

The Sacred Chain

How Understanding Evolution Leads to Deeper Faith

Chapter 24: Building Morality

Experiments in Fairness & Empathy

- Stump spoke with Sarah Brosnan who has done a lot of work with monkeys in trying to understand the evolutionary development of capacities in humans like cooperation and morality.
- One of her experiments that went viral on YouTube involved monkeys that were trained to make trades with humans. They would trade a small rock for a treat they liked: a cucumber.
- Not their favorite food but would happily eat them until they saw their friends getting a better treat.
- A monkey that saw his friend trade a rock for a grape brings another rock to trade, gets a cucumber, and promptly throws a fit.

- You could almost hear them scream, “That’s not fair!”
- Beyond fairness, we can see something that looks like empathy pretty far down the developmental scale.
- Brosnan described studies that seemed to show that rats have empathy for other rats in their social group.
- A box is built that can trap one of the rats, and it has a mechanism that other rats outside the box can trigger to free the trapped rat.
- Researchers found that when a rat sees another rat from its social group trapped in the box, it will work to free the trapped rat without receiving any reward for doing so.
- Then the researchers gave the rats a choice.

- They were introduced to a testing area that had both a pile of chocolate and one of their trapped comrades. The rats would consistently first go free their friend and then they would eat the chocolate together.
- By considering the development of fairness and empathy to the major transitions in cooperation we learned from the previous chapter, we can start to see the building blocks of true morality.
- These developments didn't happen randomly, but in response to stressors in the organisms' environments that had to be overcome.
- Stump thinks we can say those organisms were participating in the process of moral development, which can be seen over a very long period of time.

A Reflection of Our Own Journey?

- Stump read various books on how the proto-morality we find in other species today might have been developing into fuller forms in our ancestors.
- *How Compassion Made Us Human: The Evolutionary Origins of Tenderness, Trust, and Morality* by Penny Spikins.
- Documents the high incidence of ancient human fossils that show evidence of injury and disease.
- Spikins finds that these fossils of those who were injured or diseased beyond their ability to take care of themselves were somehow kept alive for years in those conditions.

- That doesn't sound like a survival-of-the-fittest strategy, which would have dictated that the weak be discarded.
- Doesn't seem consistent with conferring the kind of reproductive advantage necessary for evolution, until you zoom out further and recognize that the communities that care for the weak are the ones that might be developing other capacities with more direct survival advantages.
- Stump believes that this understanding of our evolutionary history is ripe for further investigation into how we became the kind of people we are: how our prehuman evolutionary history was necessary for developing moral capacities and how our ancient ancestors responded to the challenges they faced.

A documentation of Compassion

- Fossils have been found from people who had lost their teeth years before their death, requiring help in preparing food they could eat.
- Others have been found with arthritis so severe that it would have prevented independent movement for years. Such people were not abandoned or left alone but were provided for and almost certainly care for with compassion.
- Benjamina died between the ages of five and eight, some half a million years ago. She had a rare condition before birth that resulted in a misshapen head and stunted brain growth.

- This condition usually results in severe complications, such as blindness and seizures, yet Benjamina received enough care from her community to live five to eight years.
- This is evidence that the risky savanna environments our ancestors found themselves in several million years ago put selection pressures on the need to form lasting partnership, to form parental bonds with their young, and even to fall in love, as romantic love between mates would ensure they would stay together and protect their young.
- This development of greater emotion and compassion occurred just as living conditions were becoming more difficult.
 - Climate was becoming more variable
 - Food sources less predictable

- In this increasingly harsh environment, was it the strongest and meanest who survived? Some did.
- Spikins shows that difficult conditions in the natural world pushed us to develop emotions and learn to control them, to develop art and appreciate beauty, and to become compassionate.
- These are the capacities we tend to think of as most uniquely human. And they came about because of challenges.

“When conditions were harshest and survival most at risk, we see art, beads, and ornaments, care for the vulnerable, and the sophisticated and elaborate production of tools . . . Palaeolithic art is both moving and wonderful, and yet also seems excessive in the context of the societies which produced it. Sensitivity, generosity, and care for others seems most obvious precisely when they are hardest to explain.”

*--Penny Spikins,
How Compassion Made Us Human:
The Evolutionary Origins of Tenderness, Trust, & Morality*

- The lavishness of effort required to create art and care for the vulnerable seems almost irrational to us today when we think of needing to survive in difficult circumstances.
- *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* by anthropologist David Graeber and archaeologist David Wengrow
- They review the statistical frequencies of injuries or disease found in ancient burial sites and what can be determined about how long those people lived after the onset of injury or disease.
- They conclude, “In origin, it might be claimed, our species is a nurturing and care-giving species, and there was simply no need for life to be nasty, brutish, or short.”
- This was no Eden. There were still people like Otzi the Iceman who got shot in the back. Graeber and Wengrow note: “There is the security of knowing one has a statistically smaller chance of getting shot with an arrow. And there is the security of knowing that there are people in the world who will care deeply if one is.”

Chapter 25: Evolving Image Bearers

How did God use pain, suffering, and death to move us toward becoming the people He intend us to be?

Pain, Suffering, & Camping

- Stump's first experience with family camping wasn't exactly a beatific experience.
- Poison ivy, rain, food poisoning, getting lost . . .
- Camping wasn't always fun, but he looks back on them as good family experiences.
- He sees some parallels—in a broad way—to how an evolutionary response to pain and suffering is as good as other explanations for why God would make such a world.

The Sweet Spot: The Pleasures of Suffering and the Search for Meaning

- Written by Paul Bloom, psychology professor at the University of Toronto.
- Bloom's overall argument is that some degree of suffering is good for us. Studies show that those who have faced little adversity in their lives tend not to deal well with pain.
- Those who have faced a moderate amount of adversity are the best equipped to handle pain themselves and be compassionate toward others who are suffering.
- Rebecca Solnit investigated the resilience of communities devastated by disasters, such as Katrina, 9/11, Indian heat waves.

“It was the joy on their faces that surprised me . . . The desires and possibilities awakened are so powerful they shine even from wreckage, carnage, and ashes. What happens here is relevant elsewhere. And the point is not to welcome disasters. They do not create these gifts, but they are one avenue through which the gifts arrive. Disasters provide an extraordinary wisdom into social desire and possibilities, and what manifests there matters elsewhere, in ordinary times and in other extraordinary times.”

*--Rebecca Solnit,
A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary
Communities That Arise in Disaster*

Happiness & Meaning

- The World Happiness Report is an annual survey of countries around the world. Finland, Iceland, Norway and other Northern European countries tend to end up at the top of the list.
- They have more socioeconomic equality, lots of social services, and the highest GDP per capita. Their citizens don't suffer much.
- But Bloom notes that neither do they score very high on a different list: the most *meaningful* lives.
- Countries at the top of that list are Sierra Leone, Laos, and Cuba—places with little wealth or security. These are places where life struggles.

- Why is it that life in difficult countries, or even tragedies in otherwise easier places to live, give rise to joy and meaningfulness that go beyond the happiness born of security?
- It's doubtful that other animals species can find meaningful lives in more challenging circumstances that don't lend themselves to natural flourishing.
- Stump thinks humans can do it because we have evolved the capacity to think about things differently.
- We live in the very different world of the soul. Our mood and even our sense of well-being are not just a function of the things that happen to us, but also—and perhaps more importantly—how we understand and respond to the things that happen to us.

“My brothers and sisters, whenever you face various trials, consider it all joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance. Let perseverance finish its work, so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

James 1:1-2

- James may not have been talking about moral maturity or evolutionary development, but neither do we find any hint of the sentiment that a good God would spare us from trials.
- Rather the trials are understood as doing something to us: producing endurance, which leads to maturity.
- Nobody is suggesting that suffering is good in and of itself, but Stump finds it increasingly persuasive that suffering, adversity, and struggle can do something to us that might be beneficial.
- Did God intentionally place our ancestors—even the prehuman ones—in an environment that would induce some pain and suffering so they would develop the capacities of cooperation, empathy, and love?

Putting It Together

- According to science, we know *Homo Sapiens* evolved from earlier hominin around 300,000 years ago and have common ancestry with all other life on earth.
- According to Christian and Jewish theology, human beings were created in the image of God and so given a special role to play in creation as God's representatives.
- How do we combine these two facts into one coherent story?
- When in our evolutionary development did we become God's image bearers to the rest of creation?

- Stump speculates that evolution was occurring as described by scientists until there was a population of hominins that developed the capacity for moral maturity, which Stump takes as necessary to be God's representative.
- He's not equating the capacity for moral maturity with the image of God. Rather, he says that to fulfill that calling our species needed to have moral maturity.
- In this view, becoming image bearers depended on God's call, and it happened all at once in a moment in time when God entered into a new relationship with our species.
- Doesn't matter if it was 300,000, 60,000, or 10,000 years ago. The point is that the capacities needed to properly fulfill the vocation of image bearer had to have been in place as a first step, and then God was revealed in a new way to them. They bore the responsibility from that point onward of imaging God and stewarding creation.

Our Species as an Individual

- It didn't need to be an instantaneous or punctiliar event. This could have been gradual.
- We hold twenty-one-year-olds responsible for things we do not hold sixteen-year-olds for. Same goes for ten-year-olds and three-year-olds. Plus, there can be individual differences.
- In the same way, we might say our species grew up into the responsibility of stewarding creation—not all at once, but over time.
- Perhaps God has been revealing this vocation to us all along, and as our capacities developed, we came to understand more and more of our calling. And God held us increasingly responsible at developmentally appropriate intervals.

Chapter 26:
Finding Deeper
Faith with Simone Weil

Did God Create Pain & Suffering?

- Long before humans were around and committing the kind of morally reprehensible acts that could be called sin, the world operated on evolutionary principles according to which some individual organisms suffer and die painful deaths.
- Hurricanes caused pain and suffering, viruses caused disease, cancer destroyed from the inside out, and predators caught their prey and ate them alive.
- How could this kind of creation be called “good?”
- At worse, we have to wonder whether it makes God the author of evil. Don’t expect a conclusive argument, but perhaps these considerations can help.

Simone Weil

- Died in 1943 at age of 34 while working for the French Resistance during World War II.
- Known as a Christian mystic and spiritual master but ethnically she was a nonpracticing Jew.
- She studied philosophy and became enamored with Christianity through a friendship with a priest, without ever officially converting.
- She wrote prolifically but published no books during her lifetime. Her intellectual remains are in several books that were compiled by her friends from the notes and letters she left behind.

- She lived her philosophy in the messiness of the real world, rather than stitching together abstract ideas in an ivory tower.
- Central to her understanding of pain and suffering is her claim that the act of creation—of giving existence to something else—must be understood as God withdrawing the divine being from that creation.
- It's not that God abandons creation, it's more like the idea of kenosis found in Philippians 2:7: God “emptied himself to become human in the person of Jesus Christ.”
- According to Christian theology, Christ was still God—just now with certain limitations that go with being human.
- How much more emptying must it take to give existence to something that is not God?

The Distance of Love

- God is supreme goodness, and created things are not God. So according to Weil, giving created things their own existence must make them something other than the absolute goodness of God.
- It shouldn't surprise us, then, to find suffering and pain in the created order. But that doesn't mean God has no love for creation—just the opposite.

“It was by an inconceivable love that God created beings so distant from himself . . . The evil which we see everywhere in the world in the form of affliction and crime is a sign of the distance between us and God. But this distance is love and therefore it should be loved. This does not mean loving evil, but loving God through the evil.”

--Simone Weil

“Some Thoughts on the Love of God”

- Weil's point is that these difficult parts of creation should be seen as signs of God's love. To love is to will the good of another thing, and for God to create another thing to love, it would have to be distinct from God and therefore less than the absolute goodness of God.
- Her account suggests that suffering and love are intimately entangled, just as they were in the ultimate example she cites of suffering and love: Christ on the cross.
- The cross of Christ also points to the fact that creation was not intended to stay in this state forever. Remember that God didn't create things initially the way there were ultimately intended to be. In this sense too we might understand how the initial creation could be pronounced "good" even though it wasn't yet the good it was supposed to become.

- When we look at the world today and see all the pain and suffering, our assessment of it as “not good” is because we know that it should be something different by now. Its initial condition was good for that stage of development—it produced an astounding lavishness of life as well as the capacities in us for moral maturity. But it wasn’t intended to stay that way.
- The cross of Christ and his resurrection inaugurated a new era, and it from this vantage point that we can recognize all creation is groaning, the way it is describe by Paul in Romans chapter 8.
- Romans 8:18-23

Paul & Suffering

- Creation was “subjected to futility.” Stump isn’t saying Paul knew about the millions of years of suffering and death on Earth before humans were around to sin.
- He simply means that there are ways of describing—ways of seeing the natural history of our planet—that resonate with the grand themes of this Gospel message.
- God created a world where there are predators, hurricanes, and viruses that are capable of causing suffering and death. God said the world was good, even though it also needed to be filled and subdued. God created that way on purpose.

Why?

- Perhaps God created the world that way because it would do something to us. It would train us to become the kind of people God ultimately intended.
- Maybe God created a world that needed subduing, a world that was subject to futility, for the specific reason of creating a particular kind of life—life that could become morally mature.
- Furthermore, the world was created this way so that it too would become something else. “Labor pains” suggests that creation is in a gestational period, that it has not yet been born into what it is ultimately intended to be.

- When will that be? “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (8:19).
- When we children of God finally live up to the calling we were given as image bearers and stewards, then creation too will become what it was ultimately intended to be.
- Because we didn’t do that originally, and introduced sin into the world instead, we needed the atoning work of Christ to make things right.
- And although that has already happened, we await the further action of God for “adoption, the redemption of our bodies.” That is Paul’s allusion to the final resurrection that will consummate the Kingdom of God in the new heavens and new Earth.

- God seems to have a purpose in mind for subjecting the creation to futility, and that purpose seems connected to our role as the children of God, as God's image bearers.
- God created a place that needed to be subdued, a place where the image bearers would have a job to do. We are supposed to have an influence on creation, to cooperate with God in setting it free.
- But then, subjecting creation to futility (which includes allowing things like hurricanes and viruses) may have had a purpose for our own development too.
- God couldn't create morally mature beings from scratch because moral maturity demands participation in the process.

Not the Solution to the Problem of Evil

- No one has that. It is too wondrous for us to know, in the words of Job.
- Weil has persuaded Stump that something can be said that at least points in the direction of reconciling pain and suffering.
- She wrote, “The extreme greatness of Christianity lies in the fact that it does not seek a supernatural remedy for suffering but a supernatural use for it.”
- If God intervened to eliminate suffering, that would be the same as eliminating our existence.
- All of creation has a cruciform nature: love and suffering penetrate to the core of created things, pointing to the cross of Christ.
- Through evolutionary science and Christian theology, we can see that, by creating the world, God allowed pain and suffering to exist, and then God used pain and suffering to shape us into image bearers so that we might participate in transforming creation into what it was ultimately intended to be.