater whole, society, and has a member-of-society perspective, based on the belief that the social system is a consistent set of codes and procedures that apply impartially to all members (Colby and Kohlberg
Individuals act in accordance with moral norms because they recognize the functional nature of morality. The value of morality to the functioning of the group enables individuals to make determinations of right and wrong as actions affect society. Because one has a specific role to play in society, one has a particular perspective as to what it means to be a member of society. Others have different roles within society and therefore have different perspectives. The society, rather than the individual, is responsible for taking into account these different perspectives in the distribution of resources that satisfy the needs of its members.

At the postconventional level, stages five and six, action is motivated by the concern to maintain respect of equals, of the community, and by the concern of self-condemnation for violating one’s own principles (Kohlberg 53). This level of development expresses another shift in perspectives. At the conventional level, a person has a member-of-society perspective that suggests they are part of a greater whole. Through development to the postconventional level, a person has a prior-to-society perspective that shifts back to an individualistic outlook on morality (Colby and Kohlberg 29). By prior-to-society, Kohlberg is suggesting that a person is a moral agent aware of universalizable values and rights that anyone would choose to build into a moral society (Colby and Kohlberg 29). The postconventional individual has a perspective with which one can evaluate the validity of laws as to what degree they preserve and protect the well-being of others (Colby and Kohlberg 29). This moral agent uses an explicit understanding of moral principles to make these judgments. While an individual thinks with an individualistic perspective, moral decisions are not characterized by an individual’s interests. Rather, the individual makes decisions according to the moral
principles that promote the interests of all. These agents have a critical perspective with which they understand the complexity of moral situations and can determine the rightness or wrongness of behavior in terms of the tenets that enable society to function.

When people reach the postconventional level of moral reasoning, they are moral agents capable of moral decisions without relying on the functional morality of society. The ability to reasoning according to moral principles is a luxury in that not all people are capable of or even need to develop to this high a level. As Kohlberg asserts, the conventional level of reasoning is sufficient for the stability of society. If a society functions to provide for the needs of its members, then having a member-of-society perspective on moral issues is sufficient for that society and therefore its members to survive. Moral principles, then, are a luxury because an explicit understanding them is not necessary for society to function.

While reasoning based on moral principles is not necessary within members of society for their survival, the presence of moral agents within a group makes that group more adaptive. Kohlberg states that as an individual progresses through moral stages, they are able to reason through more complex scenarios. Likewise, a society with more moral agents is capable of reasoning through more complex moral situations. With an explicit understanding of the principles that enable society to function, moral agents can use their critical perspective to determine whether societies are actually functioning in a manner aligned with those principles. Societies that have the capability of self-critic are more adaptive and able to flourish because they can reconfigure their morality to ensure that it allows for the needs of all of its members. Reasoning based on moral principles is
supplemental among its members and supplemental for society in that such reasoning is 
not necessary for immediate survival, but makes it more able to survive in the future.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I have integrated three accounts of morality to show how 
morality is based in biology, but supplemental to our biological functioning. For the 
formulation of this theory to take place, the tendency to be social must be inherent within 
human beings. Because of our social nature, some mechanism either implicit or explicit 
within groups enables the collective to provide for the biological subsistence of its 
members. This mechanism stems from two different tendencies: the ability to reason and 
the ability to feel. These two tendencies are combined into one--the ability to think 
cognitively. Through cognition, we find ourselves as members of groups that have 
emotional attachments to other members of those groups. As we develop our rational 
capacity, we do not choose to leave these groups, but to act in a manner that supports 
them. Because we are cognitive beings, we choose to abide by the rules that enable the 
society to function. These rules are morality. While morality is the result of biological 
tendencies, it is not found within any explicit organic aspect of the human being, but still 
necessary for the human being. Morality is supplemental to our biology in the sense that 
we have developed the ability to be moral without having that ability being attributed to 
some physical attribute.

While supplemental to our biology, morality is necessary given the social nature 
of humans. Morality is necessary for our social environments to function. Through the
investigation of morality within individuals, who are developing cognitively, we come to understand how morality makes society functional. Through Kohlberg’s cognitive development approach to morality, we can see how higher levels of development lead to a better understanding of what is needed for society to function and how an individual must act to maintain that functioning. The endpoint of this cognitive development is reached when one has an explicit understanding of the principles that are implicit within the workings of society. These principles make it possible for society to function. Therefore, these moral principles are necessary within the context of a functioning group.

While necessary for society, reasoning according to moral principles is supplemental within the individual because an explicit understanding of them is unnecessary for survival. In a society, moral principles are necessary because they provide an infrastructure that enables society to function. The principles of equality and justice ensure that society provides for its members. Within the individual, however, moral principles are supplemental to the level of reasoning needed to perform one’s role within society. An explicit understanding of moral principles can be important within individuals as this understanding can make sure that society is actually functioning according to these principles. When taking this perspective within the broader scope of the evolution of morality, moral principles seem to be a luxury for individuals as the capability is the result of the refinement of biological tendencies. Moral principles are supplemental of human nature as they show the progress made from being a biological animal to being conscious human beings. The detour taken by humans through cognition suggests that all our capabilities are not necessary for subsistence, but some of our
biological capabilities provide us with a better, more enriched existence where such ideas like equality and justice are necessary.
1: The idea of needs, basic or real, is problematic and its own branch of philosophy. I would like to define needs for survival as those of food, water, shelter, and protection, but I realize how this definition is problematic, especially in terms of its interpretation. To explore further the problems of needs see *Unruly Practices* by Nancy Fraser.

2: Orangutans are the only non-social primates, apparently because the native environment of their evolution had no natural predators and had plenty of food.

3: By saying a rational individual in no way do I suggest that such a person does or even could possibly exist. I am merely trying to illustrate the difference between rationality and cognition. To make this difference more clear, rationality has two basic meanings. The first is the idea of being a rationally, self-interested agent. The second refers to the belief that rationality has the following characteristics: (a) the belief that it is possible to obtain, by reason alone, a knowledge of nature of what exists, (b) the view that knowledge forms a single system, which is (c) deductive in character; and (d) the belief that everything is explicable to that system (Flew 298-299).
Bibliography


