



On Evolutionary Biology, the Apostle Paul and Common Good

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Abstract

In this article our aim is to present some of the coordinates of the debate around common good. Starting by recognizing the importance of common good for the Christian worldview after the presence of it in St. Paul's "the manifestation of Spirit is given for the common good", we will present two ways of interpreting the development of our moral and emotional tendencies that have to do with two different evolutionary approaches. By the end of the article, we hope to have established the argumental advantage of the *cooperativist* in front of the *social Darwinist*, opening the possibility for a possible interpretation of evolution as guided towards common good.

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1. What common good?

We find, in Corinthians 1, 12:7, the centrality *common good* enjoys in the Christian tradition. As we clearly see in the French *Louis Segond* revised version, “Or, à chacun la manifestation de l’Esprit est donnée à l’utilité commune”¹, which translates into the English versions, in the most agreed way, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”² In this fragment, we see the work of the Apostle Paul directed to counter the disunity and the false teachings of his time. In this context, *common good* plays a fundamental role as a core value in the Christian world, because, as we see, it is one of the reasons for the manifestation of the Holy Spirit, following the Apostle Paul. On the contrary, imposters and false prophets would hinder its development in the search of his own profit.

With this statement to Corinthians as a strong starting point, we see the tradition of the common good has lasted up until our days, and still stands strong in the Christian tradition as one of its, still, main core values. If we take a look at the Catechism of the Catholic Church (Part three> section 1> chapter 2> Article 2> part 2), we see a really strong vindication of the common good for it is, as it states, linked to the social nature of man: “In keeping with the social nature of man, the good of each individual is necessarily related to the common good, which in turn can be defined only in reference to the human person”³. This vindication is not only interesting for it supposes the value of common good has a central position in the Christian life, but also because it defines some key aspects of the concept of common good: “By common good is to be understood ‘the sum total of

¹ *La Bible*, 2018. Version Louis Segond révisée. *Société biblique francophone*, Genève. p. 1185.

² *The Bible*, 1973. New International Version, *BibleGateway*. 1 Corinthians 12:7. URL: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2012%3A7&version=NIV>

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, *II. The Common Good*. URL: https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6K.HTM

social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily’. The common good concerns the life of all”⁴ and “In the name of the common good, public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person”⁵. The interest of these definitions is that, being built over a religious base, they offer concrete and practical instructions regarding its worldly and material application.

That common good is a central element of our moral life seems to be clear for two reasons. First, because as we showed, Christian tradition incorporates it as a core value, placing it at the centre of our social life; Second, because anyone who would claim to avoid it, or act in total selfishness, would look like an immoral person to us. Following that evidence, we may ask ourselves *why* we have a natural tendency to common good; *why* we feel great when we help one another, and bad when we harm our neighbours; *why*, in other words, under optimal circumstances we seem to be *naturally* attracted to collaborating with, and helping, our peers.

Following those questions, philosophers of emotions and of morals have tried to explain, in really diverse ways, the reasons we have to embrace one set of moral rules instead of another, the mechanisms of moral systems, and the metaphysical groundings of such moral codes. *Why are we wired in such a way and not a totally different one? Why is not the case that we consider good what we consider bad? What is the base for our moral judgments and rules?* In what follows, we will try to argue that evolution has been a guiding mechanism in the development of our altruist morals and tendencies. This position has a special interest since it challenges the common view of human evolution as being a self-prevalence-and-competence-based historical process, showing that the very foundations of the Apostle Paul’s claim have shaped our human development.

⁴ Idem. Fr. 1906.

⁵ Idem, Fr. 1907.

2. The folk evolutionary view

It seems to us that the *folk* vision of the theory of evolution, and thus of the process that shaped, in the scientific vision, our moral and emotional responses to a fundamentally troubled world, is based over the assumption of *natural selection*. The theses of natural selection states, in its most fundamental way, that the traits and properties of species, such as humans, are established via something similar to a *trial-and-error* process, which implies that the practices and responses to situations that seem to allow reproduction and the thriving of a group of individuals are *established* and kept between generations⁶, slowly shaping the moral and emotional mechanisms the species will have. In a troubled world, where we are told by economists and social theorists competence rules, this seems to mean that, in the end, what establishes the basic elements of evolution is the *survival of the fittest* (concept coined by Herbert Spencer, XIXth century sociologist and economist that built our *folk* social evolutionary vision).

Survival of the fittest, being a concept applied in the natural world and understood in the most common way, seems to suggest that competence, struggle between groups and individuals, war and, in the end, the primacy of *strength-and-struggle*, are the engines of our societal and human development. This view, that, as we will show later separates itself from the basic mechanism Darwin postulated, has helped shape the vision of *Social Darwinism*, following which the most competent, rich, strong and superior individuals are called to adopt the highest places in society due to a natural, and thus inevitable, process. The theory of Social Darwinism calls for the applications of the former notions to the human societal and individual interactions:

⁶ Definition based on the summary offered in: <https://www.britannica.com/science/natural-selection>

“ Spencer advocated this kind of competition to be closer to the one used by economists, where competing individuals or firms improve the well-being of the rest of society. According to Spencer, social development is similar to that of a biological organism. Controlled by the invisible hand of evolution, that which best contributes to the survival of the organism prevails in the long term. In this process, the unadapted, i.e. the socially weaker, stands in the way of society’s progress (Tietz, 2022)

As we see, the *alleged* evolutionary theory applied to our social lives seems to drive us to accept that our social interactions, social order and economic, moral and emotional lives have to be shaped by the rule of thumb of strength, capacity, and hierarchy for, after all, and following Spencer, “When one examines human beings, this natural inclination *is* reflected in the characteristic of rational self-interest” (Sweet, 2022).

The *spencerian* Social Darwinism, which we can see is the cause of the ruling social and economic vision of our times, has its sources on the XIXth century industrial society, which strongly marks the origin of *the survival of the fittest*’ application to the human case: “Spencer’s was a system conceived in and dedicated to an age of steel and steam engines, competition, exploitation, and struggle” (Hofstadter, 2016). In his context, deeply marked by the coordinates of industrialisation and the development of capitalism, natural sciences were winning the primacy of analysis, also in the behavioural field. Spencer took inspiration of the leading theories of his world, which included the Darwinian evolutionary theory (or at least his reception of it), thermodynamics and the physics of energy and the capitalist *economic-yet-psychologic* view.

In the shaping of his Social Darwinism, the latest discoveries of thermodynamics played a central role with the theory of the *conservation of energy*. This principle, which stated in his view that “nothing homogeneous can remain as such if it is acted upon, because any external force must affect some part of it differently from other parts and cause difference and variety to arise” (Burrows, 2022), suggested him the possibility to apply it into his

growing theory of evolution. This way, Spencer developed a universal deductive principle from which to infer the basic rules of human evolution, from homogeneous-simple-formed protozoa to heterogeneous-complex-formed human and individual beings. From this general principle, Spencer would establish that “anything which is homogeneous is inherently unstable, since the different effects of persistent force upon its various parts must cause differences to arise in their future development” (Hofstadter, 2016). With this *unknown force* as its driving energy, we see the natural tendency of the items of the world, such as species, will be to develop differences and *evolve* in such a way that a final stage⁷ will be reached at some point, creating a state of equilibrium and perception in heterogeneity, which would be shaped in his theory by the creation of a capitalist competition-based society.

With the establishment of a *force motrice* of evolution, Spencer was giving a general explanation as to why species evolve and change in a similar fashion, that is, walking towards individualisation, diversification, and heterogeneity. But there was still the need to explain what the basic mechanism of evolution was, understood as the set of concrete elements that help a species to take its form. The response would come, as we already said, from the assumptions of some of the Darwin readers and the leading theories of the moments, including names such as Thomas Malthus and his late theory of demographic clash, or Alfred Russell Wallace, one of Darwin’s direct colleagues. To understand the particular elements of change, Spencer would stress the importance of the pressure for survival of the early human stages, claiming that the struggle to survive, and the primacy of the fittest (let’s recall his principle of *survival of the fittest*), was responsible for human progress: “By placing a premium upon skill, intelligence, self-control, and the power to adapt through technological innovation, it had stimulated human advancement and *selected the best of each generation for survival*” (Hofstadter, 2016). This way, Spencer’s

⁷ The proposal of a final stage of society is a commonplace of the XIXth century philosophy, something visible with the liberal thought, as well as with the Hegelian school, including Marxism and all of its variations.

theory established what we could call the central claim of the *folk* evolutionary view, something we summarize as the following argument, which we will call “Principle of *folk* evolution” (PFE):

PFE: There is a general principle towards diversification and rising complexity of the human factor, which serves as the driving force of evolution; evolution is a *progressive*⁸ process that perfects the human being and improves its capabilities; these capabilities are marked following the “natural logic” of competition-based *survival of the fittest*.

The moral and emotional result of PFE is twofold. First of all, it seems to imply that the natural state of humankind is not a cooperational, but rather a competition-based, one, suggesting that our basic moral and emotional drive is egoistical in nature; second, it invites us to accept that the ideal, and perfect, state of society is the struggle-and-competition-based, for it allows us to perfect and improve our common human skills and capabilities with a *survival of the fittest* process in which those strong, clever, and rich, would shape the form of the future individuals with their own attributes. We find these two results reflected in a lot of different grounds, starting with the already explained Social Darwinism, but also expanding its influence into the economic and behavioural theories of our own world. The perfect example of its application, which will serve us as a contrasting experiment, used in game theory, economics and negotiation theory, is the prisoner’s dilemma.

John	Paul	Confess	Avoid confessing
Confess		5 years in prison for each	Freedom for John, 20 years in prison for Paul
Avoid confessing		Freedom for Paul, 20 years in prison for John	1 year in prison for each

Table 1: Prisoner’s dilemma Standard form. Extracted from Pineda, David (2020) Sobre las emociones. Barcelona: Teorema

⁸ In the sense of *progress*, which means that it is an ascendent way where every step is superior to its immediately previous.

If we apply the PFE, we see that the most rational option in whatever case we may face would be to maximize our own profit, even if it may imply a harm to other individuals for, after all, the most natural and advancing option is the one that arises from competition and self-profit. Let's say that two thieves, John and Paul, are caught by the police and placed in completely isolated and separated rooms. As a negotiation strategy, policemen put into practice a principal derived from PFE, opening the door to a non-cooperative and self-interest-based exercise. They tell John and Paul separately the same thing: if you confess, and your colleague does the same, each of you is going to spend a total of 5 years in prison; if you both do not confess, you will only spend 1 year in prison each; if your colleague confesses, but you don't, you are spending 20 years in prison, and he will be let free.⁹ Under that situation, and after analysing the possibilities both criminals have, if we calculate the most rational action from a PFE standpoint, they should both confess, for provided they will not expect cooperation from the other, they know they will have the best possible outcome regardless of what the other does –if John confesses and Paul does not, Paul will spend 20 years in prison and John zero, and viceversa; if they both confess, they will spend 5 years each.

We see, arising from the PFE interpretation of the dilemma, that the reaction of the individuals following this exercise is a non-cooperative one, for the prevision of each of the “players” cannot be such of considering the other as expecting himself to cooperate. In other words, it is highly unlikely to expect the other player to choose the “Avoid confessing” option, since the risk of spending 20 years in prison in the event that the other player chooses to confess is too probable in a PFE situation. Thus, the most rational option arising from this point of view would be to confess and, therefore, spend a total sum of 10 years in prison (for John and Paul's joint time).

⁹ Case adapted from Pineda, David (2020), *Sobre las emociones*. Barcelona: Teorema.

3. The actual evolutionary theory

If the theory of evolution had to entail the PFE interpretation, we would have a first seemingly logical problem. How come we defend that competition shapes our moral and emotional life but, at the same time, we accept in our own words that common good plays a central role in our emotional and moral lives? How can it be that we are based on competition and the *survival of the fittest* but we care about the others and their lives, happiness, health, etc.?

From this evident problem, we find the *literal* interpretation of the Darwinian evolutionary road, that considers, in a radically different proposal, that evolution has of course implied struggle and competitive pressure, but also a deep tendency towards cooperation and common good. In the words of Catherine Wilson:

“ In the course of his researches, Darwin had observed instances of self-sacrifice and devotion throughout the animal kingdom. He rejected the view of some of his contemporaries that every action of a living, sentient creature has a selfish motive, noting that some birds will feed their blind companions. He cited many examples of sentiment and altruism in animals: warming, grooming, hunting, removing thorns, and rescuing, and he did not hesitate to ascribe a rich psychological life to animals (Wilson, 2009)

We see, then, that the *folk* evolutionary view misinterprets the fundamental Darwinian message, considering that human evolution is mainly a competitive process based upon the *survival of the fittest* when, in simple words, Darwin considered that cooperation and the search for common good was a natural feature of most animal species, humans included. It seems to us, and this is our proposal for this section, that the Darwinian theory should be interpreted as offering a theory of the development of a refined moral and emotional sensor that *protects* and *improves* our social cooperation systems, such as caring, loving, protecting, helping, etc. In other words, that the process of evolution is the embodiment of the same premise offered by the

Apostle Paul: “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”¹⁰ Now, for the sake of this exposition, let us think of a standard case of emotion and apply the evolutionary analysis. Let us think about a basic emotion, such as the feeling of disgust. Disgust is triggered in our emotional life in front of a *stimulus* we want to automatically avoid, such as could be the case of a spider, or a plate we really don't like.

The evolutionary analysis simply asks us to apply the following premise to the operation: “The basic idea of this approach is that emotions are adaptations [...], this is, answers that would have been object of natural selection inasmuch they would have supposed an improvement of the adaptative capacity of an organism in front of the challenges of its environment”¹¹ (Pineda, 2020). To apply this element into the analysis of an emotion implies to automatically understand *emotions* as adaptations in front of a challenging and troubling environment, which is essentially dangerous and can be potentially harmful, or even lethal. In the case of disgust, we would understand that it is meant to protect us from potentially venomous insects, or possibly non-edible food, and whatnot. In the case of love, for example, we would see it is meant to perhaps ensure lasting bonds between individuals so to promote solidarity, cooperation and care. In the case of hate, it could be understood as playing the role of a corrector of wrong behaviours, fostering isolation or even punishment over non-cooperative individuals. And so on and so on. In the case of *moral rules*, the mechanism seems to be a bit more difficult to apply, but identical: “Actions, Darwin went on to say, were originally deemed good or bad as they affected the tribe, and he envisioned a form of group selection. ‘No tribe would hold together if murder, robbery, treachery, were common... A contented, happy tribe will flourish better than one that is discontented and unhappy’ (Ibid, 117, 121). [...] This suggested to him that natural morality was conducive to the happiness of the social body, though not always the

¹⁰ *The Bible*, 1973. New International Version, *BibleGateway*. 1 Corinthians 12:7. URL: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=1%20Corinthians%2012%3A7&version=NIV>

¹¹ English version translated by the author of this article; original in Spanish.

happiness of the individual, and not that of the entire species” (Wilson, 2010). It seems clear, from this concrete standpoint, that the *practical* and *evolutionary* aspect of emotions and morals can be understood as fostering and seeking common good, for the moral mechanism of classification so suggests.

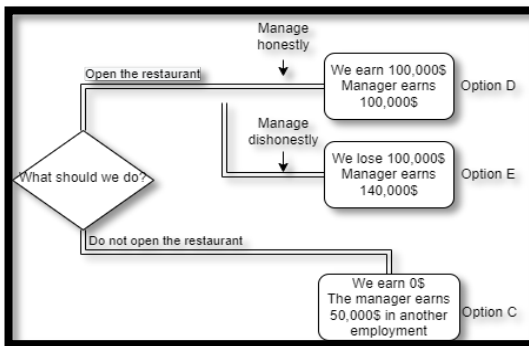
It seems to us that the basic cases of emotions, such as *love*, or moral rules, such as *thou shall not kill*, are easily explained in the direction of evolutionary theory as common good promoters, following the Darwinian analysis. But what about the case of more refined and *artificial* emotions and morals, such as jealousy, or resentment? Following Robert H. Frank and his famous theory of *social emotions*, they also serve the purpose of ensuring cooperative scenarios. As we will see, Frank considers within his neoclassical framework that these social emotions, such as jealousy, or sympathy, play a basic role in motivating social cooperation and that, furthermore, they have been nurtured by the evolutionary tendencies of humanity:

“ Commitment problems occur in situations where rational action does not serve the individual as well as irrational behavior. This irrational behavior is behavior that is not in the individual’s immediate self-interest (a committed person marries for love rather than the maximum increase in utility). Emotional commitment causes individuals to be credibly perceived as likely to not pursue their immediate self-interest [...]. This perceived emotional commitment creates advantageous opportunities for individuals not otherwise available (individuals perceived as committed have the opportunity to choose from among more desirable and probably similarly committed potential partners). Thus those who act solely in their own immediate self-interest are at a competitive disadvantage with regard to these opportunities compared to those who are perceived as emotionally committed (Waller, 1989).

We see then that the central claim of Frank’s social emotions theory is that there is a natural development of cooperation and an attraction towards common good scenarios that can be observed from the simple human behaviour, as if worldly affairs were programmed to motivate, in the end, cooperation and agreement. Let us consider the basic case scenario of Frank (2011), which will serve to us as a framework to explain the nuances of his theory.

We are the owners of a local restaurant that generates enormous benefits, and we have the belief that opening the same restaurant concept at a nearby town would have the same effect. Due to logistical difficulties, you cannot manage it directly, and hiring a manager would imply that you can’t neither monitor him nor keep an eye to the benefits of the restaurant before him doing so. One option would be to pay 100,000\$ to a honest manager, 100% more than a regular one, but a dishonest manager would be winning 140,000\$ and cause you to lose money. Now the question is: should we open this new restaurant?

Figure 1: Flux-diagram based on the Richard Frank (2011)



We observe here three options, that can be summarized as follows: either we don’t open the restaurant and we don’t win nothing, nor lose anything, and the manager earns 50,000\$ with another, yet-regular, employer or we decide to open it and hire a manager (decision A), who will have to decide at some point whether to be honest or dishonest (decision B). In the case the manager is honest, we will both earn 100,000\$ (option D), and in the case

the manager is dishonest, he will earn 40,000\$ more than expected, but I will lose a lot of money (option E). “If you assume that potential managers are self-interested in the narrow sense, you won’t open the outlet –a worse outcome for both of you than if you had opened the outlet and the manager had run it honestly. If an applicant could somehow commit herself to manage honestly, she would want to” (Frank, 2011). This way, we see for the first time a hint of how a standard cooperative agreement should look like in a complex case like this one, where earning a suboptimal salary in the case of the manager, and paying a suboptimal salary in the case of the employer, allow for the commitment to take place. But for the moment, let us see how Richard Frank solves the puzzle.

Richard Frank argues for a common mechanism often referred to wherever this case is presented, that is, the mechanism of the personal interview and the personal impressions. In the same way we would think about hiring one of our best friends to perform as manager, mainly because we trust him and consider we would not be stolen, sympathy has a similar effect when having to signal which individuals are most likely to be trustworthy, or on the contrary, are capable of stealing money from our business. As the same R. Frank stresses, “One set of experiments done with my colleagues Tom Gilovich and Dennis Regan (Frank, Gilovich, & Regan, 1993), for example, showed that subjects who had interacted with one another for 30 minutes were able to predict who would defect in one-shot prisoner’s dilemmas at more than twice chance rates of accuracy” (Frank, 2011). This means that there are social emotions that are expressed in conversational or regular contexts that serve as predictors of behaviour, marking in a more or less clear way who is going to work in favour of our common effort, and who will not.

For the same token, and retaking the prisoner’s dilemma we presented earlier, the *common good* option would be clearly to motivate the silence in both directions, opening the door for the most beneficial scenario, which is John and Paul spending a sole year in prison because none of them confessed for their common crimes. If PFE stated that the most likely scenario, following its internal premises on rational self-interest, would be for them to confess, in the case Frank presents and in the presence of such a

theory of social emotions, we could at least hold that some of the *business partners* would openly show signs, being behavioural predictors, of his potential cooperation in not confessing the crime. In other words, “for that reason it is crucial to be able to detect liars, and see them apart from honest people. Basically, Frank’s idea is that one can trust a partner when we detect in him the kind of social emotions, such as indignation, blame, or love, that would bring him to cooperate and avoid being betrayed”¹² (Pineda, 2020). The automatism of some of this emotional reactions, such as trembling, crying or becoming pale, for Frank, serves as further proof to defend its evolutionary origin.

In summary, Frank’s theory is that this kind of emotions, such as sympathy, serve as indicators of possible outcomes following the character and inner tendencies of the subject, that become public and visible as a result of a social-interest evolutionary mechanism. We see, then, a totally different approach arising from a more *orthodox* vision of the evolutionary process, that opens us the door to read our emotions and moral principles as oriented towards cooperation and common good.

4. Conclusion

We started this article with the aim of exploring the roots of our moral and emotional tendencies, paying a special attention to the value of common good, which seems to have been a relevant part of our moral life since as early as humanity. We showed, to do so, how two opposing views of evolution seemed to shape our comprehension of society and morals. The first, appearing from the smoke of the XIXth century industries, affirmed the competitive nature of humankind, vindicating its non-cooperative spirit in a pro-egoistical and individualist effort. Following this theory, defended by Herbert Spencer, we seemed to understand Darwinism in a nuanced way, as if struggle and domination from some individuals over the others were the natural state of things, establishing what is commonly called Social Darwinism, one of the ideologies we see nowadays trying to attack again the

¹² English version translated by the author of this article; original in Spanish.

foundations of common good as explained in the Bible. The second view, shaped by reading the original views of Darwin and his kin, offers us a completely different narrative on the foundations of our species, stressing the importance of cooperation and care as central values in our historical development. By focusing our attention on the collective aspects of our morals and emotions, we saw a strong and coherent explanation those phenomena, that allows us to think that, in the end, the evolution of humankind could be understood as the already announced “the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.”¹³

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6. Short biography

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