

Co-operative nature justifies moral actions

By Goldwin Emerson

gandjemerson@rogers.com

London Free Press Feb. 15, 2012

Why should we act morally? To highly principled people such as Nelson Mandela or Mahatma Gandhi, asking why we should be moral is like asking why we should wish to be happy or healthy.

In society, religion has often assumed the role of arbiter and sustainer of moral values. But religious leaders have long recognized that followers have gaps between knowing what, in a moral sense, they ought to do and what they may, in fact, end up doing. Consequently, most organized religions build “moral motivators” into their systems.

Some of these motivators are negative, while others are positive. On the negative side, motivators may include fear, guilt, shame and punishment, while offered on the positive side are approval, gratitude, inspiration, sainthood and even eternal life.

Noted theologians state, without reservation, that it is entirely possible for non-believers to act in morally correct ways. Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth and Martin Buber were theologians who agreed secular thinkers frequently act with conviction and ethical correctness. Sometimes secular thinkers serve society by bringing socially relevant morality to organized religion. Eventually, progressive religions absorb ethical issues into their belief systems without causing too much disruption. For example, moral values with secular origins may at first cause angst in religious circles, but eventually be adopted, as is equality for women, concern for the environment, birth control, stem cell research, and homosexual preferences. For the theologians mentioned above, the question is not "Can non-believers be moral?" but rather, why would they act morally? What would motivate non-believers? It is possible their motivation comes simply from the desire to foster moral standards for the improvement of society.

Science offers some comments related to this question. Soon after Charles Darwin's, *Origin of the Species*, appeared in 1859, many writers applied his theory of evolution to social behaviour. For some time, the idea of “Social Darwinism”, supported by Herbert Spencer, gained popular acceptance. However, “Social Darwinism” tended to over-emphasize the competitive nature of humans, while using Darwin as justification for the idea that the most competitive societies would prevail. This emphasis on competition was a perversion of Darwin's theory of evolution. It over-emphasized aggressive competition and under-emphasized the importance of co-operation as a technique for survival.

Peter Kropotkin's book *Mutual Aid: A Force for Evolution*, published in 1902, helped to modify opinions and initiate more co-operative views. People, as well as animals that live in social groups, develop "dependency-reciprocity" relationships as part of their survival mechanisms.

Observation of primates and herd animals such as elephants, convinced social scientists that animals that live in tribes and social groupings develop dependency relationships for food, defence against predators, and the rearing of off-spring. There also develops a social reciprocity. Consider the case of a herd of elephants guided by their matriarchal leader to new feeding grounds. As they

proceed, one of the mothers is about to give birth. Rather than continuing without her and endangering the new mother and her offspring, the matriarch stops, and the herd gathers around the mother in a time of excitement and support. They seem to sense the importance of this event to the survival of their herd. When the newest offspring can walk at a reasonable speed, the herd continues towards the new feeding grounds.

Within human species, this dependency-reciprocity relationship is more highly developed and better understood. Canadian anthropologist, Harold Barclay, suggests that, within humans, our facility with language and abstract thought enables us to develop rules, social norms, and moral codes arising out of basic survival mechanisms.

While competition is still an important motivator, there is, within us, the drive to follow ethical codes that enable societies to work in harmony. If science can help us broaden our acceptance, morality will have taken a positive leap forward.

In conclusion, let us return to the original question of “Why be moral?” The answer is that while we have a certain competitive nature within us, we also have within us a basic need to be co-operative, to develop codes and norms and morals that are even more basic and more important to our survival.