

Experiments of Living

§15. From There to Here

At the dawn of the ethical project, our ancestors lived in bands small enough so that all adult members could participate in discussions in which each could speak and all could be heard. Around the campfire, in the “cool hour,” they sought ways of remedying the altruism failures from which their social lives had suffered. What kinds of problems did they discuss?

Scarcity of resources is a likely candidate. Perhaps times have been hard, and they have often wrangled about the few food items garnered. Suppose today has been a good day; for once each member of the band has had plenty to eat. As they gather together and reflect on their recent squabbles, all of them are able to detach themselves, at least temporarily, from the difficult circumstances, and think in general about possible outcomes when the amount available is too small to give everyone what he or she would like. They imagine possible distributions of that inadequate amount, each considering not only his or her own share but also those of the others, and attempting to recognize the felt consequences for the others. From their reflections and exchanges comes an agreed-on

vision of which distributions are preferred and a rule enjoining the dividing of the spoils.¹

Whether or not they would go as smoothly as just supposed, conversations about sharing are readily imaginable. Equally, the discussants might agree to aim at increasing the food supply, viewing each band member's wish to assuage hunger as something to be supported, or they might all concur in repudiating acts that initiate violence. Socially embedded normative guidance can begin the ethical project, but the precepts it is likely to generate appear simple and crude. How could the project of these pioneers blossom into the ethical richness of contemporary life? How did we get from there to here?

There is no serious chance of answering the second question, of defending some narrative as providing the *actual* evolution of the ethical project. The clues are too scanty. For the fifty thousand (or more) years of the ethical project, we have written records only for the last five thousand. Already, at the dawn of writing, elaborate systems of rules are in place. Evidently, much happened in the Paleolithic and the early Neolithic, leaving only indirect indicators of social change. Knowing the starting point (the small bands of discussants) and the late phases (ethical life today and the historical records of the past few millennia), one can identify *what* changes occurred, even if it would be folly to pretend to know *how* they came about.

Here are some obvious modifications. By five thousand years ago, human beings had assembled in societies vastly larger than the groups in

1. I do not suggest that the rule agreed on need be the first choice of every band member, nor that it take any specific form: perhaps it demands equal division, or equal division among those who have gathered the resources, or division by subunits with special regard to the needs of younger members. The point is both that there is pressure to agree on *something*, and that each of the discussants attempts to accommodate the views of others. This last point is one way in which the approach I favor diverges from that taken by John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971]). Instead of supposing that the discussants are rational egoists who consider the consequences for themselves under conditions of (partial) ignorance, I take them to be psychological altruists, able to refine that psychological altruism in contemplating a general problem that they face, who deliberate using their knowledge of one another. Further differences lie in the facts that this is no hypothetical contract, and that it is not directed at any "basic structure of society."

which the ethical project began. In those large settlements, the egalitarianism of the early phases had given way to complex hierarchies. Ethical life had become entangled with religion. It had also come to address issues beyond the conceptual horizons of the pioneers: citizens of the polis who inquire into the good life inhabit a different world from those making decisions about how to share scarce resources. New roles and institutions had emerged, generating precepts about property and about marriage. In more subtle ways, an expansion of the notion of altruism, beyond the concepts so far considered, permitted new ethical ideas about human relationships.

There is no doubt *that* these changes occurred. Acknowledging the difficulty of explaining how they *actually* happened leaves pragmatic naturalism with a problem. Skeptics charge that the account of the origins of ethical practice works only by changing the subject—something is shown to emerge, but it is not really *ethics*. Versions of the accusation surfaced in the previous chapter: How did we acquire the “ethical point of view”? How was the commanding voice internalized? How did a system of punishment evolve? The questions gain force by sowing doubt about any possibility of explanation in the terms pragmatic naturalism permits. No available route leads from there to here.

Doubt is settled by telling a story meeting all the constraints. The skeptic denies that something is possible, and an adequate response is to provide a “how possibly” explanation (§2); claiming that this is how things actually happened is not required. In the previous chapter, the challenges were turned back by denying the need for any “ethical point of view” (§11), by offering a scenario for the emergence of systems of punishment, crude and more refined (§12), and by suggesting several possible ways to build a conscience (§13). The goal of the present chapter is to offer something similar for the rich features of the ethical life apparently so far removed from the small groups of the pioneers. Not, then, “how we actually got from there to here” but “how we might have done so.”

Fundamental to the “how possibly” explanations to be developed is the increased power of cultural transmission in a species that has acquired language. The first task is to consider this mechanism for change.

§16. Cultural Competition

During the first forty thousand years of the ethical project, our species consisted of a population of small bands, each elaborating a socially embedded mode of normative guidance. Those who framed the first clusters of rules responded to the altruism failures most salient for them, and perhaps there were already intergroup differences here. Or, even if the bands shared a common set of altruism failures—troubles in apportioning scarce resources or controlling violence, for example—the commands accepted in social deliberation varied from group to group. Variation set the stage for a new process: cultural competition.

Differences surely arose both in the content of the rules and in the systems of socialization and enforcement. For simplicity, consider only variation in the rules adopted. Assume the population contains bands with equivalently effective systems of socialization and punishment. One group declares: food acquired is to be equally shared among all; another: food is to be shared only among the participants in foraging efforts; yet another: food is to be divided in accordance with consensus judgments about effort. Each group has the same expected compliance with whatever rules it adopts. These bands engage in “experiments of living.”² Cultural competition results from the fact that some experiments work more successfully than others.

What does lesser or greater success mean here? One measure recapitulates the fundamental currency of Darwinian evolution, the reproductive success of the members of different bands. So the success of an ethical code is gauged by the extent to which people living in groups adopting that code leave descendants in subsequent generations.³ That does not imply that there will be an increasing number of subscribers to the code in subsequent generations, for greater success in leaving descendants might be offset by a propensity to desert the code. Imagine two codes, E and F. People in societies adopting E leave, on average,

2. The phrase is John Stuart Mill’s: see *On Liberty* [Oxford: Oxford University Press (World’s Classics)], 1998 chap. 3.

3. I shall ignore issues about how far one must look into the future to achieve a reliable measure for assessing success. Oversimplifying again, we can suppose that the relative proportions in the first generation of descendants are preserved in subsequent iterations.

three descendants for every two descendants of people living in societies adopting F; if both societies invariably transmit their code to biological descendants, and if there is biological competition in which all individuals prove equally adept, the E societies will grow at the expense of the F societies. But if the F societies invariably transmit their code to biological descendants, while one-sixth of the descendants of people in E societies migrate to an F society, the proportions will remain constant. Thus, codes may have one sort of success (in biological reproduction) without having another (success in commanding adherents).

Cultural competition concerns the latter type of success and is properly measured by the number and size of the groups in which a code is adopted.⁴ Separating cultural success, expressed in terms of adherence, whether by individuals or by societies, from reproductive success (the currency of Darwinian evolution) may seem artificial. For, you may suppose, occasions on which the spread of a form of culture is not correlated with any ability to foster reproductive success are likely to be rare and transitory. The fantasy of a striking effect in terms of leaving descendants coupled to, and offset by, a tendency to desert the code is just that—a fantasy. Tendencies of this sort would be opposed by natural selection: variants with a disposition not to switch, but to remain with the biologically more successful culture, would leave more descendants. Hence we should expect a loose correlation between cultures securing many adherents and cultural practices advancing biological reproduction. In a famous slogan, “genes hold culture on a leash.”⁵

4. Here there is further room for decision, for, if a code commands the obedience of a smaller number of large groups, should it be counted as more or less successful than one that is followed in a larger number of societies whose combined population is less? It is important to appreciate the distinct possibilities, but, for the purposes of the current discussion, no decision about which is the *real* measure of cultural success is required.

5. The slogan was advanced in classic discussions of human sociobiology—see, for example, Charles Lumsden and E. O. Wilson, *Genes, Minds, and Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982). The details of the argument for thinking the slogan is correct turn out to be much more complex than the simple presentation in the text suggests, and controversial assumptions are required for its derivation [cf. the review by John Maynard Smith and N. Warren, and chap. 10 of my *Vaulting Ambition* (*Evolution*, 6, 1982, 620–27)]. The most important rebuttal of the idea that cultural success and biological success are likely to be coupled came from articulated accounts of the coevolution of genes and

Detailed attention to mechanisms of cultural transmission and their interaction with Darwinian evolution reveals how the advantages of learning from others allow for processes of imitation, stable under natural selection and sometimes giving rise to biologically maladaptive tendencies.⁶ To recognize historical possibilities in the elaboration of ethical practice, no general account is needed—we can manage without any sophisticated theory of gene-culture coevolution. It is, however, important to appreciate the lack of any tie between biological and cultural success. Codes commanding obedience need not be those that further reproductive success. That important point notwithstanding, on occasion some Darwinian consequence of a particular ethical code, for example, the fact that the children of those who subscribe to it tend to survive and flourish, plays a role in the acceptance of that code by other groups.

Cultural competition does not entail that successful codes march en bloc from group to group, in the fashion of colonial conquerors. A collection of rules can spread piecemeal, some of its constituent items being accepted, others rejected. The rule espoused by one band can influence the code accepted by another, even though the latter group does not take over the rule intact: we who apportion the spoils of the hunt according to the perceived contributions of the hunters discover that our neighbors reward all members of the tribe equally, and are inspired to amend our practice in a way that combines aspects of both the extant codes (“Divide the gains equally among those who take part in joint projects!”). New immigrants bring ideas about normative guidance to be aired in discussions, sometimes modifying extant prescriptions, even when they are not taken over wholesale.⁷

culture. A seminal analysis was provided by Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson in *Culture and the Evolutionary Process* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), and developed further in several essays in their *Origin and Evolution of Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

6. For a succinct explanation of this important thesis, see Boyd and Richerson, *Origin and Evolution of Cultures*, 8–11; more technical amplifications are provided in chaps. 1 and 2 of the same book.

7. Although the oversimplification I have adopted invites the thought that individual rules are the atomic units transmitted in the history of ethical practice, the possibilities of more subtle influences and modifications reveal that that is inadequate: a search for cultural “atoms” must slice codes more finely. Moreover, there are good reasons for not thinking of

For the first forty thousand years of the ethical project, small bands of human beings regulated their lives by socially embedded ethical codes. Faced with perceived difficulties the extant versions of their codes failed to address, they tried new ideas. Sometimes, they interacted with other bands, in whose practices they saw something to inspire revision of their own rules. Eventually, some groups merged, and aspects of one or both of the antecedent codes endured in the practice of the subsequent society. Some bands simply died out, or dispersed, and their ethical practices withered with them, even though survivors may have brought facets of the previous code into the groups they joined. Sometimes new arrivals, accepted perhaps as mates, brought novel ideas to the campfire discussions, producing a synthesis previously envisaged by neither of the (“parent”) groups. Processes of these general types (and probably many more) combined to cause some kinds of rules to be prevalent, others rare.

The most widely shared features of contemporary ethical codes probably emerged in many different ways. If human beings have evolved psychological tendencies to acquire certain kinds of norms, a common rule might reflect these propensities (subject to the qualifications of §14). A rule might be the simplest response to a difficulty faced by all social groups. A rule (or a preliminary version) might originate in a single group and spread to others because it promises to satisfy widely shared desires. Alternatively, groups failing to acquire the rule might suffer some severe disadvantage, so that they had a tendency to die out or to be taken over by outsiders. The features of the ethical codes transmitted to us emerge from these sorts of episodes—and no doubt many more besides.

cultural practices generally and ethical codes in particular as collections of discrete atoms that can be shuffled and rearranged in novel combinations. Interactions among such alleged units may be crucial to the nature of the cultural practice, so that there is no stable, practice-independent contribution a cultural “atom” generates. Perhaps only in the context of an entire ethical code does a rule have specific meaning. See, for example, the writings of Dan Sperber, in particular, *Explaining Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). I have tried to show the complexities of attempts to build serious theories of culture that mimic biological evolution—theories of the transmission of “memes”—even at the level of kinematics; see my “Infectious Ideas,” Chapter 10 of Philip Kitcher *In Mendel’s Mirror* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

§17. The Unseen Enforcer

To scotch suspicions about pragmatic naturalism's ability to allow for the emergence of ethics ("real ethics"), it is necessary (and sufficient!) to show how processes of cultural competition could have led from simple early ventures in socially embedded normative guidance to the complex ethical practices of recent millennia. Begin with the entanglement of ethics and religion.

Ideally, discussions in the "cool hour" liberate and expand prior tendencies to psychological altruism. Realistically, however, full engagement with others may only rarely (if ever) be achieved. The deliberations may be conducted by people weary of constant squabbles and yearning for a consensus that will bring peace. They seek shared rules as a matter of convenience, hoping to discipline their fellows who lapse from cooperation—but they are quite ready to break the rules when they think they can get away with it. The discussants engage in a bargain, giving up some limitations on the actions they would like to perform (*genuinely* like to perform) for the sake of the benefits accruing from similar restraints imposed upon others.

It may be a good bargain, in that, with a practice of punishment in place, a significant class of potential altruism failures may be avoided, simply because onlookers can see what is occurring and enforce the agreed-upon rules. Yet when other members of the group are in no position to check whether you are conforming to the rules, you prefer to disobey. If there is an accusing voice from within, it does not sound with any great insistence or volume.

The early history of normative guidance was almost certainly one in which a population of human bands reaped the advantages of public rules, publicly applied in public situations, but in which many—maybe all—individual members were willing not to conform to the rules when they took themselves to be unobserved. Given thoughtful choices by those who introduced and revised the rules, obedience would typically contribute to the average reproductive success of the members of the band—consider, for example, sharing rules that generally ensure food for everyone. Groups would gain in the Darwinian struggle for existence and in cultural competition, through socially embedded normative guidance,

even though conformity to the rules was confined to instances in which actors could expect others to monitor their conduct. Advantages in cultural competition might come about in either, or both, of two ways: through others' perception that members of this band could satisfy widely shared wishes, and through the assessment of them as healthier, better fed, or whatever proximate cause contributes to the extra Darwinian fitness. An ability to achieve conformity across a *broader* range of contexts would yield an *extra* edge in cultural competition, while typically also adding to the expected reproductive success of individuals.⁸ Techniques for enhancing compliance promote cultural (and probably biological) success.

What techniques? As they reflect together on their ethical practices, the deliberators will recognize noncompliance as often caused by the belief that one is unobserved. They remember rule violators whose confidence that they were not seen—and thus could avoid retribution—turned out to be false. Within some groups, adult members refine programs for socializing the young. Perhaps they inculcate enduring fears of the effects of rule violations, instilling some crude form of conscience (§13) to keep people on track even when there is no obvious observer around. To the extent they are effective in doing this, later generations of the band will tend to comply at higher frequency, with positive Darwinian and cultural effects. But how exactly is this fear to be triggered? Prevalent in human cultures—in the successful surviving experiments—is an appeal to unobservable entities that respond to breaches of ethical codes. Western monotheisms use the device: there is an omniscient deity who observes all, who judges, and who punishes lapses from commandments. Variations on the theme occur in most other religious traditions. The ancestors continue to observe the actions of the descendants and to

8. The plausible assumption that rules directed at remedying altruism failures are likely to promote the average Darwinian fitness of individuals as well as to enhance the cultural competitiveness of the ethical practices realized in social groups enables me to sidestep worries that the forces of cultural and Darwinian competition might tug in different directions. A more general account would explore the ways in which rules antithetical to average Darwinian fitness might be supported because of their efficacy in cultural competition, but my purposes here can be satisfied with far less. Boyd and Richerson, *Origin and Evolution of Cultures*, provide the elements out of which the more general account can be fashioned.

retract their favors if the commands are broken. Spirits are associated with particular places or particular animals and will wreak vengeance on the group if rules are violated. There are hidden forces in nature, with which people must align themselves to be successful, and to deviate from the prescriptions is to endanger or destroy this alignment. Ethnographies testify to the popularity of the idea of unobserved enforcement (typically, but not always, personified): as when informants tell of an “all-father” who “from his residence in the sky watches the actions of men [and] ‘is very angry when they do things they ought not to do, as when they eat forbidden food.’”⁹

Once the idea of an unseen enforcer is in place, fear of punishment can be embedded in a complex constellation of emotional responses. Commands promulgated by elders can be identified with the wishes of the gods or spirits (or with the tendencies of the impersonal forces affecting human success). If the gods are local, they may be seen as prescribing particular rules for the group, rules that both express the favor of the deities and constitute the identity of the band. Later phases of a group’s ethical practice look back on an episode in which the ancestors obtained the favor of a particular divinity and were also given the divine command(ment)s.¹⁰ Crude fear of punishment is transmuted into more positive emotions—awe, reverence—and the commands are welcomed as a mark of the favor of an extraordinary being. Group members see the rules as constitutive of who they are.

Religious beliefs, beliefs in some kind of “transcendent” reality, tied to the origin and reinforcement of ethical prescriptions, are almost universal across known human societies—at least until recently. Why is this? As noted (§16), there are many possible ways to succeed in cultural competition, and the would-be explainer of the prevalence of any aspect of

9. Edward Westermarck, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1926), Vol. 2, 671; the entire chapter (chap. 50) is full of fascinating examples of “Gods as Guardians of Morality.”

10. This conception is plainly present in the earliest versions of the Judaic tradition; moreover, as the preambles to the legal codes of the ancient Near East make very clear, very similar ideas appear in societies throughout Mesopotamia and Egypt. I conjecture that these are simply written out versions of oral traditions that thrived and developed over tens of thousands of years.

human culture does well to tread cautiously. In this instance, however, there are grounds for tentatively embracing a historical conjecture: religion permeates human history because groups that did not invent some form of the unseen enforcer were less able to reap the benefits (Darwinian and cultural) of socially embedded normative guidance; with lower levels of cooperation and social harmony, they were losers in cultural competition.

A rival possibility is that Darwinian selection has generated a propensity for conceiving and adopting ideas about transcendent entities who are both the sources of prescriptions and the supervisors of conduct. Yet any thought of a genetic variation inclining individuals to so specific a form of religious belief is utterly implausible: variations, whether point mutations or shufflings of the genome, produce, as their proximate effects, differences in the structures or relative proportions of proteins present in cells, and this kind of change, inserted into some early human environment, could not yield so particular an effect. Nor is cultural diffusion of the idea of the unseen enforcer from some ur-society in which it was first articulated at all likely. Groups lacking this idea, learning of the stories told by outsiders about how beings who especially favored them commanded them to behave according to their particular rules, would hardly be inspired to think that the structure of the account, though none of the details, was applicable to their own case.

The proposed conjecture is far simpler. In a world of apparently unpredictable phenomena and seemingly inexplicable changes, our ancestors responded by invoking unseen entities with extensive powers.¹¹ Some groups took a further step, attributing to these beings a connection with the social order: impersonal forces would react against those who broke the rules, ancestors or spirits would wreak vengeance on those who failed to conform to the code, deities expressed their wishes in the commands recognized by the band and were able to inspect behavior, even when agents conceived of themselves as “alone.” Groups who

11. Dewey favors an anthropological account along these lines, viewing it as the ultimate source not only of religion, but also of philosophy and of science. See the opening chapters of *The Quest for Certainty* vol. 4 of *John Dewey: The Later Works* (Carbondale IL: University of Southern Illinois Press). See also Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), and Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

took this step gained a powerful mechanism for securing compliance and did better than rivals whose invocation of unseen powers was not connected to the ethical sphere. Religiously entangled ethics is prevalent because the very specific link between unseen powers and ethical conduct bestows significant advantages in cultural competition.

Philosophers have often been unsympathetic to the almost universal historical embedding of ethics within religion. Their arguments, articulated from Plato on, demolish the thesis that religion can provide a particular type of foundation for ethics.¹² They do not, however, touch the thought that religion may be valuable to, even essential for, ethical practice, in virtue of its power to increase compliance. Far from being an irrational idiosyncrasy, divine-command approaches to ethics may reflect a deep fact about cultural competition. Yet, for all the short-term advantages it brings, invoking an unseen enforcer amends the ethical project in potentially dangerous ways. For it threatens the equality that originally reigned in normative deliberations. Those who can convincingly claim to have special access to the will of the transcendent policeman—shamans, priests, and saints—come to have an ethical authority others lack.

Our next task is to examine the breakdown of initial equality more generally, considering divisions by status and role, and the origin of institutions that expand those divisions. How might the ethical project have introduced, tolerated, even favored these differences?

§18. Some Dots to Be Connected

For tens of thousands of years, egalitarian distribution of basic resources was crucial to the ethical project. Vulnerable small groups required the participation of all adults. They surely deployed precursors of the many clever strategies contemporary hunter-gatherers use to promote equality among their members. The !Kung, for example, take steps to ensure that differences in hunting ability are not manifest. They impose serious sanctions for boasting about a kill, cultivate a practice of joking designed to check feelings of pride and arrogance, and have a custom of crediting

12. The exact character of the arguments will occupy us in §27.

the kill to the owner of the arrow, which, when combined with a widespread practice of arrow sharing, effectively reduces differences in hunting yield.¹³ Violation of these conventions is regarded as a way of courting bad luck. Under the circumstances of early human life, groups failing to develop similar strategies would forfeit the advantages normative guidance had brought.¹⁴ The societies visible in the first written records, however, contain fine differentiation of rank and status. What might have produced them?

Archeological evidence of early cities (Jericho, Çatal Hüyük) makes it apparent that, by eight thousand years ago, human beings were able to live in groups far larger than those present at the early stages of the ethical project.¹⁵ When a thousand or more people live within the walls of the same city, strategies of peacemaking through face-to-face reassurance are no longer applicable. There must be a system of agreed-upon rules for forestalling potential conflicts and for dealing with people who are relative strangers. Some extension of the prevailing injunctions to cover transactions with individuals outside the small group of regular associates must have been achieved substantially earlier. By fifteen thousand years ago, at the very latest, bands of human beings were periodically uniting temporarily, for the deposits at some sites testify to a larger association.¹⁶ Moreover, there is indirect evidence for peaceful intergroup associations at earlier stages—and possibly even for the existence of trade between different bands.

13. See Richard Lee, *The !Kung San* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

14. For general discussion of the importance of egalitarianism, see Cristoph Boehm, *Hierarchy in the Forest* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), and for telling examples see Lee, *!Kung San*. The case for a period of egalitarianism in human prehistory, between the hierarchies of apelike hominids and those of the societies for which we have historical records, is succinctly made by B. M. Knauff, "Violence and Sociality in Human Evolution," *Current Anthropology* 32 (1991): 391–428; see, in particular, the famous U-shaped curve.

15. See James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).

16. See Clive Gamble, *The Palaeolithic Societies of Europe* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chap. 8; Paul Mellars, "The Upper Palaeolithic Revolution," in *The Oxford Illustrated Prehistory of Europe*, ed. Barry Cunliffe (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994), 42–78.

The earliest hominid technologies were disposable. Two hundred thousand years ago our ancestors made tools as they needed them and left them behind when they moved on. For them, tools posed no important constraint on mobility (people did not need carrying gear), nor did tools figure as a type of property (if someone takes an ax, the maker can easily replace it). But as hominids dispersed, they frequently left the sources of their tools behind them, and, by twenty thousand years ago, bands were foraging in regions a significant distance (a hundred kilometers or more) from the nearest places in which raw materials for their tools were found (the case of tools made from obsidian is particularly striking). Those bands would have needed carrying devices (for understandable reasons, not preserved in the record), and they would also have needed to coordinate their behavior with one another and with other bands so as to make possible either a long-distance trade network or a series of journeys to gather the materials they required.¹⁷ Either instance threatens obvious possibilities of exploitation and aggressive intervention, and the codes of the groups involved would have had to be modified to cope with these dangers. Even if they were not yet practicing trade with one another, their ethical codes would have had to contain rules that forbade harming outsiders, at least under some circumstances. Rules of this sort anticipate the possibilities that flower in the later cities, in Jericho and Çatal Hüyük, Ur, Uruk, and Babylon.

Long before people came together to build pyramids or ziggurats, our ancestors were crafting tools that depended on distant materials, bringing special substances deep into caves to paint animals, and burying their dead with special artifacts. By fifteen thousand years ago, human groups were fashioning statues and leaving them at grave sites, a practice hard to explain without supposing conceptions of transcendent beings whose welfare is a matter of practical concern. Thousands of years earlier, people took time to isolate the pigments needed for decorating the walls

17. The hypothesis of Paleolithic trading networks was originally advanced by Colin Renfrew and his colleagues, based on the discovery of obsidian tools at considerable distances from the nearest source. See C. Renfrew and S. Shennan, eds., *Ranking, Resource, and Exchange* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1982). The trade-network hypothesis seems superior to the rival idea of long journeys undertaken by members of a band, given the obvious problem of explaining how such journeys might be navigated.

of caves, developing techniques of painting, and producing the extraordinary art of the French and Spanish sites.¹⁸ These activities are unlikely in any society still struggling to satisfy basic requirements of food and shelter, improbable also if there is not some incipient division of labor. By thirty thousand years before the present, the enterprise of framing rules for life together, the ethical project, must have been quite well developed.

The early law codes provide the clearest indications of the evolution of ethical codes that occurred late in prehistory. Ancient Near Eastern texts include stories embodying ideals of behavior, myths about the afterlife, and partial codes of laws. The Gilgamesh epic, for example, provides a picture of what is expected of high-ranking people in the pyramidal societies of Sumer and Babylon; similarly, the protestation of innocence in the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*¹⁹ shows us what kinds of actions were counted as ethical transgressions and thus illuminates the structure of the ethical code; most obviously, the lists of rules found in the Mesopotamian codes, from the Lipit-Ishtar code of the early second millennium, through the code of Hammurabi (a century later) and beyond provide us with a sense of the conduct requiring explicit prohibition and of the relative importance of various social breaches.

The preambles to the law codes constantly emphasize that the law-giver brings peace and resolution of conflicts; the law is seen as a method of transcending a social life in which brute force prevails and the strong oppress the weak. The surviving tablets and stelae do not offer any complete account of the laws in force. They amend a body of existing law, offering revisions and extensions that address problems arising in the creation of social order. These “codes” represent a multistage process of development of social rules extending back to the dawn of writing and beyond. Their fragmentary character is immediately obvious. Provisions are made for very specific types of occurrence—whether a “senior” strikes the daughter of another “senior” and causes a miscarriage, whether an ox

18. See Jean-Marie Chauvet, Eliette Brunel Deschamps, and Christian Hillaire, *Dawn of Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996).

19. *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, trans. E. A. Wallis Budge (New York: Dover, 1967), 194–98; also in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 34–36.

goes a passerby, whether a woman crushes the testicle(s) of a man who is fighting her husband. The particularity points to new troubles of an increasingly complex society.

The Neolithic pastoralists and farmers of Mesopotamia had already worked out rules for restraining violence, protecting the fruits of their labors, and organizing sexual relations. As they were integrated into larger units in a world dependent on social coordination to supply adequate irrigation, new issues arose—how are measures to be standardized, how does one ensure that land is properly used, how are the public canals and dikes to be maintained? The surviving codes lavish great detail on these questions, as well as addressing the various kinds of violence and sexual relations that emerged from the social friction of large numbers of people occupying a relatively small space. They occur against the background of a general understanding of the ways in which violence is to be contained, sexual relations regulated, and property protected.

Later diffusion of rules from the Babylonian codes reveals the cultural transmission prevalent throughout prehistory (although diffusion would have gone swiftly only once the ethical project had evolved to allow peaceful interactions among bands). The Hebrew Bible takes over parts of the law we find in Sumer and Babylon: Exodus 21:28–29—concerned with control of oxen—recapitulates articles 250–51 of the code of Hammurabi, and Deuteronomy 25:11–12 reaffirms the Mesopotamian prohibition against wifely testicle crushing. Mesopotamian theocracies plainly had complex rules for religious ritual and service to the gods (or their surrogates, the ruler-priests). The code of Lipit-Ishtar already links the law to divine command, and the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* sees the prospects of the afterlife as dependent on present conduct. The idea of the unseen enforcer permeates all these texts.²⁰

20. There is even a Babylonian wisdom literature, dating to before 700 B.C.E. (possibly to significantly before this period), in which the attitudes we associate with Christian ethical conceptions are articulated. It reads: “Unto your opponent do no evil / Your evildoer recompense with good; / Unto your enemy let justice [be done].” Another text, of uncertain date but possibly very early, offers the same theme: “Do not return evil to your adversary; / Requite with kindness the one who does evil to you.” There is no reason to think that the authors of these texts invented the idea. They, too, like the writers who borrowed the

This fragmentary record provides a small number of dots that must be connected by any adequate account of how the early phases of the ethical project could have given rise to the ethical practices of the present and the historical past. The pieces of evidence constrain a “how possibly” account but are insufficient to yield any confidence that only one narrative will accommodate them (§2). The following sections construct a potential explanation, answerable to the demands of pragmatic naturalism, tracing the emergence of social divisions, trade, the institution of private property, and ultimately of societies in which the most privileged can speculate about the good life.

One important point needs advance consideration. Previous paragraphs have focused on the first written *legal* codes, as if these offered insight into *ethical* practice. Yet, as every beginning philosophy student learns, legal and ethical prescriptions are quite different: there are laws for which compliance is not an ethical matter, as well as ethical maxims not translated into law. To trace the possible evolution of the ethical project, is it legitimate to begin with *social* discussions of regulations for conduct and end with *legal* codes?²¹

For our purposes, boundaries should be blurred. Almost all societies, at almost all times, have socialized new members by inculcating more than *ethical* resources—at least as contemporary philosophy understands the ethical. The young are informed about what is a matter of religious duty, what is a matter of law, what is a matter of politeness and social custom—that is, what *we* see as falling under these categories. The specific conception of the ethical figuring in philosophical discussions grows out of a historical process. Later judgments distinguishing

theme of forgiveness from them, probably drew on previous traditions. The ethical codes of prehistory survive in these early texts, accompanied by regulations that deal with novel problems.

21. Many prominent thinkers have been willing to advance views about law quite similar to my proposals about ethics: witness H. J. S. Maine, *Ancient Law* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986); Benjamin Cardozo, *The Growth of the Law* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1924); and H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1961). Like Dewey, I take the kinship very seriously (as did Cardozo). For encouragement to think about the development of law, I am indebted to Jeremy Waldron, and I am also grateful to Sam Rothschild for valuable conversations.

some obligations as ethical emerge from earlier practices blind to differences among categories of norms.

Divisions of rules into types often makes sense, for rules can conflict and it is sometimes (though not always) handy to supply a general way of deciding what has priority. People are commanded to engage in a particular ritual, but, in the middle of the ceremony, participants hear that the lives of other group members are threatened and immediate attention is required. Does the rule to protect others in the band take priority over the prescription to finish the ritual? Different groups may decide that question differently. Some, perhaps the culturally most successful ones, declare that the command to aid and protect has higher status than the rule requiring the ritual to be carried through to its conclusion. Many societies, contemporary and historical, have divided prescriptions into three (rough) categories. The most fundamental are the commands associated with transcendent beings; these can be used to elaborate, and sometimes override, rules emerging from social discussion, (something like matters of law); both categories take priority over the least important directives, those taken to govern manners and customs. Division into these categories does not settle all issues of priority, for it is possible for two divine commandments to conflict (the rules for worship clash with prescriptions to save others).

These categories, and the ways of deploying them in subordinating some rules to others, are products of the cultural elaboration of normative guidance. There is no inevitability about the outcome. Commitment to a particular hierarchy of types of norms—or, indeed, to *any* such hierarchy—is a matter for potential scrutiny. (There might be an invariant relation among types of commands—type 1 always takes precedence over type 2—or the relative status could be context dependent.) Occasions of conflict among norms provide a spur to the practice of differentiating types of norms, including the very particular practice contemporary philosophy sees as constitutive of ethics.²²

22. It is worth noting that, even within traditions differentiating the ethical from matters of law, religion, and etiquette, some voices speak differently. Pioneering secularists of the past (Hume, Adam Smith) often seem to blur the distinction between morals and manners: eighteenth-century accounts of moral sentiments surprise readers by grouping wit, cheerfulness, and elegance with honesty and generosity. Even thinkers who allow for a

§19. Divisions of Labor

The ethical pioneers lived in the fashion of contemporary hunter-gatherers, in egalitarian societies where almost all adults carry out the same range of daily tasks to ensure individual and social survival, and in which the contributions of all are typically necessary (§§14, 18). Perhaps there was a modest sexual division of labor, centered on special involvement of women with young children and (perhaps) different types of foraging. Deliberations about how to share scarce resources surely acknowledged the basic desires of all members of the band, and *endorsed* those desires, in the sense of preferring everyone's desires to be satisfied provided there is enough to go round. Attitudes of endorsement create pressure to transform conditions of scarcity into a state of greater abundance. Moreover, to the extent that more resources are available to the group, the task of avoiding altruism failure becomes easier. Societies with codes fostering cooperation are more likely to engage in joint projects that garner valuable resources, and the increase in resources yields an enlarged class of occasions on which a socially endorsed outcome is readily seen and relatively attractive, thus promoting more cooperation. As groups develop new strategies for cooperative projects that increase their joint resources, they enter a feed-forward cycle.

One obvious strategy for obtaining more of the things everybody needs is a form of the division of labor. If one of us is better at finding roots and another makes superior arrows, we are likely to acquire more food items, or to acquire the same amount in a shorter time, if the first person concentrates on root finding and the second on arrow making. This is not yet a matter of decomposing tasks into subroutines and

separation between religious commands and the requirements of ethics do not always assign priority to the ethical. Kierkegaard is famous (notorious?) for maintaining that the greatness of Abraham, as “the knight of faith,” consists in his “suspension of the ethical.” To suppose he can be refuted by declaring that it is *constitutive* of ethical maxims to take priority over religious injunctions is no more convincing than specifying that your favorite rule (or strategy) of nondeductive inference must be adopted because it is constitutive of rationality. Better to try to understand why one, rather than the other, might be incorporated in our practices.

assigning people to repeat particular actions.²³ Rather, the spectrum of jobs is partitioned to take advantage of the distribution of skills. Implementing the strategy depends on each individual's doing his or her part, and that requires normative guidance to constrain potential shirkers. Under the aegis of normative guidance, however, the strategy may be to everyone's benefit: the group finds more roots, and its sharper arrows bring down more (or larger) prey; through equal division of the spoils, everyone gains a bigger share.

Sometimes the environment in which the band finds itself is benign, and refined productive strategies are unnecessary. For many, perhaps all, of the Paleolithic bands, times were surely sometimes hard and division of labor correspondingly important. Recognizing the possibility of hard times, some groups could have instituted a practice of storing reserves for future conditions in which even the most efficient distribution of tasks would bring in less than they needed. In a fluctuating environment, division of labor, accompanied by a practice of storing a surplus when life goes relatively easily, promotes both the Darwinian fitness of members of the band and also contributes to the satisfaction of basic desires across a broader period of time.

So far, the bands remain egalitarian: the requisites of life are found or made, and divided among the members according to their needs. The ethical code expands to regulate collective activity, requiring individuals to carry out the tasks assigned to them and to labor to acquire more than is needed to meet current demands. But groups committed to the production of surplus resources prepare the way for a second division of labor. Suppose the demands of a variable environment are sufficiently rigorous that those who do not save do not survive. The result will be a population of small bands all practicing surplus production. Relations among these bands may be wary and suspicious, even aggressively hostile. Nevertheless, if neighboring bands are well matched in size and strength, they will see that little is to be gained by attempts to encroach on others' territory or to take advantage of others' resources. It may also become clear that adjacent groups have analogs of the distribution of

23. As envisaged by Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), book 1, chap. 1.

skills that made intragroup division of labor profitable. Because of features of the local environment, or because of specially developed techniques, one group may have food, or carrying gear, or tools of kinds or quality the other does not possess. Without endangering their respective abilities to survive periods of environmental challenge, each can recognize a gain in variety of resources—and in overall value of the stock of resources—from giving up some part of its surplus to acquire surplus items from its neighbor. Trade is born.²⁴

Once trade begins, there is an impetus to exploit further the initial division of labor. If our group is to exchange with the band across the river, and if we are to retain enough to ensure our survival through possible hard times ahead, we shall have to have more than more than enough. Moreover, the stable pursuit of trade will require a new form of cooperation, peaceful interaction among individuals from different bands whose ancestors viewed one another with suspicion or even hostility. There are new demands on the versions of normative guidance practiced in the neighborhood, additions to the ethical code that regulate behavior with respect to people not previously considered within the framework of commands. This is an important step. With the addition of norms governing interactions with members of other bands, the set of people covered by normative guidance is extended—the circle expands.

This scenario leads from the original small societies, with their rules for remedying the failures of altruism within the group, to later communities, still small, each of which has a stock of collective resources and each of which engages in limited interactions with neighbors. These communities have to extend the division of labor in ways that appear small but are socially and culturally consequential. First, the need to preserve their stock for hard times and to use part of it in barter with neighbors is likely to bring new forms of work. More important, the performance of some of the tasks now carried out requires particular tools or equipment, and if some members of the band spend large periods of time on

24. In telling this story, I diverge from Smith, who appeals to an innate propensity to “truck and barter.” Unlike Smith, I have also not assumed that the effect of the division of labor must be greater productivity—some groups may settle for less work and more leisure. See Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, book 1, chap. 2, esp. 16.

the pertinent tasks, while others never do, it will be important to ensure that the users' access to the needed implements is not impeded by the activities of nonusers. These developments introduce an embryonic conception of property.

Even though the basic resources of the group (food, materials for shelter, and so on) are divided, the group as a whole owns the surplus. This is to be used in hard times and to be available for exchange, and it will be important to defend it against those who would take it. The rules allowing for trade must specify that items brought by one trading partner are not simply to be seized by others. Similarly, if the equipment required for performing a particular task is to be available to one group member and not to others, there must be rules allowing the user to keep it and forbidding nonusers to interfere. Those rules will not yet permit the user to transfer the items in question to anyone else he or she chooses—rather, they insist that tools be passed on to the next performer of the task—but they will protect a temporary power to employ the equipment. Communal property and a limited form of individual property have emerged.

§20. Roles, Rules, and Institutions

Divisions of labor assign different tasks to different members of the community and thereby create roles. The band relies on one individual in tracking game, on another in negotiating with neighbors, on yet another in finding or constructing shelter. For these roles to be filled efficiently, their occupants have to be well selected and to behave in ways promoting the ends toward which the role is directed. Groups will make better use of divided labor to the extent they are able to identify reliably the physical and psychological capacities needed for a particular role, and to articulate and enforce rules applying to those who occupy the role.

Even though resources acquired through the division of labor continue to be split equally among group members, the search for an efficient way to apportion roles already brings the beginning of social inequality. Members of the band must attend to individual differences, to the “talents” that some have and others lack, that fit some for particular roles. The simplest ethical prescriptions applying to those roles embody the band's acquired knowledge of how the tasks are best performed,

enjoining care, for example, at stages known to be especially crucial. Yet many kinds of performance improve with practice and training, and with respect to these the assignment of roles will go better insofar as the assigners can spot incipient talent and subject its development to rules. Within the socialization of youth, there can arise an appreciation of difference that is valuable to the community, provided rules for self-development are in place.

Becoming good at tracking game or making carrying devices requires the novice to obey the instructions of those who know how and to be diligent in carrying out the exercises prescribed. Some rules governing training will be specific to the task. Others will apply across a wide range of roles. The young are to be obedient and not willful, attentive and not distractible, industrious and not lazy. More general still is a form of prescription combining the idea of differences in propensities for necessary forms of work with the general characteristics required for proficiency in any role: “Develop your talents!” Coordinated group projects thus exert pressures on individual performance, prompting the appreciation of important virtues—industry, courage, prudence, temperance.

Although normative guidance began as a remedy for altruism failures, the ethical codes found in the historical record, from ancient times to the present, contain directives to act in ways without evident impact on the lives of others: people are supposed to be prudent and resolute, even when their imprudence or irresolution would affect only themselves. Where do self-regarding principles come from? A possible answer: divisions of labor introduce the conception of differences in talent, and such differences are potentially valuable in promoting group welfare; the benefit requires talents to be properly developed; once that is understood, ethical codes elaborate to enjoin the development of promise (with derivative rules forbidding laziness). Lurking in the background is still a connection to the original goals, for neglecting one’s self-development can be viewed as a kind of altruism failure. But a more personal basis can ensue.

Attention to differences in the propensities of members of a social group probably began long before the articulation of normative guidance. Strategies for playing optional games require recognition of the characteristics of potential partners (§8): at a bare minimum, you have to

discriminate those who have been unreliable in the past, and it may also pay to choose individuals with particular physical traits.²⁵ With developed division of labor, finer scrutiny became pertinent. Scrutiny starts to perturb the egalitarian attitudes of the group—for some of the tasks assigned can be carried out successfully by any of a relatively large subgroup (they require no special talent or training), while others may be difficult to fill well. Roles are more or less demanding, according as they have more or fewer potential occupants.

Suppose a particular role—tracking, say—is both demanding in this sense and requires extensive training and effort in performance. Good potential trackers are rare, their skills need to be honed over a relatively long time, and their tracking activities require searching attentively through a broad area. The group inculcates stringent rules for learning and performing this role. The solitary nature of the task, however, makes enforcement difficult, and the bare idea of unseen enforcement may not prove enough. A new idea is added: significant contribution of successful tracking to the tribal stock is particularly favored by the entities who are the source of the ethical code. Especially pleasing to the gods are those with rare talents, who develop those talents to the full and use them energetically in service of the common good. In societies elaborating the division of labor in this fashion, new human desires readily emerge: people come to want the approbation, even admiration of their fellows; they wish to enjoy the favor of the gods.

So elaborated, the code begins to advance a new conception of the good human life. Its earlier forms identified the common good in terms of basic desires, viewing human lives as going well when those basic desires were met. Early stages of the ethical project introduced rules whose intended effect was to improve the prospect of satisfying more of the basic desires and thus living better. Introducing the unseen enforcer connected the rules with the wishes of a great being with special concern for

25. Consider a joint hunting venture. If two equally reliable partners are available, and one is quicker than the other, that person may be a better bet for bringing home the game. That can easily be offset by other considerations: if the slower individual is a longtime associate, and failure to interact on this occasion would prompt the person then to refuse future invitations, the physical superiority of the rival candidate is better ignored.

the group.²⁶ Now the development and exercise of rare talent—in service of meeting the basic desires of members of the band—is seen as favored by this being. Well-socialized group members want this sort of approval. For the specially gifted, at least, to live well involves gaining the being's favor.

Once the broader idea of a good human life has been introduced as an incentive for the rarely talented, it can be extended to others. Although it is less important to encourage those who fill less demanding roles, general diligence benefits the band. The myth that divine approval descends on those who fit themselves to their station and discharge its duties with energy is a valuable extension of the idea of unseen enforcement. It detaches the rules enjoining development of talents from their derivative status, as consequences of more general principles about contributing to cooperative projects, and locates them in the direct command of the unseen lawgiver. Perfecting one's talents may contribute to the success of the group, but it is required of each member because it is the divine will.²⁷

Cultural competition can favor an evolutionary transition from an initial stage at which ethical codes are directed only at altruism failures to more internally complex societies, with divisions of labor, prescriptions for interactions with members outside the group, specific roles, rules for carrying out those roles, and injunctions for behavior even when the impact on others is not of central concern. At this stage in the ethical project, continued discussion of the prevalent ethical code will sometimes need to consider the *institutions* of the group: prescribed patterns of behavior focused on some domain of the band's life. My "how possibly" story concludes with the emergence and evolution of an institution presupposed by well-known ethical maxims: property.²⁸

26. To keep things simple, I offer a version in which unseen enforcement is personified.

27. Once the injunction to develop talent has been detached from the consequences for society, it can be maintained as a freestanding, self-regarding maxim, even when the idea of a divine backing for it is abandoned. The attitude of the citizens of Plato's Republic is, presumably, one of seeing lives as good in terms of the perfection of talent—for this is what the organization of the city aims to do—even though they have read the *Euthyphro*.

28. Both the seventh commandment and the tenth presuppose the institution of private property.

Trade already introduces a notion of communal property, for the partners each have to subscribe to rules forbidding violent appropriation of the other's resources. Division of labor gives rise to a weak conception of private property within the group, in that those assigned to certain tasks are awarded privileged access to whatever equipment those tasks require. The privilege depends on proper use by those who occupy the relevant roles: the maker of carrying equipment or the digger for roots is not free to abandon, or blunt, or misuse the special hand ax or the spade—or even to let the tools sit idly by; the items assigned are to be employed in the pertinent tasks, and, after the labor is over, to be preserved in a socially expected modification of their original form.²⁹ Nor can the user transfer the equipment to anyone he or she chooses; once the user's career in this role has ended, the new occupants of the role will acquire the privileges he or she now enjoys.

How might a stronger conception of private property, one that allows owners to use and dispose of their belongings as they choose, have emerged? One obvious thought: productive performers of particular tasks, particularly tasks playing a large role in the group's life, might be rewarded by giving them power to dispose of resources previously owned by all; their production might be encouraged by such rewards.³⁰ So long as one considers contexts of privileged access to tools, any transition of this sort looks mysterious, for it is hard to conceive how a power to dispose of equipment previously owned by all might be any significant reward or motivation to diligent exertion. If we examine stages close to the historical present, the mysteries dissolve.

By ten thousand years before the present (five thousand years before the invention of writing), our ancestors had learned how to domesticate plants and animals. The plants and animals owned by a group

29. Often, tools will be supposed to show a little, but only a little wear; there may be occasions, however, when extensive performance involves considerable damage to a tool. The point is that the extent to which this is to occur is not for the user to decide.

30. This is a standard conception in the history of political economy (developed by Smith and by many others), and the thought that some kind of private property is a necessary incentive for hard work occurs even in a thinker as worried about the notion as John Stuart Mill (see *Principles of Political Economy*, *Works* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963], 2:207, 2:225–26, 3:742–55).

constitute resources temporarily in the charge of occupants of specific roles—tenders of gardens, herders. Unlike the equipment assigned in a privileged fashion to particular workers, these resources are attractive potential rewards. Imagine a social innovation. Within a pastoral society, the deliberators resolve that shepherds may hold back a small fraction of the healthy lambs born, disposing of them as they see fit. Assuming the members of the group would like to have this new power,³¹ the shepherds would be motivated to work in ways conducive to the reproductive success of the flock, expending extra effort on protection against predators, discovering good pasturage, and nurturing young lambs.³² The innovation could increase the success of the group, as measured by the growth of the communal and the individual stock; it could generate ever-more successful trade with other bands—as well as producing pronounced inequalities within the pastoral society. If asymmetries in command of resources translate into differences in power, greater weight given to some voices in deliberations about rules, the apportioning of resources between public and private ownership could be increasingly tipped in the direction of the latter, until the communal stock was insignificant in comparison with private ownership. In tandem with this movement, the idea of private control of resources could easily be extended into other spheres—most notably when domesticated animals are exchanged with the products made by members of other groups.

A word of caution is appropriate here. The thought of private ownership as a motivator to group productivity has been so overused in economic discussions that it is essential to be specific. The “how possibly” story does not view private property as an essential outgrowth of human society, supposing that once we had engaged in normative guidance, division of labor, trade, and the domestication of animals it was inevitable. Instead, under particular conditions, against a scheme of socialization

31. This is a nontrivial supposition, for one can imagine groups in which practices of socialization rendered it quite repugnant.

32. My account echoes a famous *Genesis* story, the deal Jacob strikes with his father-in-law, Laban. Similarly, the earlier discussion of saving surplus in good years, in preparation for hard times, recalls the policies Joseph institutes in Egypt. Might we consider the myths of ancient religions as embodying records of transitions in human prehistory retrospectively seen as important forms of social and ethical advance?

producing certain kinds of desires—desires for the control of resources previously communally owned—an institution of private property could succeed in cultural competition.³³

§21. Altruism Expanded

Previous sections have attempted to show how stepwise evolution of the ethical project might transform the social environment and thereby make new kinds of desires, aspirations, and emotions possible. The final task is to show how these transitions can expand the scope and the character of altruism. Originally, normative guidance was seen as generating *behavioral* altruism in response to altruism failures. As the ethical project evolves, it can generate *psychological* altruism, even in more elaborate forms than hitherto considered.

Altruism failures can be remedied by harnessing a number of emotions: fear, dread of the unseen enforcer, awe and reverence, a positive desire to be in harmony with the deity's plans and wishes, even a sense of identity with the society blessed with divine favor. The same ends can be achieved by inspiring people not simply to simulate altruism but to have altruistic propensities across a wider set of contexts. Well-socialized people then act to help others through a mixture of motives—through taking others' wishes seriously, through sympathetic emotions, through respect for the supposed source of the ethical code, through a sense of identity with a group, through worries about the results of breaking the rules. No special sort of psychological process is likely to be better at producing appropriate behavior across all circumstances; the mind of "the friend of humanity" may cloud over, but, equally, his or her reason may go astray (§11). Reliability is an entirely appropriate measure, for, from the perspective of achieving cultural success, the goal is to arrive at strategies of socialization for eliciting preferred behavior on as many occasions as possible. Pluralism has evident advantages. The group that supplies a variety of psychological dispositions for altruistic response obtains greater relief from altruism failures.

33. Much later (in §62) we shall take up this institution with more critical eyes.

Cultural success exerts pressure to develop schemes of socialization extending the scope of psychological altruism. That can result from effective techniques of promoting behavioral altruism. Change behavior patterns so people engage in a larger number of friction-free interactions with one another, and extended psychological altruism may follow. Participating in cooperative ventures with *B* inclines *A* to think of *B*'s wishes as good to satisfy and engenders feelings of warmth toward *B*. Skillful socialization reinforces the effects. Parents acquire an arsenal of techniques to induce rivalrous siblings to get along—and their methods are not all recent inventions.

How far successful projects in socially embedded normative guidance extend genuine psychological altruism, rather than replacing some previous altruism failures with behavioral altruism, is unclear—as unclear as the categorization of contemporary people, in many everyday contexts of helping and in the special circumstances of experiments in sharing, into real psychological altruists and others (§11). Under normative guidance, psychological altruism is also extended in other ways, and the rest of this section is concerned with modifications of the notion that introduce further complications to the account previously offered (§§3–5).

I begin from an obvious point, one that recognizes familiar types of altruism not involving any positive response to the *actual* desires of the beneficiary (or to the desires that would *actually* be attributed to the beneficiary). The altruistic mother does not align her wants with the wishes of the young child who vigorously resists the medicine. Yet the mother is surely responding to *some* sort of attributed wish: it is as though she envisages the future life of her child, recognizing wishes that would arise later, given various sorts of response now. In parallel fashion to the account of §3, we can approach altruism in terms of responses to the perceived *interests* of others.

How should the distinction between interests and mere wishes be drawn? Many thinkers are tempted to identify interests with the wants those others would have if they were clearly (and coolly) to deliberate on the basis of all the facts, but this approach threatens to collapse into triviality. (One of the facts is about what we would want if we knew everything.) Yet there is an insight here: we separate the wish someone expresses from his or her genuine interest by attributing to the person

some type of ignorance. A current wish diverges from a real interest when the wish would give way to the preference marked by the interest, were the person relieved of some current misconception or form of ignorance, and when the modified preference would be retained in light of further knowledge.³⁴

In responding to young children, accommodating wishes rather than interests is often a defective form of altruism—perhaps not even worthy of the name. Does this require the account of altruism to be rewritten to focus on attributed interests rather than attributed wishes, so paternalism would be preferred across the board? Reflecting on our ordinary notion of psychological altruism, *framed as it is by the ethical project*, you might say this: to be an altruist is to identify with the other person, and that is to take the person seriously as an agent (at least once he or she is mature); hence, even if you think the person's wishes misguided, as unlikely to promote what he or she would want were he or she to know more, those actual wishes are to be respected. Or you might say something different: to be an altruist is to care about the other's good, and that is not what the person actually—and myopically—wants, but rather what he or she would want were he or she better situated to judge; so one should align one's desires with the person's interests, the person's wants as they would be if he or she were aware of crucial facts.

Once the ethical project has introduced the ideas of "identifying with others" and of "the other's good," both thoughts are available: there are paternalistic and nonpaternalistic forms of altruism. Ethical considerations now figure in decisions about psychological altruism. On some occasions, it would be arrogant to substitute one's own judgment about what the intended beneficiary would want, given the benefit of an idealized

34. A fully rigorous account would need further qualifications, since it is possible for someone to acquire misleading information that subverts the modified wish. It would do so, of course, by coming with another type of misconception or ignorance, from which yet further knowledge could relieve the person. Perhaps the best way to approach the notion of interests is to start with the idea of a *remedy for ignorance*, conceived as the clearing up of misconceptions or a new piece of knowledge. An interest is a wish one would have, given a remedy for current ignorance, and a wish that would survive any further acquisition of knowledge provided the acquisition was supplemented with an appropriate remedy for ignorance. Whether this disposes of all the difficulties is not obvious. In any event, for our purposes, the simpler approach of the text will do.

perspective. If *A* has evidence that would support the judgment that *B* has thought hard about his or her valuations of outcomes, if *A*'s own reflections on those outcomes are hasty and uncritical, *A* is quite wrong to override *B*'s expressed wants, even though, by chance, *A*'s particular judgment on this occasion would be closer to what *B*, given more information and cool reflection, would actually desire. By the same token, if *A* has excellent evidence that *B* is missing a crucial item of information, if there is no opportunity to present the salient facts to *B*—and thus induce a change in *B*'s desires with which *A*'s own valuations could then be aligned—then responding to *B*'s actual wants would seem to rest either on indifference to *B*'s welfare or on disrespect for *B*'s powers of rational revision.

There is a *preethical* notion of psychological altruism, out of which the ethical project grows, but also *ethically charged* notions of psychological altruism emerging later. The latter can revise previous judgments about “altruistic” responses. Before the introduction of the first agreed-on rules, an agent may have been inclined to respond positively to the desire of a fellow in a particular context: *B**, a member of the band who does not often associate with *A* and *B*, has found a coveted resource and offers to share with *B* on an equal basis; *A* perceives *B* as wanting more than an equal share and acts to help *B* grab the whole.³⁵ Once a socially embedded system of normative guidance has included the command that those who volunteer to share what they have found should not be interfered with (in the way *B* intends), the status of *A*'s intervention is changed. *A* no longer endorses *B*'s desire: *A* has agreed to a rule that distinguishes *B*'s wish from the desires *A* wishes to be satisfied. The first modification of the concept of psychological altruism consists in moving from a notion that treats *any* desire of the beneficiary as an occasion for positive response, to one that restricts psychological altruism to those desires that accord with the ethical code. Initially, because the original rules are

35. Note that the imagined scenario does not involve any direct benefit for *A*; for *A* there are only costs (use of time and energy, risk of harm from the resentful *B**). In terms of the approach of §9, we should take *A* and *B* to belong to a subcoalition that does not include *B**; *B** is a more distant member of the band, in that the first subcoalition that includes *A* and *B** is bigger and more inclusive than the first subcoalition that includes *A* and *B* (and similarly for *B* and *B**).

to remedy altruism failures, desires ruled out by this restriction will be those embodying a failure of altruistic response: you do not count as an altruist if you respond positively to the desire of someone whose wish represents an altruism failure.³⁶

Once ethical practice includes self-regarding commands (§20), some desires are viewed as defective—and thus not to be promoted by others—because they prevent a person from developing in a particular way. So arises the vision of mature, well-socialized people, the people who engage in the deliberations about the commands of the code, whose “real” desires are to be identified by the things they would express in such deliberations. The deviant wishes expressed on different occasions can even be conceived as altruism failures, where the agent and the potential beneficiary are one and the same person. To want to behave in this way now is to fail to respond to the wishes of the person you wanted to become. Paternalism enters the picture, as altruists respond not to the actual wishes of those buffeted by fluctuating forces but to the wishes endorsed by people in “the cool hour,” wishes in accordance with the ethical code.

Part of altruism consists in advancing the (endorsed) altruistic wishes of others: *A* can be an altruist in virtue of wanting to advance *B*’s altruistic wish to help *B**. One of those toward whom *B* has altruistic desires can, of course, be *A*, and this forms the basis for a distinctive sort of altruism, *higher-order altruism*, as I shall call it (although, if the term had not already been preempted, “reciprocal altruism” might be better).

Sometimes it is altruistic to allow others to express their altruism toward you, even though your own solitary wishes are thereby satisfied. You have a long-term history of psychologically altruistic interaction with someone else. Often you wish to do something together, although each of you has different ideas about what this should be. Were both of

36. Here I am indebted to Jennifer Whiting, whose perceptive comments on an earlier discussion of psychological altruism brought home to me the importance of this kind of restriction. As Whiting noted, the “infection” of what superficially look like altruistic responses can proceed along a chain of indefinite length (*A* promotes *B*₁’s wish to advance *B*₂’s wish to . . . to promote *B*_{*n*}’s wish to do something that would be counteraltruistic toward *B*_{*n*+1}), making the provision of sharp conditions on psychological altruism extremely messy.

you to act selfishly, you would perform the individually preferred actions, but you would forfeit what is primary for each of you—to wit, being together. Were both of you to act as psychological altruists, as so far construed, the situation would be even worse: each would do the *less*-preferred action and still not have the benefit of acting together. To escape the bind, one of you has to be a different type of psychological altruist, an altruist who adjusts wishes to align them with the other's altruistic desire.³⁷

Although it is evident that the concept of higher-order altruism can be abused, providing cover for people to pursue their selfish wants, the anti-Machiavellian condition (§3) discriminates cases. Egoists simply have their solitary wants, or see the simulation of an altruistic response to others as a good strategy for achieving those wants (“Of course, if you really want to help me by doing that, I don’t want to stand in your way”). Psychological altruists reflect on their partners’ wishes, factor in their own desires to promote those wishes, and, if they accept the altruism of a partner, do so because they view it as based on a wish more central to the partner’s life than any they would express by promoting the partner’s nonaltruistic desires.³⁸

Often-repeated interactions among people, in which altruistic responses are expressed by both parties, bring with them the possibility of an importantly different form of higher-order altruism, one in which the *processes* through which outcomes are reached become sources of happiness for the participants. The original solitary value ascribed to an outcome is sometimes negligible in comparison to the value that whatever outcome is reached results from a serious process of mutual engagement with the wishes of another person. Adjusting our actions to one another can be more important for us than what those actions actually achieve.

37. For a more developed account, see Kitcher, “Varieties of Altruism.”

38. I strongly doubt that the considerations in play are ever very precise—one simply has a feeling that expressing altruism in a particular way really matters to a friend, a spouse, a parent, or a child. Because those judgments are not exact, considerations of turn taking often play a role. You allow your friend to be generous because you were able to express your friendly feelings on the last similar occasion. This is one place in which reciprocity does play a role in genuine altruism—simply because what is reciprocated is a genuinely altruistic response.

Our experiments of living began when a primitive system of rules was used to make up for salient altruism failures. The desires targeted by those first efforts were quite basic. The elaboration of normative guidance generates new desires, eventually desires for interactions revealing the mutual expression of altruistic responses. Successful extension of altruism can produce series of occasions on which people promote one another's wishes, taking pleasure both in the pleasure given and received and in social approval of that pleasure. Institutions like marriage (and perhaps other forms of partnership) give rise to such series, and those who participate come to view efforts at accommodation, even when not completely successful, as valuable. In turn, the recognition of value in mutual response can reshape the institution of marriage or the most important kinds of friendship. From individuals for whom normative guidance is a way of ameliorating social trouble, a sequence of experiments of living can produce people for whom mutual recognition in an enduring relationship is central among their desires.

The expansion of human desires was surely coupled to the refinement of our emotional lives. Through the evolution of the ethical project, even if our affective responses remained unaltered, new types of cognitions and desires became attached to the affective states. Positive affective responses might be triggered, even amplified, by the recognition of the ways of attuning our desires to those of others and theirs to ours. We can dimly apprehend the origins of love.

All this changed our ancestors' conceptions of what it is to live well. To be secure, to be healthy, to eat, and to copulate is no longer enough. My "how possibly" story ends with a vastly enriched notion of the good life. Desires to develop one's talents become central, the active contribution to our community is important to us, and particular relationships are more significant than anything else. By gradual steps, the ethical project could evolve, from the simple beginnings of socially embedded normative guidance to the ethical sensibilities we discern in ancient Greece. Plato is a footnote to the history of ethical practice.