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### Religion and Morality: The Evolved Cognitive Nexus

The relationship between religion and morality is a topic of widespread interest and intense debate: Is morality a product of religion? Can one be moral without religion? Can moral claims be justified outside of a religious context? What is the connection between religion and violence? These important questions have long been subject to investigation by theologians and philosophers, among others. Evolutionary studies, however, provide a different way into these issues. Morality has been topic for evolutionary theory since Darwin, but an evolutionary approach to religion, based on research into the evolution of the brain, is a more recent development--one with substantial empirical grounding. Drawing on the insights from both fields, this talk will set out the evolved cognitive mechanisms that constitute the nexus of religion and morality.

A major claim to be defended is that this evolved nexus is an ancient one, possibly predating the Upper Paleolithic Period. Two important implications follow from this: 1) Religion (understood as a social system of behaviors, beliefs, and norms involving one or more supernatural entity) can be understood as a moral innovation of the human species that arises from the interplay of specific cultural environments and species-typical cognitive mechanisms; 2) Religion, in assuming a causal role in promoting social cooperation and group cohesion throughout the history of homo sapiens, could have played a causal role in human evolution. As part of the environmental/cultural niche in which human evolution has taken place, religion may have exerted selective pressure for those moral/religious cognitive mechanisms that constitute the evolved nexus. This is not to suggest that these cognitive mechanisms evolved for religion, but rather, once religious beliefs are generated as by-products of these evolved mechanisms, they become culturally available as effective proximate triggers of the cognitive and emotional tools that underlie moral psychology. We will conclude by exploring implications of this model for understanding the role of religion in the contemporary world. In particular, we will examine how the cognitive nexus of religion and morality underlies religion's role in both conflict and conflict resolution; it also helps explain the impressive resilience of religious belief in the modern world.