

# The gist of social evolution

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It is embedded in our collective memory. The epic drama of humanity! We rose, we fought our way, we thought our way, we carried each other to the top; we crushed the competitors as we loved our neighbours; we hunted the enemy as we laughed with friends; we feasted upon their meat and their entrails, and we caroused into the night; oh we, the enlightened species, the intelligent species, we heroes!

Victorious, and glorious, we were, we ruled the world, as in turn we were ruled by our kings, our chieftains, and our customs, and we established our dominance over the full spectrum of the earth. Our greatness was thrust upon us: there was no other way - such are the struggles of evolution. Necessity prevailed upon us to kill, maim, pillage, slaughter and rape, as circumstances dictated: whether other species for food; or other communities, for conquest; or the earth itself, for our insatiable appetites. As we indulged ourselves in these dark pleasures, our greatness grew accordingly. But we were never truly great; we could not bring it upon ourselves to perform the horrors required. Those amongst us who could, these monsters were pathological and above the common stock; most of us retain a conscience, even if only in ephemeral and inconsistent form. We know this by introspection: we exist; we have critical faculties; primary among these is the moral faculty.

We lived peacefully, no doubt, for millennia, and happily. We knew how to live with each other, we found internal harmony. We always knew love, and we always knew care for the others in our community: it was instinctual; we evolved from sociable species. We danced, we played, we fought, we killed, we ruled, we dominated, we subjugated, we built, we destroyed, we ate, we slept, we copulated, we grew up, we were born, we loved, we hated, we lived, and we died. Life was difficult, but we survived. We were beset by diseases, earthquakes, fires, floods, famines, and wars. We dreamed of a world in which we could break free of these shackles; but it was the order of nature. We knew that justice, morality, and love were the highest goods; but they were no use without survival and stability. Vengeful powers threatened our harvests, our buildings, our livelihoods, and our lives; the fear of death, supremely powerful, impelled us to appease them. Why did they do it? The injustice! The horror! How dare they! But their power was almighty; they could not be challenged, we would not risk such blasphemy; and in our fear, we conjured the cruellest horrors of our imagination to sate their hellish appetites, upon the horror of

the catastrophes we knew they could instigate. We did not sacrifice to them the greatest theorems of our mathematics, or the greatest discoveries of our philosophy, oh no! Gore, virgin gore, was the order of the day for our gods, and it became our habit. Superstition corrupted us; but we did not precede superstition; we were born corrupted.

Worship and fear the gods above, for survival and security; work as hard as you must on the earth below, for your bread; love, when you can, your friends, for your happiness; and fight, and destroy, your enemies, when you must. In this terrible equilibrium, this calculus of living and suffering, so lived humanity through the ages. We settled into our patterns of life, we were peaceful and stable, for the most part. We once had justice between ourselves - not always with you though, outsider! Once, in our tribal life, it was simple. We ate together, we lived together, we knew our community. As claustrophobic as it was, it was our family, and we were bound by ties of blood. We stood and fell together; nobody went hungry at our table. We would not just suffer the stranger, we would shower him in generosity; if we judged him rightly, that is. Yes, once it was simple, and we had justice. Yet even then, from the ignorance of our knowledge and customs, to our baleful gods, to the grim terror of the struggle for existence, to the whims and lusts of our leaders, we were compelled to make habitual exceptions - we could not displace these, our omnipotent masters. To exalt our gods and masters, we lowered ourselves. For the attainment of heaven we sank into the pits of hell, and tragedy ensued with all the ferocity which could have been expected.

And when, on those rare occasions when we considered the question, and we wanted to establish the rule of justice, so often we could not; we could not alter nature, they said; it was inevitable; we could not alter the ingrained habits of millennia. No, we retained our cruelty, and our malice, and our spite - they are part of our nature, though we hate them dearly - they feed off our fears, our insecurities, our jealousies, and our inadequacies. And despite our hatred, and despite our sincerest efforts to purify ourselves, they remain part of our nature; they have not yet been evolved out. We are still corrupted.

But our congenital conditions did not restrain us forever, even though they often propelled us backward. From time to time the convulsions of progress, and regress, shattered us: climate change; agriculture; the village; technology; the city; the rise and fall of great, petty empires. We grew up, and with supposed progress came all manner of escalation, not only of production and economic technique, but also of oppression, inequality and injustice. New divisions emerged, new social classes; we became cut off from one another. We were sorted and classified by our occupation, by our social status, by our rank, by our looks, by our strength, by our ferocity, by our guile. We became alienated: we yearned for a sense of identity, and a place within a community; we yearned for meaningful interaction with friends and lovers, neighbours, comrades and countrymen - with other human beings. We still do, only more so. As we separated and stratified, the forgotten parts of society languished, stewing in their lack of opportunities, their poverty, and the injustices visited upon them. We lost our support structures: new social institutions rapidly grew up and evolved, with-

out really ever being consciously chosen. Nobody chose to live in an alienated society; it just happened. Somehow, great social, institutional, political forces shape us, even as we act in them, and often independently of our intentions. There are dynamics in our social life beyond the individual, the family, and small units: we participate in these currents of social life, we are the currents of social life, whether we understand it or not. Our morals inform this evolution, but in turn it influences our morals; it is a complex system with feedback. We justify our actions by our morals; we need morals to justify our actions. We needed slaves; the wisest sages of ancient Greece never raised the thought of injustice. There were aristocrats and peasants; those on high thought nothing of maltreating the subhuman species. Even though we have freedom of thought, it is weighed upon and pressured by social forces; we do not live in a vacuum.

Nobody consciously willed it, but morality decayed. In a life without sympathy, justice, or even contact - without meaning - why play along? We yearned - we still yearn - for liberation from the impersonal structures and roles of the accepted life, for they are incompatible with our nature. They dehumanise us, they destroy what is best within us. Structures of empathy and co-operation unite us and ennoble us, but we have not yet run a stable society that way, since we grew up. Structures of efficiency, order and domination destroy us individually, but from the top the great men held them together with exploitation, suffering, terror, superstition, division and consent: they achieved their great deeds as a result. With the combination of authority, military and police power, religious aura, and reliance on apathy that every statesman knows by intuition, they stood at the top of the pyramid. Sometimes it was a cold, lifeless mass, and they enjoyed the ease of exercising their power; sometimes it was a volatile, seething combination that threatened to unleash the anarchy of injustice turned upside down, and they quelled it, whether by compromise or by violence. We yearned for liberation, but usually the structures were difficult to budge: they were stable; they evolved because they were stable. And we did not always know what to put in their place.

What despair, when our selves - our sovereign, intrinsic existence! - are left to rot in the midst of a social order that denies us opportunities for a meaningful life! We asked, rightly, why, and why bother. And the cheapest, least noble liberation was that of the common criminal. We knew no theft in the village; it was a recent invention. But most of us do not throw our conscience away so lightly, and we recognise the ineffectiveness and the counter-productivity of this method, as much as we may despise the system. We may quietly despise the system, in action, in hope, or in hopelessness. If the system was efficient, however, we never thought not to hate it: we never had the time; or the thought never occurred to us to inquire as to the cause of our misery - this tendency has reached its zenith in the present day. We may well never think of any other possibility. We may suppress and transfer our anger onto irrelevant scapegoats: foreigners, barbarians, immigrants, Jews. We may substitute for thought a gnawing sense of deep unease, to be satisfied by organised religion. Those who ruled made pawns of us by manipulating these foibles! Most of us, most of the time, accepted the ritual. Some of us refrained from thought or action in

the social sphere: it was usually prudent; there is always work to be done; and our plight has always seemed hopeless. Some of us assimilated the justificatory propaganda: the greatest ethic promulgated by power has been that of unending service. The good life, according to them, has always been that of lifelong loyalty to the worthy personage (now the king, now the emperor, now the state, now the employer, now just yourself), of hard work, of repetition, of patriotic fervour, of responsibility for family, and of minimal participation in political life. We sank into work, into non-participation, into apathy, into a private life lived for and devoted primarily to ourselves. The rulers loved it; we were the bricks and the mortar keeping the social pyramid stable. We were the cogs in the social machine, clean, smoothly oiled, and dead.

Not all of us were so quiescent. Some of us gave a little way, accepted the rules of the game, and tossed our hat into the ring: we are not puritanical creatures, and all the better for it; we are gamblers; and we want power. If it is done by others, and done often, then it cannot be so wrong. We are sociable creatures: we are evolved, in part, to imitate and to follow. With persuasion of our own goodwill, or with the usual cynicism that none of us is any better, or with reckless abandon of all such considerations, some of us forayed up the scale of greatness. These were the industrious, the enterprising, the entrepreneurial, the disciplined, the ambitious, the exploitative, the manipulative, the cunning, the calculating, the strong, the powerful, and the megalomaniacal. They dehumanised us, they exploited us, they destroyed us - and they built our roads, they built our cities, they employed us, they administrated and organised and ruled - they built our civilization, and planted the seeds of our eventual enlightenment.

And so, morality at the social level decayed, differently and differentially; society became complex, and divided. The potential opportunities, the possible careers, the possible life trajectories, the accepted practice, and the expectations that grew out of them - these informed our notions of morality; and these in turn affected how those in command exercised their power, and how those below followed their orders. Morality decayed, but it resurged from time to time. Sometimes the pyramid started smouldering, threatened to burst out from under the rigid order we had imposed upon it, and the great men noticed that a dash of justice holds the bricks together better. Sometimes the pangs of conscience rebelled against our most egregious offences. Sometimes it was in our culture to work uncritically, sometimes a few treasonous souls suggested criticism; sometimes we were bound together by external threat, sometimes we got fed up with our treatment; sometimes we were docile, sometimes we were restless.

But power also made us cosmopolitan: as our empires grew, as our trade routes grew, as our pilgrimages came and went, we came to know more of the world and its cultures. Morality came to be applied not only over our family, our tribe, our village, our class, or our city, but over broader and broader scales of humanity. We came to know you; we came to trade with you; we came to meet you on our travels and pilgrimages; we came to learn your language; we came to worship with you; we became citizens together; and above all, we came to realise that you had the same feelings as us - that you were human, just like

us. It would have been obvious to us, had we thought about it, but it took us so long to learn - and we are still learning, painfully slowly. The scope of human society - that is, the society we recognised and respected as human - came to encompass the scale of whole nations, regions, and continents. It came to include women; it came to include the poor; it came to include other races.

But even then, as from the time of our dawn, when we considered the question, and we wanted to establish the rule of justice, so often we could not; we could not alter nature, they said; it was inevitable; we could not alter the ingrained habits of centuries. To this day our tribal instincts remain, recalcitrant and xenophobic. Yes, they are unable to withstand the briefest scrutiny: but we are still afraid of those who are different. We are still too apt to discount or dismiss the feelings and the motivations of those far away, living lives that look different, in cultures that look different; people who look different. We are slowly making our peace with you, outsider, but it takes time to evolve it out of our system.

But sometimes, we succeeded: we attained a measure of justice. Sometimes through blind economic development, established institutions were so many fetters which had to burst by industry; sometimes they were abolished by edict or the legislation of our masters, to appease us; and sometimes they were swept away by the actions of the collective conscience of human solidarity, through uprisings and revolts - in revolutionary spirit. The old glories, the hallowed mythology of a never-existent golden age of ancient civilization: we attained them all, and more. We attained democracy, we attained our civil freedoms, we attained liberation from the dictators and the kings and princes and lords. We set limits on the power of the state; we brought power, to some small extent, to heel. We could no longer tolerate it, and we gained a morality in social affairs of which we previously could not have dreamed. The realists, it turned out, were wrong; they functioned merely as defenders of a bankrupt status quo, however sincere their doubts and pessimism on human nature. The utopians, it turned out, were also wrong; they were wrong in that they were not utopian enough.

All of our wildest dreams, all the impossibilities of turning the world upside down, we achieved. Morality progressed, and we lived the blessed lives of saints - relatively speaking, or so the inhabitants of the past would have thought. But we are still not saints; we are still corrupted; still gamblers; still ambitious. We simply live according to social norms which evolved a little; it is embedded into society as norm and expectation; our everyday lives were much the same, with some of the horror removed. In a sense, it was a great spiritual transformation of humanity; in another sense, it was mere tinkering with governmental institutions. Both analyses possess truth, and they inform each other - society is a complex system with feedback.

The state stopped its interference, most of the time; and commerce became free de jure, not just de facto. But it was commerce that was critical point: it was the justice of the commercialist, of the merchant, of the rich man. These ethics consisted of the absence of duties - of rights to be left alone, free from interference, whether to invest, to trade, to speculate, to think, to pursue philosophy, to write music; or, more usually, to starve. With all our newfound

nobility, rich and poor alike were left to pursue their sovereign lives - the one to exploit and live, the other to be exploited and die. The only duty was to repay debts, respect private property, and commit crimes in the name of the state upon command. The aristocratic ethics which permitted the whipping of slaves and peasants came to be despised; but of course nothing was done to alleviate the plight of the former slaves.

The aristocratic ethics were replaced by bourgeois ethics. These were the ethics of the ruthless individualist, the ethics of do and let do but let others do the hard work, of have or have not but have more than others, live and let live or let die. To let was enough, the consequences were unimportant. They could freely speak, they could freely associate, they could freely think, and more importantly, they could freely trade and contract and hold the property they amassed by trade and commerce. Those who had given up on solidarity and empathy, who had set out to make their own dint in the world, who had set out to eat the other dogs lest they be eaten, they were fuelled by whatever personal combination of duty, greed, imitation, expectation, ambition, enterprise, courage, lust, audacity and mendacity. Cynicism was their moral rallying cry - they saw people who were greedy, felt the urge in themselves, and concluded it universal and unstoppable. Or they had no moral rallying cry, just the pragmatic approach of doing business - they plied their trade, considered acceptable and respectable, and tried not to do too much harm. They simply operated within the system, which from their own perspective treated them well, and while inequality and poverty were unpleasant, there was little they could do to alleviate it. The institution, the system, carried them along - they could not carry much blame, somehow, but the system could - and they had no interest in dismantling the system along with their wealth. For them, the individualist freedoms were not only desirable and just - they were practically necessary. Nor did we deserve any better, for we could do no better. The individualist ideals of freedom and self-development were never intended to be realised fully - they were impossible to realise fully - for the great majority remained in dire poverty and ignorance. There is no freedom when survival implies continual toil, and there is no self-development when there is no possibility of learning. The lower classes were to be ignored, but reassuringly crushed when they challenged seriously the status quo. The supposedly enlightened liberal values were found wanting: not just shallow, but a deep hypocrisy. Our utopia was no such place.

The liberal's sincere commitment to democracy avoided the excesses of tyranny, but maintained property and the basis of inequality. The social pyramid now attained the theoretical possibility of ridding itself of its pyramidal structure; but social forces emanating from the top could control that tendency sufficiently well. The bourgeois ethics appealed to our greed, our lust for power, our audacious, gambling spirits, and to those of us who could hold out as an ideal a noble, aristocratic individual, striving for glory - whether intellectual, commercial, political, military or otherwise - striving for glory in a vacuum, in an image devoid of reality. It was an inspiring image that forgot our roots, forgot our evolutionary heritage, and maintained a fiction and an impossibility as the highest good. It questioned religion but held the right of property in

sacred awe; it preached the rights of man but left most men in such a wretched state that they were of no use.

This murky enlightenment, this cynical balance of greed and freedom, of inequality and scepticism, of plutocracy and democracy, of enlightened words and atrocious reality, of atomisation and innovation - unleashed all the energy for the capitalist transformation of the world, and all the development, wealth, super-inequality, super-exploitation, and antidemocratic impulses that entailed. It gave us undreamt of technology and standards of living; and it committed genocide around the world, wiped out native peoples, gave us colonial domination, third-world subjugation, and two world wars. It gave us opportunities for education; and it left intolerable inequality, even worse than before. It gave us wealth; but nature is now beginning to collect the debts we recklessly made of the global environment, with all the possessive fury of the overdrawn usurer. It encouraged limited democracy in governments; while it intervened ruthlessly in nations that threatened to depart the global capitalist system. It supported dictators in other nations friendly to foreign investment; and it gave us the tyranny of the employer, and the authoritarian centrally planned government of the corporation. It did not work, it threatened to explode, and sometimes it did; it was checked, and restricted, and made almost tolerable, by the massive interventions of the state, through taxation and the bureaucracies of the public sector. And still we are asked to believe in the freedom to contract and to employ, to outfox and to exploit, as the most glorious activity of humanity.

The bourgeois ideals are great and noble, prosperous and free. They are contemptuous, arrogant, dismissive and egoistic. They are democratic in word and hypocritical in action. They encourage practical clear thinking and the decline of superstition, but enough superstition about the inevitability of the system as to go unchallenged, and a holy aura of property and law to defend the rich from the horrors of equality. They have extended trade across the globe, and raised inequality to unspeakable proportions; they have made us an interconnected world, and a dangerously unjust one. They are useful for maximising economic output - most of which is wasteful and inefficient - with socially catastrophic consequences.

In short, they are incomplete. We still yearn for the community which authoritarian society has denied us, with all the apathy, the individualisation, the atomisation, the ignorance, and the justificatory propaganda, that arises naturally as a stabilising social force. We still yearn for a life with meaning, and not one concerned solely with the pursuit of commercial or financial success. We are not home yet; we still have a long way to go. We have yet to achieve a society that displays on the social scale the ethics which we accept as a matter of course and expectation on the individual scale.

They are not only incomplete, but to the extent they systematically overlook crucial developments, they are harmful. The libertarian ideals of the enlightenment, restraining the dangerous concentration of power in the state, were its greatest victories. But the thinkers of the eighteenth century did not foresee that the state was not to be the only accumulation point of domination. As capitalism grew, it tended to concentrate power and wealth in fewer hands, in

larger and larger corporations constrained to pursue only profit. Laws evolved to grant the corporations extraordinary rights: rights of immortal, institutional people; human rights were given to these inhuman monsters. Corporations which follow exclusively the dictates of profit, and for this purpose they would be invested with the greatest private power the world had seen - to employ, to hire, to fire, to underpay, to overwork - and they were punished if they did not. Employment was always, in a sense, a private tyranny; the employer could order the worker to do pretty much what he wished. But writ on the enormous scale of the modern corporation, the scale of possible exploitation was obscene - and implemented, to the profit of owners. For self-preservation, as the commons were enclosed and the farms mechanised - as economic development proceeded, with its promise of increase in the standard of living - the standard of living sunk to new levels of conformity, homogeneity, alienation, and despair. The enlightened, noble, striving individual of the bourgeois ethics was made a mockery as a mere link in a production chain. Socialism added these crucial insights to enlightenment liberalism, demanding the obvious recognition of individual dignity, an equality in practice - not just in law - that was worth the name, and sought to curtail these concentrations of private power, just as it had curtailed the concentration of public power in the state. The thoroughgoing socialists who demanded radical change always sought a future where the state had become unnecessary, but where it abandoned the commitment to more traditional libertarianism in favour of seizing the power of the state to reshape society, it became what is now known as Communism, Leninism or Trotskyism. Where it consistently railed against all concentrations of power, seeking complete justice and equality, it became Libertarian Socialism or Anarchism; the highest ideal of human society, to this day unfulfilled, and still largely a dream, ridiculed by realists. In a thoroughly diluted form seeking parliamentary piecemeal reform, it is known as Social Democracy, and is responsible for the civilizing of the most ruthless forms of capitalism.

It has taken millennia of injustice, and perhaps will take millennia more, to dislodge whatever disasters constitute the status quo - though the pace has sped up in the present day, occasionally miraculously so. From time to time, we have realised - and correctly - that perhaps not all of this fear, or suffering, or injustice, is the inevitable consequence of our own terrible nature in a terrible world, in a heartless universe. Such realisations are astounding; they also constitute the root of all real human social progress. For their moral force then gathers social force, and if that is enough to dislodge the existing structures, we come one step closer to utopia.

We would like to say that the moral force of justice is irresistible, and its realisation a matter of course; but it is certainly not. History is littered with the carcasses of noble revolutionary ideals which became terror, and with the crushing of social movements under the sword, the baton, tear gas, and the gun. Obtaining a just social order is bound up inextricably in political struggles, in questions of strategy, and the careful analysis of the operation and effects of social institutions. In order to understand moral evolution, one must understand social evolution; and to understand social evolution one must study the struggles



of history. We must learn, we must learn!

And today, as ever, when we consider the question, and we want to establish the rule of justice, so often we cannot; we cannot alter nature, they say; we cannot alter the ingrained habits of decades, or years!

But usually, we have. Ingrained habits, customs and institutions have been swept away, sometimes, and we have seen it. Nothing survived of the old inevitable structures, of the caesars, of the empires, of the colonies and the colonial wars. That democracy is a pipe-dream is no longer common sense; that a social order based on justice is impossible is no longer the common refrain of all practical people. Of all the holiest superstitions, nothing remains; we need fear them no more. All that has been sacred, has been profaned. And as new secular priests and wizards rise to proclaim that this world is this best of all possible worlds, is all that we could ever be, all that we ever will be, we have no reason to believe them, if history, our imagination, our conscience - our informed, considered, individual judgment - teaches us otherwise. The shaman and the holy man always maintained themselves in shrouds of secrecy; their knowledge was too difficult, too sacred, for the common folk; and we have learned that there is no better way to maintain an illusion with no substance. There is no reason to be intimidated; there is no substance to their holy aura. There is no cause for the certainty that inequality and injustice are inevitable. But there is no cause for certainty in most things pertaining to human social affairs; they are just too complex.

With admirable doubt, we may decry all certainty that justice will triumph, but with a disrespectable consistency, we equally decry the certainty that the present situation is eternal. We do not predict, but we analyse, think, hope and act. The forces which shape society, and of which we are a part, and which influence and are influenced by the notions of morality we apply in the social sphere - these depend so chaotically on our individual choices that all we can say is "perhaps".

Perhaps, it is not our own fault. Perhaps, it is possible.