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The Implications of Belonging: *Some Conundrums of Sociality*

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Abstract

In this discussion, I put forward a hypothesis on social bigotry that appears at first to be counterintuitive, but which is supported by a very simple and compelling analysis. From that analysis, we will discover that bigotry and other negative social behaviours such as racism, homophobia, bullying etc., are driven by the same inherent human passion that makes sociality possible. The virtue or vice of that passion is therefore dependent upon the circumstance of its expression.

Introduction

The modern era is characterized by a crescendo of change from tribal societies to cosmopolitan societies. However, the social instincts of the individual, being ingrained in our biology, cannot change at that rapid pace, and therefore tend to lag behind. Consequently, there tends to be a lapse between the social psychology of the modern human and his/her current social reality. The residual *tribal instincts* from the tribal past of today's cosmopolitan human manifest in modern social problems such as bigotry, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, bullying etc. Consequently, the prevalence of these attitudes tends to correlate strongly with the conservatism of a society.

The efforts to explain the evolution of social and moral behaviour often focus exclusively on the positive social and moral traits, or the *prosocial* traits (in the parlance of evolutionary

biology). In this paper, I will explore the evolutionary psychology of the negative social/moral behaviours such as bigotry, racism, homophobia and bullying, whose evolutionary basis is a subject that scholars have generally not deemed worthwhile to investigate. In fact, it is only by serendipity that that aspect of social behaviour caught my interest. It was in the process of modeling the evolution of the pro-social traits, upon *empathy* as foundation, that it struck me that many of the “negative” social attitudes, such as bigotry, racism homophobia and bullying, are actually variant manifestations of the same instinct that drives social behaviour and which enable the formation of social groups.

Here is the conundrum: the idea of forming a group within a population or species involves the dual process of inclusion and exclusion. For, there is really no group if there is no distinction between who is in and who is out. This necessarily entails some criterion for picking out those within, from those without. Sensitivity to the most effective criteria for discriminating between group members and non-members would correlate positively with the formation of durable groups, and will therefore tend to be favoured by natural selection. It is this discriminatory component of social behaviour that becomes problematic for contemporary cosmopolitan societies.

Analysis

Under current Darwinian modeling of social evolution, we suppose selfishness to be the original constitution of human nature from which sociality evolves. By that scheme, the negative and abhorrent social behaviours such as those I have cited above are blindsided. What is their origin? One thing that is quite apparent is that they are not selfish behaviour. They are also not strictly *anti-social*. In fact they are always motivated by a passion to protect a group or a society from a perceived threat from individuals of alien behaviour, culture, race or ethnicity. So if anything at

all, they are *hyper-group* or *hyper-social* behaviour. Consequently, I refer to that suite of behaviours – bigotry, racism, patriarchy, homophobia, bullying etc. - by the term *hyper-social behaviour* or *hyper-sociality*. Thus an unpleasant paradoxical reality emerges from this research, and it is that abhorrent social attitudes, such as bigotry, homophobia, racism and bullying are expressions of the same trait that drives the formation of social groups and by the same passion that sends a social being to war, and inspiring in him/her the willingness to kill and to die for group or country. Therefore, it is only time, place and circumstance that separate the virtue of that passion from its vice. If policy makers have this proper understanding of the nature and evolutionary basis of such hyper-social attitudes, they would be better equipped to devise more effective policies to combat them.

My hypothesis, is inspired largely by insights from moral philosophy, particularly, the philosopher David Hume, who gives a very compelling analysis of sociality and morality in his *Treatise of Human Nature*. The aspects of Hume's moral views that I use are corroborated by other eminent philosophers and scholars such as Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, Darwin and Freud. There is also empirical evidence from contemporary research in social neuropsychology, which strongly corroborates Hume's view that emotion forms the basis of morality (Bloom 2010; Haidt 2007; Greene et al., 2001, 2004; Zanjoc 1980; Wilhelm Wundt 1907).

Hume (1740) asserts sympathy (actually empathy in today's parlance) to be central to the evolution of social and moral behaviour. He refers to *empathy* as a natural passion, and describes it as characteristically *partial*, in that it is directed towards family members to the exclusion of non-family members. Hume adds however, that even though empathy by nature dwells within the family, it can be extended to other members of the society when the individual discovers through education and experience, the immense benefit he/she draws from his/her social group.

The basis of bigotry is what a person perceives the perimeter of his/her social group to be. We shall see how, later in this discussion.

In building his moral theory, (Darwin 1871) also asserted this in-group confinement of empathy, and cited anthropological studies that suggest that members of primitive tribal societies were quite indifferent to the misfortunes of individuals who were outside their tribe. But Darwin and the anthropologists of his day did not have to look for the clearest evidence of this confinement of empathy in “primitive tribal societies.” Members of the most civilized societies today exhibit this all the time. For example, in early January of 2015 a major snow storm alert was issued for the north-eastern USA and parts of Canada. It was a great inconvenience to many people in the affected regions but nobody died. At the same time, in Malawi, floods triggered by weeks of heavy rains affected more than 1 million people, displaced more than 300,000, killed 276 and injured more than 600, according to the U.N. Disaster Assessment and Coordination (UNDAC) unit. While every news channel in North America reported the snow storm alert, not a single one of them mentioned the disaster in Malawi. In fact media watchers observed that the BBC was the only Western media outlet to report the Malawi disaster.

Beyond this inherent disinterest regarding the plight of individuals outside our own group, Freud (1930) notes that there is an innate tendency for aggression towards the outsider, even though he assigns a different source to it. Freud suggests that humans have an innate “cruel aggressiveness” that disturbs the relationship between neighbours, and threatens the disintegration of society. One outlet for this innate aggressiveness is hostility against outsider. Freud notes that as long as there is some individual or group that can be perceived as the outside other, the aggressiveness may be directed away from group members and towards the outsider. Freud writes: “It is always possible to bind together considerable number of people in in love, so

long as there are other people left over to receive the manifestations of their aggression” (1930, 98). Freud suggests that this is the source of strife between communities that occupy adjoining territories. According to this hypothesis, cohesion between members of a group becomes easier once an external avenue is found for the discharge of the instinctual aggression of the members. Freud cites the Jewish people who now scatter around the world as often situated to receive the aggression (1930, 99). This work of Freud was written before the Nazis came to power in Germany, yet he talked of the Jews as frequent targets of aggression. In fact, anti-Semitism was quite rampant even in the countries that allied to fight the Nazis. The *hyper-sociality* hypothesis that I propose here may explain the basis of the prevalence of anti-Semitism. It is simply that Jews are a small distinct minority wherever they live (other than in modern day Israel). Thus they are often situated to be the target of the inherent discrimination and hostility of the social being (humans in this case) against the outsider. Every minority group in every society is subject to the inherent discrimination and hostility of humans as social beings.

This exclusionist and egoistic character of social groups has also been expressed in contemporary thought. Zwick and Fletcher (2014, 103) assert that “group solidarity often promotes aggression towards outsiders,” as does Koestler (1967), who notes that “The egoism of the group feeds on the altruism of its members.” This stems from the group-centered tendency of altruism. In other words, the altruism of individuals results in a self-interested group, and this can have unpleasant consequences for individuals outside the group. As such, inter-group conflict has been a regular feature of human social history. As Zwick and Fletcher (2014, 103) note further, “the evils of human history may be due more to the tendency towards integration than towards self-assertion.” Freud and Darwin, like Hume, also held that this “family confined”

empathy has the capacity, given certain conditions, to transcend the family boundary to bigger and bigger groups.

In fact, the natural instinct or social instinct that manifest in empathy for one's group of affiliation, and indifference or even hostility towards individuals outside the group arose deep in man's evolutionary lineage, and is most vividly exhibited in social mammals. In wolf packs and lion prides for example, the group territory is vigilantly guarded against intrusion by non-members, and even those who want to join the group have a hard time getting accepted. We see this instinctive aggression towards intruders expressed to varying degrees by our domestic dogs when strangers visit our homes.

Inter-group conflict is a feature of all social species. In fact Brown et al. (2015) reports that over a hundred species of flies have been identified that carve a living solely out of decapitating and consuming the head contents of injured ants. Brown et al. reports some of these ant decapitating flies to be the most abundant fly species in some habitats and all the abundant food supply of injured ants comes from inter-colony violence.

Thus, aggression towards individuals outside the groups appears to be concomitant with sociality. But how does this come about? The strong in-group bias (or confined empathy as Hume would call it) has enabled humans to form strong and stable tribal groups which have ensured their survival in the natural environment to which they are otherwise individually ill-adapted (Hume 1740). In fact, if empathy (in fact, call it the social instinct) were not sensitive to group markers, social groups could not be formed. An organism that is not capable of feeling any special bond or affiliation with particular individuals would not be capable of forming a social group or belonging to one, and would for all intents and purposes be an asocial organism.

It seems then that the social instinct necessarily has to be discriminatory, for the formation of social groups to be possible. In fact, Kurzban et al (2001, 15387) have cited numerous studies, in addition to their own, that suggest the existence of a cognitive machinery that has evolved to detect coalitional alliances. This in fact is now a very prevalent feature of modern revolutionary models of sociality/morality - in what is called “conditional altruism,” where the only kind of altruism that can possibly evolve is one that is selective on the basis of reciprocity, kinship and group affiliation.

Evolutionary biologists have long noted that natural selection does not allow for the evolution cooperative and altruistic traits within populations (Wilson and Wilson 2007; Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman 1978; Hamilton 1964). Thus, for cooperative social groups to evolve, the altruistic expression must be contingent on certain factors, rather than being automatic. What has been suggested by evolutionary biologist include: (1) Altruists associating exclusively with other altruists (Maynard-Smith 1998; Sober and Wilson 1998). This means that groups that are formed must consist of like-minded individuals in terms of willingness to cooperate and help other members of the group. (2) Conditional deployment of the altruistic behavior, i.e., only towards: (a) genetic relatives (Hamilton 1964), since they are more likely to also carry the altruistic gene (b) or towards other altruists through reciprocity (Trivers 1971).

All these suggest the need for a sociality trait, if it is to be evolutionarily stable, to be discriminatory between individuals. However, the discrimination cannot be effective unless there is a reliable basis for distinguishing between those individuals to favour and those to disfavour. That is why Dawkins (1976/1989, p. 89) used the “Greenbeard” metaphor to suggest a clear and obvious basis for discrimination. Thus, the capacity to discriminate in the dispensation of altruism is necessary for the sustainability of altruism/sociality itself.

The idea of the group “Canada,” for example would be meaningless if there are no criteria for discrimination between who is and who is not Canadian and on the basis of which privileges will be preferentially conferred or denied. Canada as a society provides, for example, conspicuously more generous healthcare, education and welfare to Canadians than it does to non-Canadians inside and outside Canada. That is the discriminatory, but necessary aspect of sociality. There is the popular sentiment among Canadians that they are characteristically polite. They also hold Canada to be the best country in the world to live. Every social group, and in fact, the citizens of every modern state see themselves as special in some way. That is the bigoted feature of sociality. Ghanaians for example feel generally that they are distinguished by their hospitality and Americans see their country as the vanguard for freedom and democracy around the world. These bigoted views play a role in sustaining the group by giving members a worthwhile reason to belong. If so, why do we generally view them as undesirable? Again, it is based on time, place and circumstance. In modern racially and ethnically mixed societies like Canada, a situation of “groups within group” exists, which creates an opportunity for conflict in group identity. It would be interesting then, to explore the psychological factors that underlie the useful and harmful expressions of the social instinct.

In his book, *Against Fairness*, Asma (2012), has attempted to use the evolutionary significance of this inherent group bias to argue for mitigation in our current social disapprobation of favouritism and nepotism. However, we expect humans, who we credit with advanced rationality and self-command, to be more discerning of when the display of such primal instincts is appropriate. It is when, for whatever reason, an individual fails to properly align these group/tribal instincts with his existing social reality that they (the instincts) manifest in such vicious forms as racism, homophobia, bullying etc. In other social contexts however,

especially in the small tribal societies of man's past, such attitudes can be quite proper and useful for the protection and maintenance of the group or tribe.

Reed & Aquino (2003) suggest "a self-regulating construct referred to as *moral identity* that connects the individual (personal identity) to others (social identity) through the evaluative implications of a set of moral associations that define the moral self." We should expect then, that it is when this proposed "moral identity" regulating system is functioning improperly in an individual that he/she overplays subgroup passions in a major group. Such major groups are largely the nation states of today, which are actually artificial constructs that consist of several of these natural groups cobbled together as units of political administration. However, for over 95 percent human social existence, the natural fault lines for the boundaries of empathy have been kinship and tribe, and the social groups were quite homogeneous, racially, linguistically, culturally and belief system. The ideal of modern cosmopolitan societies is to see these natural boundaries of empathy drastically diminished within their national borders.

My on-going research explores how such subgroup or tribal group traits such as homophobia and bullying could have fostered group strength and stability in tribal societies. To explain briefly here, in early human societies, where intergroup conflict was common, and weapon technologies for fighting wars and hunting big game was quite rudimentary, group strength was determined largely by group size and the physical strength of individual members. Under such circumstances, such societies would have evolved social instincts that valued procreation (which was the surest way to increase their numbers) as well as physically powerful individuals. As such, any conduct that would appear to undermine procreation within the group would be suppressed. A homosexual tendency in those times would have been perceived as such. Similarly, the premium on physical power possibly formed the basis of patriarchy and bullying.

As I have stated in my introduction however, modern cosmopolitan societies, as well as modern technology have evolved at such a rapid pace that there has not been sufficient time for these tribal instincts to be shed. They are still in the deep psyche of the modern human. However, like many of our other primal instincts, we ought to be able to control these through education, rationality and self-command.

To conclude, bigotry and the other *hyper-social* behaviours are not intrinsically bad. As a matter of fact, they are the very features of humanity that make sociality and citizenship possible. They become a problem for cosmopolitan societies. We evolved adaptations to live in small social groups and we have done so for the past ninety-nine percent of our existence as humans. Modern cosmopolitan societies are only hundreds of years old and require behaviour contrary to our biological wiring. Through education and training, we can always overcome biology. But we need to understand the true nature of the problem in order to resolve it.

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