The Invention of Good and Evil – by Hanno Sauer

Hanno Sauer is an associate professor of ethics in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Utrecht University. His research takes an interdisciplinary approach to ethics, blending fields of neuroscience, cognitive science politics and social psychology.

The Invention of Good and Evil is a philosophical exploration of the origins, development, and evolution of human morality. Sauer investigates how concepts of good and evil, morality, and ethics emerged in human societies and argues that these notions are human inventions shaped by cultural and historical contexts.

Sauer begins by dismantling the notion that morality is a universal, immutable truth. He argues that morality is not an inherent feature of the universe but rather a product of human cognition and culture. By framing morality as an invention, Sauer draws parallels between moral norms and human creations like language, tools, and art. He underscores the idea that morality arose as a response to practical problems faced by early human communities, particularly the need for cooperation and conflict resolution.

Central to Sauer's argument is the evolutionary basis of morality. Drawing on research from evolutionary psychology and anthropology, he suggests that the roots of moral thinking lie in adaptive behaviours that fostered social cohesion and survival in early human groups. Traits like empathy, fairness, and reciprocity likely evolved because they enhanced group stability and reduced internal conflict. However, Sauer also emphasizes the role of cultural innovation in shaping moral systems. While evolutionary mechanisms provided the foundation, human creativity and cultural transmission allowed morality to develop into complex systems of norms, values, and institutions.

1. Early Human Societies: Evolutionary Foundations

Sauer argues that the origins of morality lie in evolutionary adaptations that promoted group survival. In small, hunter-gatherer societies, behaviours like empathy, fairness, and reciprocity emerged because they enhanced cooperation and reduced internal conflict. These traits were critical for survival in environments where humans relied heavily on mutual aid and collective decision-making.

During this period, moral norms were simple and localized, focusing on immediate concerns such as sharing resources, maintaining group cohesion, and resolving disputes: which he argues led to the development of the 'punitive instinct'. Moral behaviour was deeply tied to face-to-face interactions within small groups.

2. The Agricultural Revolution: The Birth of Complex Norms

The advent of agriculture marked a turning point in human morality. With the rise of larger, sedentary communities, new moral challenges emerged, such as property rights, hierarchy, and social inequality. Sauer highlights how moral norms began to adapt to the demands of organized societies, which required rules to govern complex interactions and ensure stability.

Moral systems became institutionalized, often supported by religious or mythological narratives. These narratives provided a framework for justifying moral norms, such as laws regarding theft, marriage, and inheritance, which were designed to address the challenges of living in larger, stratified societies.

3. The Axial Age: The Emergence of Universal Morality

The Axial Age (roughly 800 to 200 BCE) saw the development of moral philosophies and religious traditions that introduced universal principles of justice, compassion, and human dignity. Thinkers like Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, and others laid the groundwork for moral systems that transcended local tribes and applied to humanity as a whole.

Sauer points out that this shift was driven by increased contact between diverse cultures through trade, migration, and warfare, which created a need for moral frameworks that could bridge cultural divides. The emphasis on universal values represented a move toward abstract reasoning in morality, reflecting the growing complexity of human societies.

4. Modernity: Individual Rights and Moral Progress

With the Enlightenment and the rise of modern science, morality underwent another transformation. Sauer discusses how moral thinking became more secular, rational, and focused on individual autonomy and human rights. Ideas of equality, freedom, and justice gained prominence, challenging traditional hierarchies and oppressive systems.

Technological advances, globalization, and democratic ideals further reshaped moral norms, leading to broader recognition of issues like gender equality, racial justice, and animal rights. Sauer underscores that this era reflects humanity's ability to critically examine and revise moral systems in light of new knowledge and changing values.

5. The Present and Future: Emerging Challenges

In the contemporary era, morality continues to evolve in response to global challenges such as climate change, artificial intelligence, and socio-economic inequality. Sauer suggests that moral progress involves refining existing frameworks to address these unprecedented issues. He advocates for a pragmatic, reflective approach to morality that balances universal principles with the complexities of modern life.

Conclusion

Sauer challenges the idea that moral principles are timeless truths handed down by divine or metaphysical sources. Instead, he presents morality as a dynamic and evolving construct that changes in response to social, economic, and technological developments. For example, he explores how shifts in societal structures, such as the rise of agriculture, industrialization, and globalization, have transformed moral norms over time. Sauer illustrates that what is considered "good" or "evil" often reflects the needs, priorities, and power dynamics of particular societies.

A key theme of the book is the plurality and diversity of moral systems. Sauer examines how different cultures have developed distinct moral frameworks, often influenced by their unique histories, environments, and challenges. He argues that this diversity underscores the idea that morality is not a universal truth but a human invention tailored to specific contexts. Sauer's approach highlights the potential for moral relativism while also acknowledging the shared human capacities—such as empathy and reason—that underlie all moral systems.

According to Sauer, human morality has transformed from simple, survival-driven norms to complex systems of universal values and individual rights. These changes highlight the adaptability of moral systems in addressing the evolving needs of human societies. By recognizing morality as a human invention, Sauer encourages us to critically engage with and shape our moral frameworks to better address contemporary challenges.