

WE ARE ALL NINJAS: SYMPATHY, SOLIDARITY AND EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

TODOS NÓS SOMOS NINJAS: SIMPATIA, SOLIDARIEDADE E ÉTICA EVOLUCIONISTA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I ask whether sympathy, solidarity, and empathy are hard wired in our human brain. I will discuss one the thesis of evolutionary ethics, that is, that empathy and sympathy are innate. I ask whether these are natural /innate features of human beings and other animals, such as primates. I investigate whether there is a natural altruistic behavior and a natural tendency to solidarity. I claim that we have already sufficient empirical data to accept one aspect of an evolutionary ethics, which claims that at least some features of our morality, comes to us naturally.

Keywords: sympathy, empathy, solidarity, evolution, ethics

In the last months, we have seen two powerful movements in two countries very far from one another: Turkey and Brazil. The first began in May 2013 in Turkey, with a very local agenda, against the changes on Taksim square. What was at the first moment a fight against the destruction of the square has quickly changed into a very massive movement that gathers millions of people.

One month later, in Brazil, a movement for the free fare (Passe livre) began fighting for better public transportation. However, after a strong repression of the Sao Paulo military police against the young people, the movement was transformed into one of the biggest protest in Brazil. We have seen millions of people in the main big cities of Brazil, protesting and fighting for many different reasons: free fare, against the corruption, for political reform, for better public systems of health and education.

Although they live far apart and have distinct problems, the Turkey movement shows solidarity to the Brazilian movement and vice-verse. In the beginning of the Brazilian movement, many people posted in the social networks: *Taksim is here*. Also in Turkey people show posters of solidarity with Brazilian movements. What is the ground of such solidarity? What do they could possibly have in common, besides the same gas bombs used by an unskilled police of both countries? They shared a very general identification as people

fighting against what they thought were wrong in particular and general issues, but the agenda was highly different.

At the same time, both movements have grown really fast, going from a particular group of people to a very massive mass movement. Feelings of empathy and solidarity, with the help of social networks, played an important role inside each movement and in transnational identification.

The day the Pope arrived in Brazil, there was, besides the catholic movement, a protest against the governor of Rio de Janeiro. In this protest, some young people who belong to the media group Ninja were arrested. In few minutes, there was a huge wave in the social networks to take them out of prison. The slogan was: We are all Ninja/ Somos todos Ninja. It seems that the old word sympathy has recovered some of its meaning in social networks. The fact that the Ninja was recording the moment he was arrested was very important to the feeling of sympathy.

In this paper I ask whether sympathy, solidarity, and empathy are hard wired in our human brain. I will discuss one the thesis of evolutionary ethics, that is, that empathy and sympathy are innate. I ask whether these are natural /innate features of human beings and other animals, such as primates. I investigate whether there is a natural altruistic behavior and a natural tendency to solidarity. I claim that we have already sufficient empirical data to accept one aspect of an evolutionary ethics, which claims that at least some features of our morality, comes to us naturally.

1. Prinz criticism of an innate altruism

Prinz in the *Emotional Constructions of Morals* (PRINZ, 2007), claims that some researchers show that reciprocal altruism is rare in other animals because it demands cognitive prerequisites which is difficult to achieve. However, he accepts that there is evidence for reciprocal altruism in non human primates. Primates clearly show altruistic behavior: monkeys and apes share, help and reciprocate.

Prinz points out, based on the research of Soner and Wilson (1998) that “we cannot infer altruist motives from altruist behavior”. Apes may have other interests in having altruistic behavior: “There is little reason to think that apes are driven by altruistic motives when they exchange goods, because the donor receives a payoff in return (food for sex tradings in Bonobos)” (PRINZ, 2007, p. 260.)

Prinz also argues that altruistic behavior can be a strategy to achieve popularity: “Alpha males often distribute more food than other apes, and this helps them to be viewed favorably by members of the troop” (PRINZ, 2007, p. 260).

Prinz claims that it is easy to prove that human beings help others when there is no reciprocation: “In contrast, human beings frequently help others when there is no reciprocation. We send donation checks to distant charity organization, protest injustices that do not affect us directly, and support interventions in far-away lands” (PRINZ, 2007, p 260).

The recent movements in Brazil and Turkey illustrate this feature Prinz highlights. This kind of sympathetic and pure altruistic behavior can be attested when we we protest against injustice and show solidarity to a movement in a distant country.

According to Prinz, we cannot prove any moral evolution because we cannot show this kind of pure altruistic behavior in other primates:

The fact that we don't see this kind of behavior regularly in other primates species suggests that moral concern may be uniquely human, and if it's uniquely human, then we cannot use the comparative method to show that this trait is evolved, rather than culturally constructed” (PRINZ, 2007, p. 261).

2. Altruism in young humans

If altruistic behavior were innate, we should be able to notice it in very young infants. Prinz refers to the experiment of Warneken and Tomasello, where eighteen months old infants tried to help adults when they tried to do something unsuccessfully (e.g. reach for a fallen object, stack a pile of books, open a cabinet, and so on). This experiment shows that, “in comparison to control conditions in which adults did not display trying behavior, infants were likely to help spontaneously” (PRINZ, 2007, p. 263). However, Prinz warn us that this is not enough to attribute to infants a moral behavior: “What looks like helping behavior may just be one special instance of infant's general tendency to imitate and complete unsuccessful actions,” (PRINZ, 2007, p. 264).

I guess that this experience can count as a hint that reciprocal behavior is innate, although it is obviously not followed by a moral consciousness. What should be proved is that reciprocal behavior is a fact in young infants, since pure moral motives can never be proved, nor on child neither in adults.

Prinz objects to evolutionary ethics stating that we cannot prove any natural predisposition to moral behavior:

Our biological dispositions have no authority over values that have a cultural origin, and they can be embellished and overturned over the influence of culture. Moreover, I will argue that our biological predisposition do not qualify as moral rules without cultural elaboration. Morality is artificial all the way down. Taken literally, “evolutionary ethics is a myth (PRINZ, 2007, p. 246).

3. Is sympathy innate?

Prinz is right when he claims that biological predisposition does not qualify as moral rules, not even as prudential one.

I may object that, even in human beings, we find human altruistic behavior without being able to prove that they were motivated by moral concerns. I guess that the well-known Kantian distinction between action “according to duty” and “done by duty” shows that our deep and true motives may be shadowy. And this applies to human beings as well as to primates. There is no sense in asking more from apes than we can ask from human beings.

Yet there are many experiments showing that sympathy is a biological predisposition. Moreover, there are a lot of empirical data showing that solidarity is a fact among non human animals besides primates. De Waal in the book *The Age of Empathy (nature’s lessons for a kinder society)* refers to manifestations of helping behavior in elephants and birds. Moreover, he shows empathy and sympathy are a fact among chimpanzees, Bonobos and young children. I will present some of these empirical data.

4. Experiments on sympathy and empathy as natural feelings

One of the first experiments related to empathy has been made by the Russian primatologist Koth, who was married to the Director of Moscow’s State Darwin Museum. Koth was a kind of surrogate mother to a young chimpanzee called Yoni. She was also mother of young child. She not only described the emotional behavior of Yoni, but also related it to her own child behavior.

Koth writes about Yoni reaction when she pretended to be sad or crying:

If I pretend to be crying, close my eyes and weep, Yoni immediately stops his play or any other activities, quickly runs over to me, all excited and shagged, from the most remote places in the house, such as the roof or the ceiling of his cage, from where I could not drive him down despite my persistent calls and entreaties. He hastily runs around me, as if looking for the offender; looking at my face, he tenderly takes my chin in his palm, lightly touches my face with his finger, as though trying to understand what is happening, and turns around, clenching his toes into firm fists.” (DE WALL, 2010, chapter 4, Kindle Edition)

De Waal comments about the description of Yoni’s empathy towards the (fake) suffering of Koth: “What better evidence for the power of simian sympathy than the fact that an ape who’d refuse to descend from the roof of the house for food that was waved at him would do so instantly upon seeing his mistress in distress?” (DE WAAL, 2010, chapter 4, Kindle Edition). These kind of behavior of trying to comfort people in distress has been noticed in many different experiments. De Waal call some of these dispositions *preconcern*, by which primates and young humans try to comfort people, without having the full consciousness that something bad has happened to this person.

Empathy seems to be rooted in our brain system. One of very challenging experiment that points in this direction was the experiment of the Swedish psychologists Ulf Dimberg in the early 1990, who shows that empathy is triggered without consciousness of that behavior. Here is the description of the experiment by De Waal:

Dimberg demonstrated that we don’t decide to be empathic- we simply are. Having pasted small electrodes onto his subjects’ face so as to register the tiniest muscle movements, he presented them with pictures of angry and happy faces on a computer screen. Humans frown in reaction with angry faces and pull up the corners of their mouth in reaction to happy ones. This, by itself was not his most critical finding, however, because mimicry could be deliberate. The revolutionary part was that he got the same reaction if the pictures flashed on the screen too briefly for conscious perception. Asked what they have seen after such a subliminal presentation, subjects knew nothing about happy or sad faces, but still mimicked them (DE WALL, 2010, chapter 3, Kindle Edition).

5. Conclusion

The existence of empirical data, proving that sympathy and empathy are innate in human beings, and even in some primates, will make sentimentalists, such as Hume or Hutcheson, very satisfied. However, it does not please a philosopher, such as Prinz, who claims that

feelings and emotion are essential to morality. The reason is that he aims at finding emotions not in biological predisposition, but in culture itself.

Prinz refutes evolutionary ethics by arguing that we cannot infer moral motives from apparently moral behavior of non- human primates or young humans. I claim that pure moral motivation cannot be proved even for human beings. Emotionists should not be searching for pure moral motives, but for moral behavior.

6. References:

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Recebido / Received: 07/05/2014
Aprovado / Approved: 15/06/2014