Chapter 12. Ageing and the Angels

Amongst all animal species, human beings are unique in knowing that they will eventually die. Even young children are aware that elderly relatives do not have long to live, and that when they die they will not see them again. This realization has had enormous cultural and social consequences.

Nowadays, individuals are expected to reach an advanced age, but this was not the case during the early evolution of man. Annual mortality was such that few people reached natural old age. We saw in Chapter 8 that in early human populations the expectation of life at birth is less than 20 years, and about 3% of individuals would be expected to reach the age of 45 years. In a society such as this, death would be a common phenomenon, but these deaths would be predominantly due to starvation, disease or predators. Death from “natural old age” would be a rare event.

It is probable that these hunter-gatherer societies consisted of an extended family, or a few families living together. The community was very important in food gathering, hunting and also in protecting itself against danger. As communication skills developed, children would be taught the importance of altruistic behaviour. Such behaviour increased the chances of survival and reduced the likelihood of death. In contrast, selfish or acquisitive behaviours would, at best, only have a short term advantage in increasing survival. Under these circumstances, it is fairly easy to see that a basic moral code would develop. To increase the chances of one’s own and one’s relative’s survival, it became important to contribute to beneficial group activities, such as food gathering, hunting and defence. Since the groups contained many genetically related individuals, kin survival was an important component of group behaviour, and this of course resulted in kin-selection.

It is fairly easy to envisage the form this moral teaching might take. It could be one of the roles of the more experienced members of the community, as well as being undertaken by the parents of children. It would be evident to all that the environment was overtly, or potentially, hostile and stressful. The benefits of successful hunting and the hard work of food gathering would be explained, as would the hazards of predators. Also, the danger of being alone would be stressed, since the safety and survival of community depended in very large part on co-operative activities. The danger of the unknown in a hostile
environment would be very important. This is in part built into our sensory system, since a substantial part of the retina is particularly sensitive to movement in our peripheral vision, which is just what is needed to detect danger approaching. It would not be surprising if the teachers in the society warned of unknown enemies, evil spirits and so on, which everyone must be made aware of. Such dangerous imaginary beings may well have been the first non-material creations in those early human societies.

The moral code was important for survival, because those who followed the teachings would be much more likely to survive than those that did not. In those early societies, the major reward would be a relatively long life, with the opportunity to raise a family oneself. Old age and natural death would still be an uncommon, possibly a very uncommon, event. Indeed, it is possible that members of such communities were taught that they might survive indefinitely, if they were skilled and also lucky enough to avoid the many hazards inherent in their environment and life-style.

This period of human pre-history lasted a long time, with populations remaining fairly small. As time went on, human skills gradually improved, particularly in communication and tool-making. This lead to a somewhat lower annual mortality, a reduction in risk level, and as a consequence a gradual increase in population size. This provided the driving force for migration from Africa to Europe and Asia, and many believe there were successive waves of such migration, involving various hominid sub-species.

The success of human adaptation to the environment increased inexorably, and eventually lead to the means to control the environment itself. This was seen particularly in the development of agriculture. Instead of a nomadic existence, or one based on habitation in caves, humans began to plant, tend and harvest crops, at least for one part of the year. The advantage, most obviously, was a more reliable food supply. Associated changes would be the building of semi-permanent or permanent shelters, and an increased size of each community. In addition, there would be division of labour within each community, for example, tool-makers, farmers and hunters, albeit no doubt with much overlap between them.

These trends would have had very profound effects on the existing moral codes of behaviour. For the first time, the reduced mortality would result in the survival of some individuals to old age. The reward for hard-work and altruistic behaviour would not be indefinite survival, as the community elders had previously taught, but senility