

anthropologists had long been that evolution got our species to the point of becoming bipedal, tool-using, large-brained creatures, but once we developed the capacity for culture, biological evolution stopped, or at least became irrelevant. Culture is so powerful that it can cause humans to behave in ways that override whatever ancient instincts we share with other primates.

I was convinced that the prevailing view in anthropology was wrong, and that it would never be possible to understand morality without evolution. But Shweder had taught me to be careful about evolutionary explanations, which are sometimes reductionist (because they ignore the shared meanings that are the focus of cultural anthropology) and naively functionalist (because they are too quick to assume that every behavior evolved to serve a function). Could I formulate an evolutionary account of moral intuition that was not reductionist, and that was cautious in its claims about the “purpose” or “function” of evolved psychological mechanisms? I couldn’t just point to features of morality that seemed universal—such as compassion and reciprocity—and assert that they were innate merely because they were found everywhere. I had to have a careful evolutionary story for each one, and I had to be able to say how these innate intuitions interacted with cultural evolution to produce the variety of moral matrices that now cover the Earth.

I began by analyzing lists of virtues from around the world. Virtues are social constructions. The virtues taught to children in a warrior culture are different from those taught in a farming culture or a modern industrialized culture. There’s always some overlap among lists, but even then there are different shades of meaning. Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad all talked about compassion, but in rather different ways.²⁸ Nonetheless, when you see that some version of kindness, fairness,

and loyalty is valued in most cultures, you start wondering if there might be some low-level pan-human social receptors (analogous to taste receptors) that make it particularly easy for people to notice some kinds of social events rather than others.

To put it in terms of the taste analogy: Most cultures have one or more sweet beverages that are widely consumed—usually derived from a local fruit, or, in industrialized nations, just from sugar and a few flavorings. It would be silly to posit the existence of separate receptors for mango juice, apple juice, Coca-Cola, and Fanta. There’s one main receptor at work here—the sweetness receptor—and each culture has invented various ways to trigger it.²⁹ If an anthropologist tells us that an Eskimo tribe has no such beverage, it would not mean that they lack the sweetness receptor; it would just show that Eskimo cuisine makes little use of it, for the obvious reason that Eskimos, until recently, had little access to fruit. And when primatologists tell us that chimpanzees and bonobos love fruit and will work hard in a laboratory task to obtain a sip of Coca-Cola, the case for an innate sweet receptor becomes even stronger.

My goal was to find links between virtues and well-established evolutionary theories. I didn’t want to make the classic mistake of amateur evolutionary theorists, which is to pick a trait and then ask: “Can I think of a story about how this trait might once have been adaptive?” The answer to that question is almost always yes because reasoning can take you wherever you want to go. Anyone with access to an armchair can sit down and generate what Rudyard Kipling called “just-so stories”—fantastical accounts of how the camel got a hump and the elephant got a trunk. My goal, in contrast, was to identify the most obvious links between two fields I deeply respected: anthropology and evolutionary psychology.