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The biological basis for religion and religion's evolutionary origins.

Complex animal societies are most successful if members minimise harms caused to one another and if collaboration occurs. Genes which promote such actions and hence stabilise societies will confer benefits on their bearers and will spread in populations. Qualities which are needed in individuals in order that moral actions will occur include: ability to recognise beneficiaries and benefactors, ability to remember one's own actions and their consequences, ability to assess risk, ability to detect and respond to cheating, a desire to conform, affection for certain individuals and an ability to feel empathy. Sentience is involved in this collection of abilities and the advantages for socially living animals of being able to work together with other individuals have favoured the appearance of sentience and the development of more and more sophisticated cognitive function. Empathy is the process of understanding the experience of another individual, cognitively and emotionally whilst sentience means having the awareness and cognitive ability necessary to have feelings.

There are several genetic mechanisms encouraging altruism. Although competition occurs in social animals, it is generally of less importance than co-operation. Life in social groups is not principally about competition between individuals. There can be competition among genes which results in altruism by individuals. Genes cannot be selfish, although sentient individuals can. Morality has evolved in humans and in many other social species. The central characteristic of religions is a structure which supports a moral code, essentially the same one in all religions, so the basis for religions has evolved. All human societies have a propensity for religion because religion provides a structure for the moral code that is valuable in all of those societies. The religious framework makes life easier for the average person and makes it easier for the likely transgressors of moral codes to understand what should and should not be done.

The attitudes which people have towards other humans and individuals of other species are greatly affected by this biologically-based morality. There is widespread empathy for people or other animals with problems. All of these empathic feelings throughout the world can be thought of as a common spirit.

Improved communication in human societies has the important and valuable effect of increasing the size of the group thought of as "us" to include all people and, to some extent, individuals of other sentient species. These issues affect decisions about which individuals are thought of as being moral agents, which can be the subject of moral actions and which have moral value. We should consider our obligations to ensure good welfare in other humans and animals which we use, rather than thinking in terms of human rights.