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Puritanical Morality and the Scaffolded Evolution of Self-Control

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Abstract:

There is a puzzle in reconciling the widespread presence of puritanical norms condemning harmless pleasures with the theory that morality evolved to reap the benefits of cooperation. Here, we draw on the work of several philosophers to support the argument by Fitouchi et al. (2022) that these norms evolved to facilitate and scaffold self-control for the sake of cooperation.

Main Text:

Fitouchi et al. (2022) have provided us with an elegant solution to the apparent paradox of puritanical morality - i.e. if morality evolved to aid/ensure cooperation, why do so many societies moralize the

pursuit of seemingly harmless pleasures? Though this may seem like a serious problem for evolutionary accounts of morality centered on cooperation, the authors instead argue that it can be captured perfectly well within such a framework once we move away from a focus on the short-term and consider the payoffs of long-term cooperative endeavors. Since acting on immediate impulses or desires can undermine cooperative relationships through acts such as cheating or lying, long-term utility maximizers - perhaps counterintuitively - require an investment into self-control and discipline that may undermine moment-to-moment pleasure maximization.

Our goal in this commentary will be to further advance their proposal by drawing on the work of philosophers who have written on the evolution of cooperation and moral norms, but that have surprisingly not been mentioned in Fitouchi et al. (2022). There is a long and thriving tradition of philosophers working on these issues, including J.L Mackie (1978), Richard Joyce (2007), and Kim Sterelny (2012). While it may be easy to artificially create a gap between the target article and this literature, through their being situated within different academic departments, this would be a mistake. There is no real difference in content, with much recent work in this type of philosophy of biology being imperceptibly close to the naturalistic kind of work undertaken in the target article (see also Veit 2019). With this in mind, we believe that the proposal of Fitouchi et al. (2022) can be strengthened by drawing on Sterelny's (2012) evolved apprentice framework, which emphasizes the role of cultural feedback loops in which learning, cooperative foraging, and the scaffolding of the environment come together and mutually sustain each other.

As emphasized in Veit & Spurrett (2021), with the emergence of an economy involving sharing, trade, and cooperative foraging with division of labor, there is an immediate rationale for the investment into self-control and delayed gratification. However, these capacities have to be trained, a process that costs both time and energy with rewards being reaped only in the more distant future – a particular challenge for adolescents most in need of their development. And it is precisely here that we argue puritanical norms have played an important role in scaffolding the development of self-control capacities. Indeed, it will help us to make sense of what Fitouchi et al. (2022) describe as a “strong valorization of *temperance* and *self-discipline*”. Inculcation of these traits during critical developmental periods may form an important part of future cooperative success.

Moreover, the moralization of both hedonism (Saroglou & Craninx, 2021) and the lack of self-control (Mooijman et al., 2018) have what are perhaps surprising connections with arguments made by prominent utilitarian philosophers. For example, De Lazari-Radek and Singer (2010) argue that morality is at least partially a social institution and requires children to be taught within it in order for them to endorse it. Further, they argue that since children need rules that they can readily apply and understand, it may be easier to teach them simple rules that must be obeyed in a deontological fashion, even if their ultimate purpose is to ensure cooperation and enhance aggregate wellbeing. If these rules are not questioned in later stages – a questioning that some societies may very well also condemn – we could readily see how a society could become increasingly puritanical. While we may conceivably tell children that it is in their own self-interest to follow moral rules, such a motivation is unlikely to conquer the pursuit of short-term interests and ensure sufficient self-discipline to reap the benefits of long-term cooperation. Evolution and moral education may then have converged alike on a seemingly paradoxical solution to ensure that hedonistic impulses can be controlled in the pursuit of greater long-term benefits.

Indeed, we suggest that there could be an evolutionary-developmental feedback loop in which improved ecological conditions for learning (i.e. the teaching of social norms) can lead to natural selection for better learning in this sphere, which in turn will lead to more effective teaching. Puritanical norms, rather than seen as a strange evolutionary latecomer in the natural history of morality, may instead have old evolutionary roots that constitute a scaffold upon which to create some of the preconditions for cooperative foraging and exchange: i.e. self-control and the ability to delay gratification. Indeed, the enforcement of puritanical values during the early life-history stages of humans may have been of utmost importance as a cultural scaffold to develop the skills of self-control and resolve by leading to a feedback loop in which humans develop better self-control and in turn enforce even more austere norms.

We believe that there is great promise in the proposal made by Fitouchi et al. (2022) and that we have offered some additional reasons here for why it may be fruitful to pursue this path. To finish, we suggest some of the empirical upshots of this expanded proposal. First, developing better methods for assessing and ranking the degree of ‘puritanicality’ of different groups or societies would then allow for testing of hypotheses regarding the circumstances associated with higher levels of puritanical moralization. In particular, we suggest that they could be used to look for relationships with results in tests for delayed gratification and stability of cooperative endeavors. Additionally, in line with the intriguing suggestion raised by the authors in the end of the paper, investigating the relationship between puritanical norms and the size and average social connectedness of members of a social group could tell us whether this type of morality arose in part to deal with the complexities arising from larger societies and the difficulties of maintaining trust without personal knowledge of individuals. If the tests we describe were to show the predicted correlations, it would further strengthen the evolutionary proposal put forth.

Conflict of interest statement:

The authors have no conflicts of interest to report.

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