

Moral Conscience and Survival

Introduction

Different specialists have pointed out that conscience, not only is and keeps being a mystery, but it also remains an ambiguous and polysemic word. They are right, and not only right in terms of spatial location but also in time. The DRAE has modified the content of the entry for the word *conscience* in every new edition which says a lot, not only on the work of the Academy but on the volatility of the concept. I want to bring attention to this particular characteristic of the idea of *conscience* because, in my layman opinion, it's one of the issues that may cause difficulties when talking about this important concept. We might all be talking about different consciences. Some other times, the content gets so disassembled of substance that the parts, and even the whole, lose their meaning.

In any case, it seems to me that the attention of the scholars focuses on the first definition found in the 22nd edition from 2001: "Property particular to the human spirit of recognising oneself within one's own essential attributes and on each and every modification one experiences on oneself". All the philosophers I've read emphasize the symbolic and self-contemplative capability of the conscience, namely that they tend to consider conscience as the ability of self-knowledge more than the capacity for judgment. It also seems as if the biggest concern lies on trying to find out what is conscience: is it only human? how does it work? what's its content? where does it reside? What are its pathologies? ...

I feel the need to clarify this because I'm not going to question myself about what conscience is, its essence and so on. I am applying a banker's vision to the concept. A teleological and utilitarian perspective. I will ask myself: conscience for what? What's its goal?

Scholia: I'm also following the advice found in Mat. 7.20: "...Ye shall know them by their fruits"

Anticipating my response: conscience is a medium for survival. It helps whatever species possesses it to survive. The response, expressed in this manner, is not mine in origin. Even though very few thinkers ask themselves the question, I've seen it answered in a few other documents. Damasio does not ask the question either but deals with it in "And the brain created man" (2010, 399). He says, amongst other things: "...conscience...has greatly contributed to the survival of the species that were provided with it".

Scholia: Like others before him, Damasio doesn't name that contribution as "the" main goal of conscience. He merely states that conscience "imposed itself on evolution",

as a capability to place value on conscience, which it definitely has. But my question is not if conscience is important, which it is, but what is its final goal, its priority, for whence it came. I believe the nuance is very important. End of the scholia.

While, as I already stated, this is not a novel approach, trying to see it in the light of my ideas on survival, is. In order to get there, I will enunciate said ideas and then comment on what we can see, derived from them, on the understandable part of the notion of conscience, particularly, the notion of *morality*.

My ideas on survival

I will enunciate them presently but I deem it necessary to summarize their history and add some notes on their more significant characteristics. These ideas are novel, as far as I know and even though they appear and, in fact, are pretty obvious they are very complex in its content and applications. A shortened version would go as follows:

The basic idea: Like all other known species, our species, Homo sapiens sapiens, has the prime vital imperative of surviving and the imperative to try. Unless there's an error in the copy, this imperative exists implicitly in all the individuals of the species.

The second idea says that, being ours a social species, *broad group altruism (instinctive, reciprocal, gratuitous, onerous, selfish, pure...)* has been and is the most efficient and effective method to accomplish the survival of the species.

The third idea derives from the first two and deduces a *universal ethical principle: It's good/better whatever is good/better for the survival of the species.*

History and request: I came across the basic idea by chance, intuitively. It was not my job to seek it out. It came to me and I developed it in a ten pages' note in September 2000. I must say I was shocked to learn that such an important idea was not already discovered, made explicit and widely broadcasted.

Since then up until 2013 I gathered information on anybody that might have seen and talked about it already, and on any related subjects. I couldn't find anybody that did. That same year 2013 I started writing down notes on my main readings and, after a first essay in December 2015, I published a *paper* of 367 pages titled "*Supervivir. Ideas para una ética universal*". I printed 200 copies that I kept entirely to myself. I've been hand delivering them one by one to try and contrast the main ideas in it. So far, no rebuttals. I've clarified all doubts and qualms posed on me but I still haven't had full confirmation on the three ideas at once. I could be because of the multidisciplinary knowledge needed for it or they might not be sufficiently well formulated. Or they might not be true after all. That's what I'm trying to figure out.

In this November 2016 I've just edited a summary of these ideas in a reduced format of 117 pages called "*Supervivir amando. Un principio ético universal*" with the intention of reaching out to experts that may help contrast them. I'm also translating it into English as per recommended by Mayr (2016, 123).

This article takes part in the history of these ideas and also a way to verify them, thus I entreat capable and interested readers to analyse them with critical eyes and, if inclined to do so, let me know their opinion on the subject. I guess it's an odd request, but I don't have ready access to experts that may be able to help in this task of mine, which really belongs to Academia and its members. I am truly in debt with them not only on the publication of this article, but also in its reading and commentary.

Some further notes

The basic idea is empirically justified by historic causation, as it's apparently suitable for this form of hypothesis. According to the leading science, all known species have had, and still do, tried first and foremost to live and survive. In order to do so, each and every one of them have adopted different methods and strategies. This uniformed behaviour allows us to conclude that, within the species, the common and prime goal of survival does, indeed, exist.

The hypothesis is falsifiable, as Popper would say, since existing the possibility, there hasn't been any rebuttal case, in the past or currently. As far as we know, homo sapiens sapiens is just one more species of living beings and, as such, possesses the same vital and prime imperative of survival, without prejudice to having other *superior* or transcendental objectives as well.

I think one of the causes to not having *seen* these ideas by the part of the socio-biologists could be in mistaking the goal of survival with the methodology used to achieve it: evolution and its progress. Here lies the naturalistic fallacy they agree to commit (Ruse 2007:217). Also not regarding the species as an evolutionary subject (Wilson 2012: 73), mistake already remedied by other experts (Dobzhansky 2009:133; Gould 2004:50-95-625 to 772).

For its part, philosophers usually *work* with individuals. The species to them is a sum of people to be considered as a *universorum* and not as a *singulorum* (Kant 1941:95) and, consequently, the end and ultimate cause they are looking for pertains to the individualistic and transcendent, nothing to do with the material or the survival of the species, which is implicit or unimportant. The *drag* of idealism might have also influenced this absence of vision from the part of philosophers (K. Lorentz 1979, 24-30)

The theologians from the International Theological Commission, following on St. Thomas' footsteps, consider man to have three inclinations: first, its own survival; second, the survival of the species; and third, living in society looking for truth and God. They agree on the survival of the species, but as a second of three, after the individual. Also, as an *inclination*, not as a primal objective. They do not question themselves on the possibility of physical non-survival, and so, they don't link it to the mandate to all living beings, including man found on Gen 1, 22-28: "Be fruitful and multiply..." (T. Trigo 2010: 53-55)

One of the issues I've had to confront when discussing my ideas with specialists, especially pure philosophers, it's been their high degree of specialization. That's why I entreat my readers to confront them with a wider array of knowledge before applying specialised expertise.

Apropos altruism, its been recognized as an *efficient* method of cohabitation, by philosophers as well as by socio-biologists but its origin has been completely blundered and miscalled: as *mutual help* by Kropotkin (1977:39); *sympathy* by Darwin (2009: 109); *agape or brotherly love* by many philosophers and theologians. Some biologists call it eusociality (Wilson, 2012:31); De Waal (2001:223) counts some forms of animal and human altruism. The DRAE would have a pretty accurate definition if it would but add a period or a semi colon mid-sentence: "*Diligence in procuring others' well-being (ó ;) even at the expense of one's own*", or you could just remove the second half. We all accept and understand motherly and familiar altruism/love, even after Dawkins' mistake (2002:115) with his theory on the altruism/egoism of the genes.

I've yet to see anybody noticing that the eusociality of the hymenopterans, the reciprocity of the primates, the sympathy, the agape, the motherly and brotherly love...they are all one and the same and share the same vital origin and the same objective. It is the common, primary, efficient and, most of all, effective element that social species have used to try and survive, each one under its own more convenient modality according to its own physical and cultural nature. And to its own circumstances and environments. Our own species utilizes all kind: some hereditary, some acquired as a special species. Do not confuse this altruism/love with the love-desire which is part of the strategy of sexual selection of some species, ours included (Darwin 1989: 194 to 509).

Theologians have not fully realized either that the prime mandate of Jesus: "*love one another*", coincides with the altruism of natural law. Jesus is the first one to make explicit the concept of fraternal humanity versus the former divide amongst communities and countries (Ratzinger 2011:30) and confirms the natural and the Old Testament law to *Homo sapiens sapiens*. And also acknowledges Humanity as a subject or collective with a universal ethical principle, common to all its individuals all through history.

The Universal ethical principle. If as I suspect, the former ideas are right and true, it can be deduced from them a universal ethical principle. This principle has been and currently is implicitly operating in the judgment of the individual moral consciences. As I've already said this principle can be enunciated as follows: *It is good, or better, that which is good, or better, for the survival of the species*.

Conscience and survival

I'm not going to try and explain conscience, I don't think I can, but, given its various meanings, I deem advisable to manoeuvre the concept around depending on what I need it for.

In the 22nd edition of the DRAE (2001) the first definition is the one already cited in the introduction. The 2nd one is "*Inner knowledge of good and evil*" which doesn't specifically link it to individuals. However, in the last edition, the 23rd, of 2015, this last definition moves up to the first position and gets a wider development: "*Knowledge of good and evil that allows the individual to exercise a moral judgment of reality and actions, specially his own*"

I think interesting to remember the definition of instinct according to the DRAE: "Set of response guidelines that, in animals, contribute to the preservation of the life of the individual and of the species" and, as an example, it mentions the *reproductive instinct*. It seems as if conscience begins where instinct ends, even in man.

As far as I know, there's a fair amount of agreement regarding the description of conscience as professor Álvarez Munárriz does: "*It's generally understood as a global capacity of the human mind that provides us with knowledge about ourselves and our position within the world*" (2005:11). Add to this the description found in the DRAE and you would get a pretty comprehensive definition of conscience.

I agree with the statement found in Álvarez Munárriz (2005, 67): "There's different levels of conscience. The simplest one it's also found in animals and it involves the capacity of being aware of their own feelings, thoughts, actions". By the context it's understood that this capacity in animals, it's the maximum one, that's why I would add that animals also have different levels of conscience, p.e: amoebas and domesticated dogs, and I believe they possess varying judgment capacities on good and bad behaviour.

This idea of allowing animals to have some kind of conscience does not imply equality between animals and man. Man's conscience appears distinctly different from that of the closest animals. There's a lot of literature on this idea, as well as a lot of discrepancy between materialists and spiritualists, see "The unexplained conscience" (Arana: 2015)

There might also be discrepancies and mistrust between believers and non-believers. The former affirm that man is made on God's image and thus a being apart from animals and different to the concept of *natural* man hold by non-believers. Their consciences would also be different. To solve this problem, I'll turn to Monsignor Luis F. Ladaria, S.I., Secretary to the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, who, in his excellent work on theological anthropology, says: "*Man is a creature amongst creatures*", and further on: "*...our `nature' or creatural condition...would be what remains after mentally removing that in us which derives from the supernatural elevation. K. Rhaner has spoken about this context of nature as a `residual concept'*" (Ladaria:2011,41-103) The creatural conscience of believers, standardized to the one hold by non-believers, would be this *residual conscience*.

We would then have three kinds of consciences: animals', that of natural man's and that of man in the image and likeness of God, homologated in some cases. I've concocted this classification to avoid misunderstandings even though these differences

do not influence my underlying ideas. All consciences are the same as pertains the application of the prime vital imperative and broad altruism. Norms or *natural law* are, by definition, the same for believers and non-believers, the difference would lie on the *Agency*. But that's a different matter.

This quality of universality is one of the *advantages* of my ideas: on top of being true and certain, they are suitable for all, as well as politically correct and useful. Also common to all living beings, with no exceptions, as it pertains to basic natural laws. The norms that rule individuals are different for each species and, within the same species, they might be different rules applying to different groups or collectives, but the basic implicit norms for our species, are universal and common ground.

A lot has been written regarding the origins and history of conscience. I don't know about how good a scientist Damasio is, but he seems a great scientific divulger and, in the work cited here (2010: 52-53) he says, amongst other things, that conscience rises from the history of homeostasis or biological regulatory process. It begins with unicellular creatures like the amoeba, continues on individuals with simple brains like worms, proceeds with individuals able of generating behaviours and a brain like insects and fish. When the brains commence to generate primary feelings, organisms acquire a primitive form of *awareness* and with it they develop a *self*. It's said that reptiles are an example of this process, even more so, birds and mammals. Human beings have a centralized self and an autobiographical self which allowed them the use of part of the brain to control the rest of themselves.

We can agree to Damasio's explanation on the history of the animal conscience. For that of man, allow me to go to Ortega (1961:88) whom, after complaining of the lack of rigour found amongst sociologists, and of his own ignorance on the subject, he feels compelled to start thinking on the capacity of man of getting inside himself, of having a self, which separates him from other living beings. I summarize:

Animals live in a state of constant alteration, looking out for its surroundings, acting and reacting according to the external, unable to concentrate. Pre-man was also in this situation for a long time but in a moment of extreme effort (*which I'll name A*) he achieves isolation and self-sight. And from that *self*, he sees everything and its changeability. So he comes out of himself and does as he thinks, and judges the outcome, and goes back inside himself and repeats the process not only reacting to the environment this time, but according to what he thought, foresaw, valued and decided within himself. Ortega then says that man's destiny is primarily initiative, and that we live not for thinking, on the contrary: we think (*and "harshly" judge*) to try and survive.

According to this story prehuman, like the rest of superior animals acted, up until that A moment, using three capacities: the operative one that regulates the material side, the instinctive response guidelines inherent to each species and group, and a mini operational conscience which allowed him to judge and decide a few actions inhabiting inside his small freedom of valuing and doing. Everything he did was good as it was in point with the universal basic norms as well as the ones inherited by his species. Even

the punishment to the group for breaking the norm was good. This is what still goes on amongst social species of *superior* animals.

From this first self-awareness moment on, prehumans become men and able to judge, from their selves if their actions are within the norms inherited and acquired by the group. Man realizes he can act in different ways, getting better results out of some of them. This notion of noticing new possibilities widens his freedom and allows him to change his environment and discern if the norms for the group (inherited or otherwise) are functionally good or bad. He then gets to do things that are not good according to existing rules but are more efficient to his goals, or more pleasurable even.

Some of these actions become implicit costumes and habits for the group, and still some end up as explicit moral rules. This means man has to judge according to two types of ethical norms: his own implicit inherited or assumed ones; and the explicit ones that rule his surroundings any given moment in time: costumes, laws, commandments, etc. The conscience of each individual has to consider both, and both can be wrong every time, which creates distortions within the individuals, who are able to see these potential mistakes and *foresee* the consequences. And so they act on correcting them and, in turn, improve on the explicit normative and readjust the implicit conscience by repeated and interactive usage.

This iterative activity improves the competitiveness of the group and allows it to survive in various environments with almost no physical changes. The process is overly studied although with varying perspectives.

All this discursiveness is just to highlight the fact that conscience emerges as a medium to improve the ability to survive and that the interrelationship with environment has increased and bettered the operational capability of the more evolved consciences, meaning ours.

I now ask myself the question about how the norms used as a base for moral conscience judgment appeared and I believe that my ideas combined with all of the above makes for a suitable answer: they appeared as of the initial mandate of survival. To this basic norm, partial ones were added as each species or collective would assume those individual behaviours that favoured their continued existence. These are the implicit norms *imprinted* on each individual who uses his moral conscience to form judgment. They have been transformed through time into explicit ruling by group translators, with varying degrees of success, such as: fathers, clan chiefs, shamans, kings, religious leaders, legislators, dictators, the People...

Throughout all this process the vital imperative of survival is implicitly operating deep down each conscience, and it has been translating into implicit and explicit survival mandates, for better or worse, by bigger and bigger groups inasmuch as they have been forming, being aware of each other and growing (family, group, clan, tribe, nation). We need just extrapolate it to the whole species now.

Moral conscience and altruism

Surviving is the objective and, within social species, *the best and more efficient* way to do it is through broad group altruism.

Scholia: sometimes it's crossed my mind if the division of unicellular beings to create another unicellular being is also an act of altruism, as the existing being donates half of itself to a new being. It's something to think about for another time.

What's clear is that the various species of living beings have used different methodologies and strategies to try and survive. These strategies, generally speaking, have been insufficient, slow or wrong in adapting to environmental changes. It seems as if of the two million known species, and double more unknown, we represent less than 2 % in the history of life in this planet.

These survival tools are pretty well known for many species and there's multitude of studies on the diverse evolutionary Darwinian theories. The most widely spread idea based on *The origin of the species* was that evolution comes by the dominium and survival of the fittest. This dominium is achieved by competition and struggle between individuals of the same species. Same with groups. That is to say, the main strategy of evolution is fighting each other, to death in most cases. Still true nowadays amongst almost all species. This struggle for survival makes the food and reproductive chain work, and improves the capabilities of practicing individuals, groups and the species.

Each species has added to its repertoire of rules, that which it considered good/better for its survival goal. These norms can vary depending on changes on the environment: food availability, competing species, etc. There's species that function on basic instinctive regulation, others have had to develop different norms for different times or habitats within the same species. In other cases, faced with changes in the environment or in order to conquer niches, new species are created with features adapted to the new situation. Such is the case with ants, of which more than 15,000 species exist, developed along 120 million years of existence.

For *superior social* animal species (dolphins, whales, felines, canines, primates) norms of behaviour are more complex and translate into a *conscience* of sorts, apart from the instinctive routines that are still the most important reaction guideline. The standard for this conscience is still what the group has deemed good or bad and as such has been attached to the inherited and cultural rule of conduct. A lion considers fighting other dominant males to death a good thing and, if done, killing the descendants of the defeated lion is expected of him so he can breed his own. This behaviour is commonplace and serves the purpose of reminding as how superior animals *conscience* works. *Scholia: these behaviours were at some point "good" for some human clans as well. Are they still?*

Many of these social species also practice altruism as the group's best social cohesion and reinforcement tool for child bearing, hunting, attack and defence of other

groups or species and so on. Broad altruism, in its varying ways is the best strategy for prosperity, dominance and cohabitation. And so, it's *the best and more efficient tool for survival*. Darwin said so in "The origin of the species". Nevertheless, evolutionists liked better, as it had stronger selling points, the idea of competition and struggle, so very few talked about altruism, and those who did, mostly resorted to the reductionism of considering it partially, not as a whole. Or, even worst, making it a means to genetic or individual survival, which makes the whole idea quite confusing.

Broadly, any action or norm which means giving something to someone, might be considered altruistic. This act of giving, be it instinctive (bees, ants), reciprocal (wolves, primates), or human; facilitates cohabitation in the group and rises its coherence, strength and makes room for physical and cultural improvement.

In the case of man, moral conscience based on altruism, together with intelligence and language, has allowed and boosted the development of increasingly efficient social groups that, given our species extraordinary freedom, have propitiated the obvious capacity for the dominion over the rest of the species and the environment in a minimum time lapse. The problem is that, up until now, altruism belongs to the group (nation, bloc, civilization, religion) and keeps sharing space with the group struggle characteristic of the natural selection. Even though within the moral conscience of each individual the universal vital imperative is *implicit*, along with the common and inherited altruism of the species, these principles have the selfish rules of individual survival over imposed. As well as the inherited and acquired group norms. Also, each individual and group have to consider the *explicit* norms, laws and commandments of the various groups he belongs to: family, collective, region, nation, religion.

All in all, it is urgent and important to explicit the universal ethical principle of the species, already implicit in the individual moral conscience. This will lead to a world common idea of brotherhood amongst humanity with a united vital goal: survival; and a explicit common strategy: broad altruism which enables wellness and coexistence thus improving the chances for the survival of the species.

Individual human beings will be happier if the explicit basic goals of their groups coincide with the vital imperative and the altruism implicit in the foundation of our conscience. Wise men and saints from the times of Aristoteles onward know this to be true, be they religious or secular, even ignorant of my basic ideas.

I think it is necessary to quote professor Álvarez Munárriz who, in his introduction to his excellent and comprehensive work on "Key Categories of Anthropology" (2015,14) says: "*We, members of the Homo sapiens species, are not only ecologically related but are also humanely and culturally independent. The menace of ecological collapse, misery and hunger that afflict vast areas of the plane is forcing us to raise awareness of this interweaving. The conscience of the need to cooperate slowly emerges as well as doing our best to avoid a tragic destiny for humanity. We are all involved in this project, as individuals as much as Scientifics*".

Finally, I look back on a sergeant explaining to the recruits the Law of Gravity saying: *“things drop according to Mr. Newton’s Law of Gravity”*. And then: *“...in the absence of that said Law of gravity, things would still drop due to their own weight”* Humanity as a species will keep trying primarily to survive, even not being explicitly aware of it, using broad altruism as a primary tool, in bigger and bigger groups every time until those groups and their leaders begin acting rationally as part of the same brotherhood of humans.

With the assumption of the basic ideas, and of this idea of humanity, *the moral human conscience* that *“slowly emerges”* will undoubtedly get better and better at doing what must be done.

J.C. Madrid, 23rd of November 2016
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