

PICTURE A SMALL, one-room cottage in the forest. Then watch as successive generations build onto it, gradually adding rooms. Eventually somebody adds a second story. The building design becomes more complex but the structure's functionality and versatility increases. Later a third story is added. This brings new structural problems but also new possibilities for added functionality. While these possibilities are being exploited, some visionaries are already dreaming of adding a fourth floor.

For several million years the ancestors of these hunter-gatherers had evolved physically, mostly in response to changes in the physical environment. Bipedalism and increased brain size had led to an increase in the number of years during which the child required parental supervision, which in turn encouraged the practice of monogamy and some

The Architecture of Ethics

BY CARL COON

We can use this as an analogy to illustrate a central feature of the moral standards and ethical principles that we humans follow in our dealings with each other and with society as a whole. These principles constitute a structure of interlocking behavioral guidelines that have been growing organically since our ancestors first became human, if not earlier. These standards and principles didn't descend to us from on high as some revealed truth from an intelligent being greater than ourselves. We worked them out through a long and arduous evolutionary process marked by many wrong turns and much social discord. Indeed, the structure is still imperfect and we continue trying to make improvements.

This understanding of the source of moral systems is expressed succinctly in *Humanist Manifesto III*, where it says: "Ethical values are derived from human need and interest as tested by experience."

So let's look again at that one-room cottage. Long before our remote ancestors became sapient—while they were still at the *Homo erectus* stage or even further back on the evolutionary tree—they were social animals, not solitary predators like the great cats. The social unit at first consisted of little more than an extended family. Small bands scattered widely across the savannah subsisted on a mixture of hunting and gathering. To survive at all, the individuals in these wandering bands had to trust each other. Rules evolved that governed each individual's behavior toward other members of the group. An embryonic Golden Rule began to take shape: share the food and other good things, and share the hardships with other members of the group: "One for all and all for one." We are a team and we stick together.

limited expansion in the use of verbal symbols. Eventually our ancestral primates evolved into physically modern humans as a new species we call *Homo sapiens* emerged. That threshold was crossed about 150,000 years ago.

The evolutionary pace accelerated during the next 100,000 years. People learned that multi-family tribes could hunt bigger game and survive environmental stress better than the old family-based units. The Golden Rule developed a few bylaws. Our cottage developed a few more rooms. But the rules that governed the behavior of these archaic humans were mostly instinctive, not learned. In technical terms, our social instincts continued for the most part to co-evolve with our physical evolution. Nobody saw fit to build a second story on our structure.

Why? Because instinctive application of the Golden Rule only works when everybody in the social unit knows everybody else, as is still the case in small, isolated villages. This makes it difficult for a cheater to violate the accepted behavioral guidelines without getting caught. Minor violations will be noticed and controlled by group disapproval, while in extreme cases the cheater can be expelled. In archaic times the population was spread so thinly that people had very little occasion to meet and interact with outsiders, so cheaters normally had no place else to go. Ergo, very few cheaters, and the system worked without police or other formal instruments of coercion.

About fifty thousand years ago everything changed. Language burst its former bounds and enabled people to think in abstractions, even to imagine things that didn't exist in the physical world

around them. After a gestation period of a hundred thousand years our human ancestors began to think like we do. It was a truly Promethean transition. We have been special ever since.

This critically important milestone in our evolution had all sorts of consequences that intersected with each other in profoundly important ways. People asked questions for the first time and, in an attempt to answer them, imagined divinity. Enter religion. People developed much more efficient ways of gleaning a living from the environment and radiated out to quickly populate the habitable world. They also began to cooperate in larger groups and formed confederations of tribes.

Then, about 10,000 years ago, some of them switched from hunting and gathering to agriculture and animal husbandry, and their numbers multiplied explosively. Now the need for cooperation on a much grander scale became acute. Many of the older in-groups, the village-sized units, coalesced and came under one ruler. New sets of behavioral guidelines were needed—to govern relations between governors and the governed, for example, or to manage trade and commerce.

The ancient sense of in-group versus out-group, of “us

versus them” was still part of the human heritage, part of human nature. The trick was to build on it and expand its coverage. People needed the ability to tell whether that stranger on the other side of the mountain was really an alien “them” or just another member of “us” that lived too far away to be known personally. Cultural markers evolved to meet this need, such as dialects, religious affiliations, and conventions in dress and manners. Culturally identified in-groups became the norm, the basic template for human social organization.

Kingdoms and empires followed. The ground floor of our building was still intact but a second floor, a new superstructure of ethical principles, had been built on it that governed relations between outlying members of the enlarged in-group.

During the last three centuries or so a third story has been added. The nation-state has become the dominant template for social organization, taking over from the often feudal and hierarchical system of societies based either on a single culture or a confederation of them (such as an empire). Here again, the new sense of the in-group hasn’t replaced the older ones, it has simply displaced them, leaving them diminished but essentially

intact. An American citizen now gives his or her prime loyalty to the nation but may retain a secondary sense of belonging to a region or a religious community or any of many other alternatives. And beyond that there is a primary, visceral loyalty to kin, particularly the close family.

Now a fourth story is being constructed, rather rapidly in the context of the time frames we’ve been considering but agonizingly slowly as we sit here at the dawn of a new millennium and try to figure out what’s going on. We are building a sense of humanity-as-a-whole as the ultimate in-group, which exists over and above our sense of national consciousness and whatever residual loyalties we retain from the earlier, culture-based periods. The need is increasingly urgent, for galloping technological change is forcing new global problems on us that demand global solutions.

The ethical principles needed to facilitate cooperation on a global scale need to be more fully explored and defined. And therein lies the need for Humanism. We can’t return to value systems appropriate for lower floors in our ethical architecture. We need to develop global values for global times, drawing on our archive of past experience, our developed capacity to reason, and our forethinking imagination. Only then can our fourth story be completed. ☪

Carl Coon is a former ambassador to Nepal and author of *One Planet, One People, Beyond “Us versus Them”* published by Prometheus Books in 2004.

Get the scoop on Humanist Living

Memorials • Humanist Ceremonies • Important News & Announcements • Book Reviews • Childrearing Poetry • Weddings
It all comes together in Humanist Living, the quarterly newsletter published by the Humanist Society
Join the Humanist Society for \$20/year. (subscription included)
Subscribe to *Humanist Living* for \$20/year.
www.Humanist-Society.org • info@Humanist-Society.org
1777 T St., NW, Washington, DC 20009-7125 phone 800.837.3792