How humans invented good and evil, and may reinvent both

Over thousands of years humans domesticated themselves

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Illustration: Patrick Leger

The Invention of Good and Evil. By Hanno Sauer. Translated by Jo Heinrich. *Oxford University Press; 416 pages; $29.99. Profile;* £25

TRIAL BY boiling water was not as bad as it sounded. In medieval Europe, those accused of grave crimes might be ordered to plunge an arm into a bubbling cauldron to retrieve an object. If they were scalded, that was God's way of revealing their guilt. The chance of acquittal would seem to be zero, but 60% of those who underwent this ordeal got off. How come?

The answer is that defendants believed in divine judgment. The guilty, convinced that God knew all, confessed to avoid the extra punishment of scalding. The innocent assumed they would be acquitted, so they refused to confess. The priests who prepared the cauldron knew this, and did not want to undermine their own authority by condemning someone who might later prove innocent. So they did not heat the water as much as they pretended to.

Hanno Sauer of Utrecht University has made a heroic effort to chart how morality has changed since the first humanlike animals began to populate Africa 5m years ago, and to predict how it might change in the future. It is a rich, complex narrative, full of unexpected twists like the inquisitors' tale. His book is as sweeping as Steven Pinker's "The Better Angels of Our Nature" or Yuval Noah Harari's "Sapiens". He is less optimistic than Mr Pinker, who describes a dramatic reduction in violence over millennia, and more tightly focused on ethics than Mr Harari. He blends insights from

evolutionary biology, cognitive science and anthropology to ask what makes people good, evil, or a bit of both?

Much of his argument hinges on a trait that sets humans apart from other animals: the extraordinary complexity of their social relations. People's early ancestors lived in an unstable environment, the African savannah, and developed "an unusually spontaneous and surprisingly flexible capacity for co-operation".

Since a hunting party might be successful one week but return empty-handed the next, rules emerged about sharing meat with the wider group, to maximise every member's chance of survival. Competition with other bands of hunter-gatherers over territory swiftly turned violent, however. "Inwardly, our ancestors were familycentric pacifists, but outwardly, they were gangs of murderers and plunderers," the author writes.

Wars ravaged hunter-gatherer societies yet involved great individual altruism. When each person's survival depends to a large degree on the clan's, people have an incentive to co-operate selflessly to defend it. From an evolutionary perspective, such self-sacrifice made sense only if the beneficiaries were closely related.

Early hunter-gatherer bands probably included no more than 150 or so people. To collaborate in larger groups, people needed new rules, vigorously enforced. This is perhaps why all human societies have devised ostentatiously nasty punishments. Cave paintings from 20,000 years ago depict ritual garrotting; in ancient Greece torturers roasted victims in a hollow bronze bull, their screams being amplified by the bull's horns.

"A species that kills its most [aggressive] members over hundreds of generations creates a strong selection pressure in favour of peacefulness, tolerance and impulse control," reckons Mr Sauer. In effect, "We domesticated ourselves." When it is socially required, humans can show enormous restraint and consideration; unlike, say, chimpanzees, which if crammed together on an aeroplane for a long flight would undoubtedly kill each other. Humans "are to chimpanzees as golden retrievers are to wolves", argues Mr Sauer.

Back to the future

Rules against killing strangers allowed people to co-exist in much larger societies. This, in turn, fostered the development of sophisticated cultures. Just as science depends on the steady accumulation of thousands of small innovations, so culture evolves over time, with ideas accumulating and being refined from one generation to the next. This process yields plenty of rotten customs, such as female genital mutilation, but also the benefits of everything from reading and music to cities and double-entry bookkeeping.

For millennia, the kinship group was the most important social unit, and morality was understood largely as the duties owed to one's relatives. But in Europe the Roman

Catholic church blew this system apart with a series of reforms that ended around 500 years ago. It banned cousin marriage and changed inheritance rules, encouraging people to choose their own spouses and bequeath assets as they pleased. This weakened kinship groups (which relied on cousin marriage to keep property within the clan) and fostered a more individualistic morality. People became more likely to feel guilt (at having done something wrong) than shame (because their aunts disapproved). The effects of these reforms can still be measured in Italy: people in the provinces that were under stronger papal control 500 years ago are more likely to donate blood even today.

The rise of individualism paved the way for modernity, with contract-based business, participatory politics, impersonal bureaucracies and the pursuit of science unconstrained by religious dogma. This has made the world richer, and richer countries are happier than those that remain poor.

The idea that rules can govern a society has spread far beyond Europe, albeit unevenly. Fully 70% of Norwegians say they trust strangers, whereas only 5% of people from Trinidad and Tobago agree Mr Sauer thinks universal norms will probably keep spreading but is unsure. As the Holocaust proved, humankind's ancient suspicion of out-groups has not vanished, and skillful demagogues can harness it in catastrophic ways. Examples are too numerous to list.

Looking at the past five years, the author finds much to worry about. 'Morality seems to be boiling over" in the West, he writes. People's moral vocabulary has become "mangled". Woke activists describe words as "violence" and use this claim to try to justify restrictions on free spreech. They also divide the world simplistically into "oppressors" and "oppressed", sometimes ascribing original sin by skin colour. And political tribes of left and right have come to see the other lot not merely as misguided, but evil.

Yet despite the fury of the culture wars, Mr Sauer sees "an enormous... unrealised potential for reconciliation". After hundreds of thousands of years of evolution, people share more moral values than they think, and this could help them cast off the identity politics that tells them they are enemies. "Between the extremes of 'being on time is white supremacy' and 'we must revitalise Western Christianity's cultural hegemony,' there is a silent majority of reasonable people," he concludes. He is surely right.

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The Economist, section on Culture: From witchcraft to woke. <economist.com/culture/2024/10/04/how-humans-invented-good-and-evil-and-may-reinvent-both>