

**THE GENEALOGY OF MORALS**

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I

Imagine a population of organisms with limited altruistic dispositions. For each of these organisms, there's a variety of contexts and a range of other members of the population such that the psychological states of the focal organism – specifically the desires and the emotions – will adjust to reflect that organism's perceptions of the wants, needs and feelings of the others. These dispositions enable the organisms to interact with one another on a number of cooperative projects, and, indeed, enable them to function as a population, to live in the same place at the same time and to encounter one another daily without too high an incidence of social friction and violence. But the dispositions are limited, cooperators are sometimes exploited, returns are uneven, and, when there is an opportunity for large selfish benefits, even long-standing allies are sometimes left in the lurch. Defections threaten to tear the social fabric, and, in their wake, much signaling is required; our organisms engage in prolonged bouts of grooming and other forms of physical reassurance.

I'll call these organisms "hominids", although it would be equally apt to dub them "chimpanzees". Their limited social lives reflect their limited psychological altruism, and, in turn, prevent them from gathering in much larger groups and from participating in more complex cooperative projects. If, however, we look at their evolved descendants some quarter of a million generations later, we discover that the limits have been transcended. Ten thousand years before the present, the successors of our hominids have started to live in settlements that sometimes contain a much larger number of them, they have come to interact peacefully with many hominids whom they don't encounter on a daily basis, and they've constructed complex systems of cooperation that involve marked differentiation of roles. How have they managed to do it? One possibility is that they've acquired some new and stronger mechanism for psychological altruism. Another, the one I'm going to explore, is that other changes that have occurred, including in particular the acquisition of language, have made it possible for them to reinforce the original limited altruistic tendencies, so that they no longer falter quite as frequently in their cooperation. Because defection is more often prevented, less time has to be spent in re-knitting the social fabric. The cumbersome peacemaking of our original hominids is replaced by a new device, one that pre-empts rupture rather than reacting to it. That device is part of what we think of as morality.

The crucial change is the ability for self-governance according to a system of rules. Let me state, baldly, some of the steps that may have been important in the emergence of that ability. I begin with the development of systems of punishment.

Even in groups in which there's no genuine punishment, animals sometimes engage in agonistic encounters. Let's ask, then, what conditions are required to transform the agonistic interactions in such groups into real punishment. In the initial state, I suppose, the adverse reaction of one animal to the behavior of another is quite uncoordinated with the behavior of others; sometimes others may intervene to help the "victim", on other occasions not. A first step in the direction of punishment seems to be that other members of the group, even those that may be allies of the threatened animal, should not intervene. Thus we can envisage populations in which there's a regular pattern; with few exceptions, aggression in contexts of particular types doesn't cause the allies of the aggressor's target to rally round – the allies "let" the aggression go forward. Next we can imagine that the mere regularity is coupled with an expectation, shared by the organisms in the population, that others won't interfere in such contexts. Further, this expectation may lead to no resistance on the part of the target; the animal picked out merely suffers what happens. Yet another refinement would be the existence of a regularity concerning the animals who carry out the aggression: perhaps they are animals who bear a particular relation to the context, perhaps they play a particular social role. Finally, we can suppose that there's an expectation about the identities of the animals who initiate aggression. At this last stage, we seem to have reached the systems of punishment found in contemporary human societies (and in societies for which we have historical records).

I don't want to claim that the evolution of punishment necessarily followed the steps just envisaged; nor do I want to specify a point at which "real" punishment is present; nor shall I offer any detailed account of the reasons why any hominid lineage might have undergone this sequence of steps. Firm views on the last issue ought to be grounded in precise models of the advantages of moving from one stage to the next, and while I have an outline of how such models might be developed – roughly in terms of the advantages in opportunities for cooperative activity without costly signalling among organisms that have moved from one stage to its successor – showing how that intuitive idea can be elaborated within the joint theory of biological and cultural evolution that I favor would require substantial work. Finally, it should be evident that the early stages of the envisaged sequence can be managed without language and that later steps would, at very least, be facilitated by the prior acquisition of linguistic skills, but I'm not going to link this sequence in any definite way to the evolution of language. For present purposes, ideas about systems of punishment are relevant insofar as they illuminate questions about self-governance. So, setting the important issues I've noted on one side, let me imagine that our hominids have acquired a full-fledged system of punishment,

corresponding to the last stage I delineated, and that they are able to formulate their expectations in language.

Our evolving hominids thus can entertain and believe propositions of the following forms:

If, in *C* a *P* does *W*, then a *J* will typically respond by doing *S* to that *P*. [Here the letters stand for types of organisms, acts and situations: think of *C* as standing for the context, *P* for the perpetrator, *W* the wrongdoing, *J* the judge and *S* as the sentence.]

On such occasions, other members of the group typically won't interfere with *J*'s doing *S*.

On such occasions, the *P* typically won't resist the *J*'s doing *S*.

Now we imagine that hominids with self-governance and those without it differ in that the former, but not the latter, have a mechanism that tends to give rise to a reactive emotion (an unpleasant emotion) first on occasions on which they have performed the wrong in the context (done *W* in *C*), and subsequently on occasions on which they are in the context and have formed a disposition to prefer doing the action marked out for sanction (when they come to prefer doing *W* in *C*). I suppose further that the consequence of feeling the reactive emotion *after* doing the action consists in an enhanced disposition to submit to the sentence, and that the consequence of feeling the reactive emotion *before* carrying out the action (when the hominid comes to form the preference in prospect) is to diminish the strength of the preference for the action.

There are two kinds of cases that we need to consider. In one, the agent is genuinely torn; there are conflicting dispositions, one ranking one option as preferable, the other reversing that ranking, as I've suggested for the chimpanzees torn between altruistic responses and the enticement of large selfish rewards (recall Luit abandoning his alliance with Nikkie). The new mechanism serves in such instances as an instrument for sorting out the internal mêlée, although its performance need by no means be perfect. In the alternative scenario, there's no conflict of dispositions, and the role of the unpleasant emotion is to weaken or reverse the preference for doing *W*. In both instances, the net effect of the mechanism is a tendency to avoid the actions that lead to trouble. To the extent that the desires are inhibited, our hominids don't incur punishments they would otherwise likely have received. (Of course, the account I've offered must recognize that punishment isn't the inevitable consequence of action, for the action might go undetected; there are interesting questions about whether the hominids could evolve mechanisms for "over-representing" the chances that they'll be caught, thus leading to the occurrence of the unpleasant emotion in circumstances where the objective likelihood of detection is low. I shan't pursue this point in general, although I'll return later to the possibility of specific devices for cultural groups to embed their rules in a broader system that conjures up serious possibilities of detection.)

The story so far has envisaged a transition from hominids who sometimes transgress the punishment regularities of their groups and are punished for doing so to hominids whose psychology contains a mechanism that operates prospectively to decrease the probability of transgression. It seems likely that an evolutionary understanding of that transition might be gained along the general lines I indicated for thinking about the emergence of systems of punishment – but, as always, detailed models are needed and I am not going to provide them here. What concerns me is the character of the final state. It's tempting to think of this as consisting of a rather abstract inhibition device: the aversive emotion will be generated in certain contexts with respect to certain prospective actions, and that emotion will weaken the preference for those actions; but what these actions and contexts are is a matter for different societies to fill in (in much the way, perhaps, that exposure to a particular language fills in a child's grasp of universal grammar). So we might conceive of the mechanism as completely open to whatever content the hominid society supplies, as if *any* social rule could take effect with equal ease. A different thought is that the hominid system of normative governance is biased towards certain types of rules; in the simplest (maybe not the most plausible) version, one might even suppose that there are built-in reactions to some actions whether or not they are explicitly forbidden by society (this is a line that could elaborate the sociobiological insistence on a biological basis for incest avoidance). If the governance mechanism is conceived as relatively plastic, then, to the extent that common reactions are found in all human societies, those will be explained by supposing that societies whose rules failed to set up those reactions had a tendency (possibly explicable, possibly accidental) to die out. On the sociobiological alternative, the reactions are universal because of features of human nature, whatever the expressed rules of various societies may be. In my judgment, we don't really know how to resolve the issues here, but I think there are enough examples of cross-cultural variation in reactions to demonstrate that large parts of the normative governance system are "filled in" by the ambient culture.

In what follows, I'll chiefly be interested in the evolution of the ways in which cultures do this work of "filling in".

## II

That evolution proceeds on two levels. Most obvious, perhaps, is the articulation of different rules among different groups at different times. But we should note that the crude mechanism I've sketched might be refined in any number of ways by different schemes of socialization. Developmental psychologists have documented the differences in children's attitudes towards others and towards moral rules at different stages in ontogeny. Their findings make it plain that the capacity for associating reactive emotions with particular types of deeds can be connected with the extension of altruistic dispositions (in the sense I've explored), and that a reactive capacity present at an early stage

may be replaced later by a simple refusal to consider breaches of an internalized rule. A practice of socialization that obtains its initial purchase by inducing feelings of guilt in connection with certain desires or actions may cultivate older moral agents whose deliberations are guided, or constrained, by rules that they can formulate explicitly and whose altruistic dispositions are triggered in a far broader range of contexts than those in which they were found earlier. It seems unsafe to me to assume that all societies will produce a similar set of psychological connections, so that we can think of a single “moral sense” that all humans (and hominids?) enjoy. Nor do I suppose that, within one society, the psychological springs of conformity to the code are always the same, even among those whom we consider fully developed members of the society.

I’ll briefly illustrate the possibility of inter-agent variation by recalling the obvious fact that societies often use several different strategies for promoting particular kinds of behavior. Thus the moral training of a child may include stories designed to arouse sympathy for needy individuals, as well as the abstract formulation of rules for helping others, and even the elaboration of a religious doctrine that assimilates help to a brotherly duty. Mature agents who have received this training may act to help the needy as the result of quite different psychological backgrounds: because they have tendencies to psychological altruism that are triggered by the presentation of others in distress, because they have acquired a firm propensity to obey the rule, or because their ideal of themselves involves satisfying the commands of religion; these psychological backgrounds can occur singly or in combination, and they can be interwoven with various other attitudes and emotions; in the terms of contemporary psychology, the states involved can range from the “cold” to the extremely “hot”. Although there are many obvious counterfactuals that hold of such agents, counterfactuals that indicate how the desirable helping behavior wouldn’t be forthcoming if various background conditions inhibited the arousal of sympathy or overwhelmed respect for the abstract principle, and so forth, it seems to me to be a philosophical prejudice to insist that one of these modes of psychological causation represents the genuine moral point of view, and that societies with a genuinely moral practice must seek to inculcate this and no surrogate for it. In the genealogy of morals, I suspect that many different groups have socialized the young in ways that achieve any number of combinations of the elements envisaged here – and very probably include psychological connections and states that outrun my impoverished list – and I suspect that it’s a philosophical prejudice that yearns to pick out one of these as especially privileged. As noted, there are issues about reliability, but I see no reason for thinking that only a single special “moral point of view” can answer to those.

Let’s turn now to the second level, the more obvious issue of evolution in the content of rules. If, as I’ve suggested, the system of normative guidance substitutes for inefficient and time-consuming strategies of peacemaking, then it’s easy to make educated guesses about the content of the rules that societies would attempt to inculcate. Recall that the social problems to which peacemaking is addressed are lapses from cooperative behavior, where the terms

of cooperation are set by the coalitional and subcoalitional structures present in the group. Thus we should expect rules that make the forms of coalitions and subcoalitions visible, and that enjoin loyalty. Further, since the occasions on which social tension is most threatening involve intra-group violence and the opportunities for mating, we might anticipate that the rules should specify when violence is to be prohibited and which pairs of hominids may engage in sexual relations. We might conclude, in short, that the social rules should embody the “elementary structures of kinship”, that they should pronounce on acts of violence and that they should include marriage rules. It’s no accident, I think, that such rules constitute the core of the normative systems of those groups that live in ways closest to those experienced by our hominid ancestors.

I can now make my hypothesis more concrete. A decisive step in hominid evolution consisted in the acquisition of a capacity for normative guidance – possibly the rather crude disposition sketched in the previous section – and the “filling in” of that capacity with rules of group loyalty, including explicit proscription of violence across a range of contexts and explicit rules about marriage and mating. Hominid groups that were able to achieve this system – call it *proto-morality* – were able to engage in the older repertoire of cooperative ventures with greater efficiency, and were also able to undertake new cooperative projects. Their surviving descendants are linked to them through a sprawling genealogical tree, along whose branches different systems of socialization have proliferated, introducing psychological differences among (and within) various cultural groups, as well as different adumbrations and revisions of the initial set of prescriptions and prohibitions. The primary force in the dynamic of moral change has been the differential ability of groups with different moral codes and systems of moral training to survive, to spread their views to others, and to found new groups in which their ideas would be accepted. Out of the process have emerged the moral systems of contemporary societies, including those of the affluent world.

### III

Plainly this hypothesis rests on a considerable amount of speculation. Hostages have constantly been given to fortune in my confessions that detailed models need to be built, that psychological ramifications must be explored, that the account must fit the recorded diversity of cultures, and so forth. So why engage in so speculative a story? Why should we need a genealogy of morals?

I answer that our existing views about morality are handicapped by a threadbare psychology (largely inherited from the eighteenth century) and, even more, by an inadequate epistemology. The epistemological picture that holds us is highly individualistic, suggesting that the epistemic status of someone’s beliefs is to be judged by looking at the achievements of that individual independently of others. Classical programs in the theory of knowledge invite us to ponder a subject’s experiences and the inferences in which that subject engages; we are supposed to be able to trace a justificational structure that will

focus on inferential relations among beliefs and on sensory inputs. Cartesian foundationalism is one, strikingly clear, version of the program; another is Frege's attempt to reveal the true justification of our arithmetical beliefs (a project in which, of course, the appeal to sensory experience is unnecessary). Now it's abundantly obvious that people discover many things for themselves. It should be equally obvious that they don't find out *everything* for themselves. Although we revise *some* things we were originally taught, although we *extend* the systems of belief passed on to us by others, it's plain that our revisions and extensions take place against a background that we have to hold constant while we're engaged in our work of modification. The Archimedean points that Descartes and Frege envisaged simply aren't available for our occupancy.

Perhaps this will seem familiar, even boring (I hope so). To see why it promises significance for a genealogy of morals, let's turn back to one of the influential texts in twentieth century moral philosophy. Towards the end of *Principia Ethica*, G.E. Moore announces that it's evident that there are just two sources of intrinsic value, to wit personal relations and beautiful things. It's worth asking why anyone, including Moore, ought to believe the two claims made here, both that these are indeed the two sources of intrinsic value and that this is evident. Moore's own official reply would presumably be that each (mature, enlightened) human being has an intuitive capacity to detect the good, and that, once we exercise the capacity, we'll agree with his judgment. Now it's worth asking if the human beings with whom Moore is concerned only exist in the modern Western world (maybe only in Cambridge and Bloomsbury?), since it's abundantly clear that people at other times and in other places have thought differently. But my main concern is with the fact that anyone who wondered how to engage in the pertinent process of intuition (or who worried that he wasn't doing it quite right) would be offered very little help by anything Moore says. 'Intuition' is a theoretical term of an extremely thin theory about human moral cognition. Moore seems to have recourse to it because he has no *other* way of grounding the moral knowledge of his (mature, enlightened) individual. What he gives us is an "epistemology of desperation".

Other people have found themselves in the same box. Consider Gödel's well-known account of mathematical knowledge as grounded in a quasi-perceptual apprehension of the axioms of set theory. That, too, is an "epistemology of desperation", apparently forced on Gödel because he can think of no viable alternative for someone's coming to know the principles from which he takes us to derive all the rest of mathematics. But it's not hard to escape this predicament. Why do Gödel (and his contemporaries, von Neumann, Zermelo, and others) believe set-theoretic axioms? There's an obvious answer. They have accepted a body of mathematics, which they are trying to render coherent and systematic; on that basis, they adopt principles (axioms of set theory) that enable them to complete the work of systematization; Zermelo, in fact, is quite clear that this is what is going on. A full explanation of their mathematical beliefs would thus be socio-historical, tracing the ways in which mathematics grew from primitive roots and the social institutions that

guided its development and, in particular, the transmission of mathematics from one generation to its successor. If the philosophy of mathematics is full of epistemologies of desperation – as I think it is – the obvious way out is to turn to the socio-historical explanation, and to declare that this is all there is. The Cartesian-Fregean tradition opposes socio-historical explanation to the epistemological enterprise of laying bare the structure of knowledge, but it's not obvious that this is anything other than a prejudice that compels their philosophical successors, again and again, to invoke epistemologies of desperation. Faced with the charge that if all that lay behind our beliefs was a socio-historical explanation, then that wouldn't underwrite our claims to know, I reply that it's a matter of looking and seeing. Maybe when we investigate the details, we'll discover that the growth of knowledge in a particular area involves a kind of reflective and critical modification of belief that answers to a worthy ideal of knowledge. Or maybe not. In the case of mathematics, it seems to me that socio-historical inquiry can vindicate the idea of mathematical knowledge. (But that isn't the issue here.)

Back to Moore. Why does he believe such intriguing things about the sources of intrinsic value? The story is surely a complicated one, but it doubtless involves Moore's revision of the late Victorian values that he learned in his childhood, possibly under the pressure of his felt needs and emotions along the road that led him to Cambridge. Whether Moore can be regarded as making a cognitive achievement isn't something that can be settled without probing the ways in which he came to change his mind, and it might require a much more extensive historical perspective. (To judge what Moore did, we might have to appraise his point of departure.)

The need for a socio-historical perspective emerges when we look hard at other ventures in understanding morality. Philosophers more recent than Moore have sometimes claimed that the wrongness of certain actions (setting cats on fire) explains the judgments people make that those actions are wrong. Their critics counter that moral cases are profoundly different from scientific cases – the observer's belief that the cloud chamber reveals an electron track is explained by the fact that an electron passed through it, and the explanatory relation here is very different from that obtaining in the example of moral judgment. I think this debate is confused by the tacit adoption of an individualistic perspective. Our judgment that an action we witness – setting a cat on fire – is wrong is best explained by rehearsing the details of our moral training, showing how it yielded the sensibilities that are disturbed on the current occasion; by the same token, the scientist's judgment about the electron track (more plausibly, the judgment of the technician employed to make the observations) is best explained by relating a history of training, one that set up dispositions to respond to particular observed events with such judgments. The difference, if there is a difference, is that one of these programs of training (the scientific one) emerges from a history in which the practices of socialization really do respond to the facts about the entities involved (the electrons); a critical history of physical science will, I maintain, vindicate that. In the case of

moral judgment, however, we have no idea whether an analogous verdict can be defended, and that's because of our ignorance about the genealogy of morals.

Philosophers who neglect history are doomed to lurch from one implausible account of moral practice to another, and also to misconceive the role of moral philosophy. There's a presumption that philosophers are the people who see the moral domain clearly. Others, like religious leaders, popular moralists, or ordinary moral agents, lack the synoptic philosophical vision – they are heirs to the influence of tradition, in the grip of residual prejudices from which those who build morality on its genuine foundations are liberated. But moral philosophy is bound by the socio-historical tradition from which the philosopher emerges. The moral system masquerades as something more timeless than a systematization of important themes in the everyday morality of the polis, or of Pietist Germany, or of English radical dissent, or of reaction against Victorian stuffiness. If that system has a value, it serves as a way of making explicit certain important themes in the way of life of a group and possibly serving as a pointer to revisions or extensions of their moral views. Midwifery rather than legislation is a better analogue of the moral philosopher's role.

I began this section with a question: If a genealogy of morals is fraught with uncertainties, what's the point of engaging in it? My answer is that, without some genealogical understanding, systematic moral philosophy will be distorted into something typically grotesque and usually irrelevant. Let me now turn to the character of the genealogical project as I envisage it.

#### IV

I draw my title from Nietzsche, who introduced it by separating the enterprise he considered worthwhile from the entirely inadequate ("English") point of view he opposed. My own conception is much closer to the projects Nietzsche derogated. The task is to understand the historical development of moral practices and the principal factors that have operated in moral change; in other words to take the perspective on moral practice that Darwin took on groups of organisms. As I've already hinted, the enterprise falls within a general account of cultural evolution (although I shan't go into the details here.)

The process Darwin describes is usually thought of as non-progressive; there's no goal towards which evolutionary history tends, although, locally, natural selection favors heritable traits that are adapted to the current environment. As I conceive them, the big philosophical issues about morality are whether we can think of the genealogy of morals in a different way – perhaps as showing how some traditions have successively figured out better moral systems – and how, in light of our answer, we should understand our own situation and the possibilities for going on from where we now are. Before we'll be in any position to tackle those large questions, some preliminary clarifications are needed. I'll start by focusing on the units of moral change.

In the standard biological case, we're concerned with organisms and species. What are the analogues for the genealogy of morals? Apparently the changes that occur will modify the *moral codes* in force in societies. The last notion seems relatively clear, for we can understand a society as a group of agents who interact with one another, or at least are bound together in patterns of mutual dependence across a broad range of contexts. But what is a moral code, and what is it for a code to be in force in a particular society?

Here's a simple thought, already hinted at in some of my previous remarks. A moral code is a set of rules, prescribing some actions and proscribing others. The moral code is in force in a society when each member of that society has internalized every rule in the set, and there is no more inclusive set all of whose rules are internalized by every member of the society. I think that this idea is far too simple, both because it adopts a very narrow conception of a moral code, and because it doesn't allow for the possibilities that individuals may be allowed – even encouraged – to develop their own moral standards.

Just as philosophers of science have learned to take a multi-faceted approach to scientific theories (or practices) so too with morality. A society's moral code consists of a collection of *resources* (to use a relatively neutral term). Besides explicit rules, there are principles, proverbs, stories, descriptions of situations with moral evaluations, ideals, criteria of application, rules of thumb, claims about which individuals count as targets of particular moral attitudes (most notably, which individuals matter morally and which are morally accountable), specifications of roles with their attendant ideals, principles and rules – and doubtless other things that my limited survey of different cultures hasn't yet exposed. These resources constitute the moral code of a community when the members of that community (a) believe, (b) expect others to believe, and (c) expect others to expect them to believe that such resources are appropriately used in the contexts of prospective deliberation, of retrospective assignment of praise and blame, and in the socialization of young (or new) members of the community. If the community is *rigid* it will expect that these beliefs will issue in unanimity on judgments about particular actions; more flexible traditions allow some divergence.

To understand the difference between this proposal and the idea I've rejected as over-simple, consider some examples of moral deliberation. Those who think of morality as a system of rules presumably view the deliberating moral agent as applying the shared rules to her situation in much the way that old-fashioned views of science regard the student as solving problems about empirical systems by applying the equations of high theory. In both instances, an important part of the skill of the adept lies in understanding how the situation is to be conceived in terms of a framework of categories – how one figures out the Hamiltonian of a complex system, how one describes the options in the morally appropriate way. Moral systems that initially appear alien come to life once the outsider can grasp parts of this framework, seeing that one course of action would accord with a particular role (the warrior, the shaman), that it

would be at odds with a paradigm exemplified in a central story (the life of a revered figure), or that it would involve attitudes taken to be inappropriate towards some of the individuals involved (totem animals, outsiders). Indeed, in many instances, the work of deliberation consists in achieving these kinds of perspectives, so that any serious application of rules becomes otiose.

The members of a society are equipped with certain resources in their early socialization. If the society is extremely *conservative* there'll be little modification of these resources during individual ontogeny; the mature agents will respond to situations in much the ways they'd have done at the close of their moral training. Most obviously, this will come about because of social pressure to restrict moral deliberation to the resources that have been handed down by tradition, and that in turn may trace to the rigidity of the society. Alternatively, societies may be liberal, allowing and even cultivating the elaboration of further moral resources among individuals, as those individuals encounter new situations; indeed, some of these resources may be spread among the mature agents, finding their way into the lore that is transmitted to the next generation (think of stories and accounts of the deeds of figures who are seen as especially worthy). As I've already hinted, conservatism is likely to be associated with rigidity, and liberalism with flexibility. But it's important to recognize that the concepts are distinct, and only detailed research on different traditions will reveal how tight the association is.

I can now give substance to the idea that moral codes evolve. Start with the notion of descendant generations of a community. These are picked out by self-ascriptions of ancestry, in part biological, in part cultural. Typically, there will be overlap in membership, for some who figured as young members of the earlier generation will be present in its immediate descendant; but the descendant community will also contain biological offspring of the members of the previous community, as well as those who have entered by marriage and immigrants who accept the appropriateness of the community's moral resources. Evolution simply consists in the change of resources from one stage in one generation to the same stage in the immediately descendant generation. For fairly obvious reasons, the simplest stage to take as an index of evolutionary change is the close of socialization. Hence I'll say that the moral code of a community undergoes an evolutionary change just in case the set of resources passed on to a new member in acts of socialization in the immediately descendant generation differs from that passed on to a new member in act of socialization in the previous generation.

Return to our hominid ancestors with proto-morality. Perhaps there was just one group of them (providing a single origin for the genealogy of morals); perhaps there were several. Now consider all the communities of the contemporary world with their different collections of moral resources. Each of these communities can be linked by the relation of ancestor and descendant to a sequence of earlier communities, terminating in the unique moral progenitor (if there's a single origin) or to one of the originals (if there isn't). Nobody knows how to draw the picture and label all the communities that figure on each lineage

(line of descent), but we can imagine what it would look like. It would be a branching diagram, for communities sometimes undergo fission. In contrast to Darwin's famous illustration, however, it would show a significant frequency of cases in which a successor moral community is formed by fusion of two previous lineages (think of Islam, or of the role of Hellenic ideas in the fashioning of the Christianity that came to predominate in the Roman empire). The complete task of the genealogy of morals would be first to display this diagram (or at least enough of it to make plain the sources of major moral resources of contemporary communities), and second to understand the dynamics of the crucial changes. Only in light of that dynamical account can we expect to obtain a clear perspective on questions about moral objectivity, moral progress, and our future attempts at moral change.

I anticipate the charge that my formulation blurs boundaries. For surely the socialization of a new member of a community involves much more than the inculcation of *moral* resources. The young are informed about what is a matter of religious duty, what is a matter of law, what is a matter of politeness and social custom, and, on my account, this information will be muddled with the requirements of morality. I reply that that is as it should be. Some societies plainly do make distinctions among rules of varying force, holding for example that the commands of religion trump those of morality (as in Jahweh's test of Abraham's faith), that morality has priority over law, and law over manners. But many do not. Insofar as these divisions – or others – are to be vindicated as correct, or as progressive, that must be a consequence of explaining their emergence in the genealogy of morals. Not only should we not presuppose that the line of descent that leads to our moral views reveals the successive exposure of moral truth, but we should resist the supposition that the background achievement of certain kinds of divisions and ranking of obligations represents the right way to conceptualize the phenomena. Nor will it do to insist that an inquiry should start from the assumption that a *moral* system is a system with certain features (features lacking in some, possibly most, parts of the genealogical nexus), for the real issue concerns the possible grounds for wanting a system of this special kind. (Compare old-fashioned attempts to defend particular inductive rules by claiming that adherence to these forms part of the definition of 'rationality'.)

Let me conclude my brief exposition of the character of the genealogical project by using the anthropological record to indicate the kinds of areas of human life and conduct in which we may expect to find resources constitutive of moral codes. Proto-morality, as I've explained it, focuses on the sources of social conflict, breakdown of alliances, violence and sexual relations. It would be tempting to juxtapose this with the emphasis on relations with others that pervades contemporary moral philosophy, and to suppose that the scope of the moral resources concerns the ways in which members of a society should relate to one another (and to outsiders). A broader look at the moral resources of different societies shows that this would be mistaken. Important parts of the socialization of the young in those societies concentrate on the development of

the individual, both as a generic member of the society in question and as the occupant of particular roles; other facets concern the appropriate attitudes and conduct towards supernatural beings, towards the dead, and towards nonhuman animals (and other parts of nature). To recognize these different topics for moral appraisal isn't to exclude the possibility that the ultimate explanation for their presence in the system of socialization would advert to the smooth functioning of the community. (It might, for example, be important for the group that individuals feel an obligation to develop their talents, or to avoid provoking the wrath of the ancestors.) Again, a narrow conception of the subject-matter of morality carries a tacit presupposition about objectivity. In this instance, the error can be diagnosed without casting doubt on the possibility of eventually providing a more satisfactory defense of the correctness of our contemporary ways of thinking; to take the most obvious example, we might hold that morality doesn't contain duties to the gods, not on the basis of a dubious definition of 'morality' but on the much more satisfactory ground that those duties presuppose a factual premise that has been discovered to be false (no gods, no duties to gods).

## V

I've tried to explain why the genealogical project is important, and to clarify its character. The next obvious step would be to carry it out. But here we face two difficulties. The first is the evident vast scope of the genealogical nexus. The second is less apparent, and involves a point that Nietzsche missed.

To a first approximation, Nietzsche views the history of moral systems in terms of two types, an ancient heroic code and a ghastly infection that corrupts it (the Judeo-Christian bacillus). A relatively minor problem with his account is that even those who accept a Homeric code answering to his description would have to accommodate the evolution of this code in the development of the Greek *poleis*. Much more significant is the Nietzschean emphasis on a microsecond in human cultural history, a period of approximately three thousand years. We have written records for a bit less than two thousand years more, but beyond them lie the vast expanse of millennia of human cultural evolution, a period in which, I claim, our hominid ancestors explored various forms of society and introduced moral codes that have left residues in the earliest extant documents.

Let me state a provocative thesis that I take to be plausible, although not susceptible to conclusive argument: Plato (or Socrates, or Homer) is a footnote to the history of human morality. While the history of philosophy, including moral philosophy, may begin with the Greeks, the significant action in the history of moral exploration (the canvassing of moral possibilities) is largely over by the time they arrive on the scene. One reason for thinking this likely consists in the time since the evolution of human language. Waiving unsettled issues about Neanderthal capacities to speak, and focusing just on *Homo sapiens*, we can suppose that hominids have been using language for at least

30,000 years (at a very conservative estimate), probably more than 50,000, and possibly as much as 100,000. From the standpoint of biological evolution that doesn't provide a remarkably large time, but cultural evolution goes far more rapidly, especially when groups of hominids are radiating into different environments (the evolution of the Polynesian chiefdoms, which has occurred in the past two thousand years, provides a clear demonstration of how fast cultural evolution can occur); and, of course, if anything is clear about human prehistory, it's the spread of hominid groups across vastly different environments during the past 50,000 years. If we assume that individuals who developed technologies for shaping tools, customs for burying their dead, rock carvings, statuettes, and cave art were in the process of formulating moral codes (in the sense I've given above), then it would be highly surprising if a wide range of "experiments in living" hadn't been undertaken in prehistory.

The second difficulty to which I alluded above should now be apparent. My provocative hypothesis is easily developed into a pessimistic claim to the effect that the important transitions in the genealogy of morality occur in a period about which we have to confess "profound ignorance". But I don't think we're totally clueless. One source of insight consists in the moral transitions that have occurred in recorded history (we can return to Nietzsche's preferred time-frame with a sense of its limitations, and I'll do so in the successor of this essay). There are others: the characteristics of the most ancient texts we have, the archeological record and its social preconditions, the diversity of cases in the anthropological literature and, in particular, the studies of those who seem to live in ways closest to our hominid ancestors (contemporary hunter-gatherers). In what follows, I'll attempt to outline what each of these sources can provide, in hopes both of supporting my original provocative hypothesis (Plato as footnote) and of offering a preliminary sketch of some main features of the genealogy of morality.

Start with the texts of the Ancient Near East. These include stories that embody ideals of behavior, myths about the after-life, and partial codes of laws. The Gilgamesh epic, for example, provides a picture of what is expected of high-ranking people in the highly pyramidal societies of Sumer and Babylon; similarly, the protestation of innocence in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (Chapter 125) shows us what kinds of actions were counted as moral transgressions, and thus illuminates the structure of the moral code; most obviously, the lists of rules found in the Mesopotamian codes, from the Lipit-Ishtar code of the early second millennium, through the code of Hammurabi (a century later) and beyond provide us with a sense of the conduct that needed explicit prohibition, and of the relative importance of various social breaches.

I'll focus on the law codes, with some obvious features of their structure and their content. First, the preambles constantly emphasize the idea that the lawgiver brings peace and resolution of conflicts; the law is seen as a method of transcending a social life in which brute force prevails and the strong oppress the weak. Second, it's evident that the tablets and stelae that have come down to us don't offer any complete account of the laws in force. They are sets

of amendments to a body of existing law, revisions and extensions that address problems that seem to have arisen in the creation of social order. I don't think it's fanciful to take these "codes" as representing a multi-stage process of development of the social rules that extends back to the dawn of writing and beyond. Third, the fragmentary character of the codes is immediately obvious. Provisions are made for very particular types of occurrence – whether a "senior" strikes the daughter of another "senior" and causes a miscarriage, whether an ox gores a passerby, whether a woman crushes the testicle(s) of a man who is fighting her husband. I interpret this particularity as pointing to a practice of responding to the new kinds of troubles that emerged in a newly complex society.

By the time of Hammurabi, people had been domesticating animals and engaging in agriculture in Mesopotamia for at least five thousand years. There had been settlements of significant size in neighboring regions (at Catal Hoyuk, and at Jericho), although nothing on the scale of Uruk or Babylon. The neolithic pastoralists and farmers of the region had worked out rules for restraining violence, protecting the fruits of their labors, and organizing sexual relations. But as they were integrated into larger units in a world dependent on social coordination to supply adequate irrigation, new issues arose – how are measures to be standardized, how does one ensure that land is properly used, how are the public canals and dykes to be maintained. The codes we have lavish great detail on these questions, as well as addressing the various kinds of violence and sexual relations that emerged from the social friction of large numbers of people occupying a relatively small space. They occur against the background of a general understanding of the ways in which violence is to be contained, sexual relations regulated and property protected.

The code of Hammurabi contrasts with the most famous part of the moral code that has played such an obvious – "founding" – role in our cultural lineage. The Hebrew Bible contains a systematic account of moral principles in the famous commandments. But if one reads these in their context the kinship with the older Mesopotamian and Egyptian documents is evident; for the famous ten are embedded in a vast, and unsystematic, collection of all sorts of rules about everyday affairs. Many of those rules simply take over parts of the law we find in Sumer and Babylon: Exodus 21: 28-9 recapitulates articles 250-251 of the code of Hammurabi, and Deuteronomy 25: 11-12 bears an obvious resemblance to the Mesopotamian prohibition against wifely interventions that use testicle-crushing (to cite just two of many examples). Further, when one looks closely at the famous Decalogue, there's an obvious division into three groups: first come rules about proper behavior towards the deity (and these are given enormous prominence in the Hebrew bible – Jahweh seems to be much more concerned with ensuring that tabernacles are the right size, entered at the right times by the right people bearing the right things, than he is with the social interactions among the chosen people); there are four prohibitions of behavior (killing, stealing, adultery and false witness), and two commands about psychological attitudes (respecting parents, not coveting). On the account I've

suggested, there's little surprise about the four social prohibitions. The root difficulties that call for normative governance lie in violence towards other group members and sexual competition. All the traditions of the Near East that have left a record deal with the first by prohibiting and punishing in-group violence, and regulating sexual competition through an institution of marriage; I assume that this is extremely ancient, and long antedates the explicit writing of codes. The protection of property was surely necessary once people began to cultivate the land and to domesticate plants and animals – and I would trace it back tens of millennia to the origins of trade and the use of non-disposable tools (see below). Again, the Mesopotamian codes, while lacking any systematic statement, are full of complex rules that presuppose the importance of protecting property; they issue rules to cover instances in which one might think that a title to property has lapsed. (These codes, like the Hebrew bible, also have a pronounced tendency to treat womenfolk as male property, suggesting that the origins of rules protecting property may go back to the regulation of sexuality.) Finally the concern with false witness obviously emerges once there's a practice of social sanctions, and it's interesting that the code of Hammurabi *starts* by focusing on this problem.

In effect, then, there's nothing new in the social rules of the Ten Commandments. Nor do the two commands about psychological attitudes offer anything beyond the ideals offered by the Mesopotamian myths and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. If the Hebrew tradition offers anything original, it seems to lie in the thoroughness with which the obligations to the deity are delineated and the importance of obedience to the moral code *because it is a divine decree*. Yet even here, we discover only the intensification of themes already present in earlier traditions. The Mesopotamian theocracies plainly had complex rules for religious ritual and service to the gods (or their surrogates, the ruler-priests). The code of Lipit-Ishtar already links the law to divine command, and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* sees the prospects of the after-life as dependent on present conduct. Even the concept of the Divine Enforcer turns out not to be a Judeo-Christian invention.

There is even a Babylonian wisdom literature, dating to before 700 B.C. (possibly to significantly before this period), in which the attitudes Nietzsche traced to Christian corruption are articulated. It reads:

Unto your opponent do no evil

Your evildoer recompense with good;

Unto your enemy let justice [be done].

Another text, of uncertain date but possibly very early, offers the same theme:

Do not return evil to your adversary;

Requite with kindness the one who does evil to you, ...

It thus seems to me overwhelmingly likely that the fragmentary texts we have from the first civilizations to have invented writing form part of a long moral tradition in which the ideas we take to be the innovations of more salient sources were already formulated, and that these ideas emerged from a far longer history of social experimentation extending back into the early Neolithic, and even into the previous forty millennia.

I'll close by setting this claim in the perspective of the archeological and anthropological records. By the time groups of people come together to build pyramids, ziggurats, henges, and long barrows, it's plain that they have mechanisms for large-scale social coordination. Long before this, however, hominids were fashioning tools that depended on distant materials, bringing special substances deep into caves to paint animals, and burying their dead with special artifacts. These activities suggest that the mélange of rules we find in later traditions – some concerned with social interactions, some with attitudes towards supernatural beings, animals, and the dead – must have had counterparts in the unwritten codes of the late Paleolithic. It seems highly probable that the earliest technologies were disposable, that the hominids of two hundred thousand years ago made tools as they needed them and left them behind when they moved on. For them, tools posed no important constraint on mobility (not requiring the fashioning of carrying gear) and nor did they figure as a type of property (if someone takes an axe then the maker can easily replace it). But as hominids dispersed, they frequently left the sources of their tools behind them, and, by fifty thousand years ago, bands were foraging in regions that were a significant distance (a hundred kilometers or more) from the nearest places in which the raw materials for their tools are found. Those bands would have needed carrying devices (that, for understandable reasons have not been preserved in the record), and they would also have needed to coordinate their behavior with one another and with other bands so as to make possible either a long-distance trade network or a series of journeys to gather the materials they needed. In either instance, there are obvious possibilities of exploitation and aggressive intervention, and the codes of the groups involved would have had to be modified to cope with these threats. Perhaps we see, in the Mesopotamian rules for standards in exchange, as well as in the discussions of hospitality and the protection of property, the residues of agreements that were worked out during many millennia. Similarly, the later emphases on religious ritual are prefigured in the shrines of Catal Hoyuk and the practices of burial that extend back into the Paleolithic.

Detailed ethnographies offer the same picture. They reveal groups of people mixing ideas about nature, death and the supernatural with social prescriptions and prohibitions. The life of the tribe often depends on conforming to the rules bequeathed by the ancestors or specified by the deities. Among these rules are elaborate strategies for ensuring that conflicts are prevented, or, if they occur, contained, and for regulating sexual relations. The !Kung, for example, take steps to ensure that differences in hunting ability are not manifest. There are serious sanctions for boasting about a kill, a practice of

joking designed to check feelings of pride and arrogance, and a custom of crediting the kill to the owner of the arrow, which, when combined with a widespread practice of arrow-sharing, effectively reduces differences in hunting yield. Violation of these conventions is regarded as a way of courting bad luck. The !Kung also have ways of negotiating interactions among bands that don't meet frequently, allowing for the sharing of scarce resources in times of shortage. It would be wrong to overlook the fact that they are a contemporary people, but we can recognize the point while seeing them as facing problems that our human ancestors in the Paleolithic would have had to solve. I don't find it implausible to think that the solutions those ancestors found might have been quite similar.

The Greeks and the Hebrews come late in the history of moral experimentation. They are preceded by maybe 2500 generations in which people formulated norms for reinforcing their altruistic dispositions. I think it likely that much of that cultural evolution involved the themes we find in the first historical records: attention to the problems of violence, sexual relations and property; myths about the dead and the supernatural, conjoined to the articulation of corresponding duties; suggestions that social breaches will involve unfortunate consequences of types specified in the myths. Further, I suspect that the dynamic of the cultural evolution was thoroughly straightforward and unrelated to any cognitive achievement. Some combinations of moral resources (rules, ideals, stories, myths etc.) enabled the groups that adopted them to thrive, to take over adjacent groups, to found new colonies. The first written documents were authored by descendants of such groups, and they passed on to their descendants a basic moral framework that we trace to them. To a first approximation, we've inherited the social strategies that were hammered out in the later Paleolithic and the Neolithic, and those social strategies have shaped our psychological dispositions.

That is a highly conjectural genealogy of morals. Perhaps it can acquire some support from a more extensive probing of the archeological and anthropological records. Another possibility, of course, would be to narrow the genealogical project as Nietzsche did, and to look at the evolution of moral codes in recorded history – to look specifically at the structure of moral revolutions.