

Human Pro–Sociality, Morality and Proverbs¹

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ABSTRACT

Our evolved pro–social mental tools (intuitive morality, social exchange regulator, social status monitor) provided us with social/moral intelligence to live peacefully amongst each other since the early dawn of modern humankind. We not only have the intuitive capacity to act right or wrong but also the reflective (rational) capabilities to negotiate moral norms. Altruism, fairness, honesty, self–control and deference for authority have become the moral embodiments of our pro–social mechanisms. These same social/moral agreements and their implied pro–social originators are all reflected in the ancient wisdom book of Proverbs, providing content to its wisdom order. Amongst many other things, Proverbs is an apt illustration of our humanness, of our natural and cultural capacity for social and moral living.

A INTRODUCTION

The appearance of group–living early in our human ancestry implied that early humans had to be socially equipped to live peacefully in these small bands. For their groups to stay intact they had to develop pro–social dispositions that ensured the well–being of every individual as well as that of the group as a whole. Pro–sociality inevitably led to the construction of moral rules and systems to regulate the ethos of a group’s members. The Golden Rule, do unto others as you would like done unto you, seems to be universal, and captures our moral sensibilities of altruism, justice, honesty, self–control and deference for authority. We immediately and intuitively experience resentment when these age–old social agreements are violated, because we know from experience that this destroys the moral order of a society and causes it to slide into anarchy. We also complement our natural sensibilities of right and wrong with rational deliberation to defend a lifestyle that adheres to the “ought to.” Different cultural groups might have different social conventions about justice for instance, but the general rule of being just is upheld.² Delving into the possible origins of

¹ Dedicated to a good friend and respected colleague, Prof. Herrie van Rooy! He is someone who embodies “social” and academic intelligence *par excellence*.

² Frans B. M. de Waal, “Morality and its Relation to Primate Social Instincts,” in *Human Morality & Sociality: Evolutionary & Comparative Perspectives* (ed. Henrik Høgh–Olesun; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 49–50.

our naturally evolved pro-sociality/morality,³ and offering an illustrative cultural application (Proverbs) of these dispositions, is the goal of this contribution.

In the first section human pro-sociality and morality will be highlighted with insights from different psychologies (e.g. evolutionary, developmental, cognitive). The human brain-mind is seen as a workshop consisting of diverse mental tools or capacities, assisting us in interpreting our reality and adapting rather seamlessly to the world that we have been part of for at least one to two hundred thousand years as *Homo Sapiens*. Special attention will be paid to our so-called pro-social tools equipping us to live and manage our lives as group beings successfully – what tools/mechanisms do we have for this, why did they evolve and how do they contribute to the construction of our moral universes, also culturally specific social codes? In the second section this pro-social “lens” will be used to focus on the wisdom book of Proverbs. This will be done to illustrate these typical human social intelligences in action to construct a morally satisfying world, an agreed upon wisdom order that served this ancient society well. The purpose is not necessarily to bring new insights to the book of Proverbs itself but to use this ancient wisdom book as an apt illustration of our humanness, of our natural and cultural capacity for social and moral living.

B HUMAN PRO-SOCIALITY AND MORALITY

To understand the workings of the complex brain-mind, not only its physical but also its psychological or mental functioning, neurophysiologists and cognitive psychologists have tabled important findings the past few decades. The modular theory⁴ where the mental function of the brain is understood as

³ See for instance Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, “Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture, Part II: Case Study: A Computational Theory of Social Exchange,” *E&S* 10 (1987): 51–97; Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, “The Logic of Social Exchange: Has Natural Selection Shaped how Humans Reason? Studies with the Wason Selection Task,” *Cognition* 31 (1989): 187–276; Joseph Henrich and Francisco Gil-White, “The Evolution of Prestige: Freely Conferred Deference as a Mechanism for Enhancing the Benefits of Cultural Transmission,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 22 (2001): 165–196; Elliot Turiel, *The Culture of Morality: Social Development, Context, and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Justin L. Barrett, *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (CSRS; Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2004); Henrik Høgh-Olesun, “Human Mind – Human Kind: An Introduction,” in *Human Morality & Sociality: Evolutionary & Comparative Perspectives* (ed. Henrik Høgh-Olesun; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1–12; Dennis L. Krebs, *The Origins of Morality: An Evolutionary Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); see also Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 120–121, 296, for illuminating views on early human coalitional behaviour.

⁴ For other competing theories see Peter Carruthers and Andrew Chamberlain, “Introduction,” in *Evolution and the Human Mind: Modularity, Language and Meta-*

cooperating, specialised modules, templates, "recipes," intelligences or capacities instead of a general purpose capacity, currently enjoys great popularity. This model is known as the "Swiss army-knife model." Although neuroscientists physically divide the brain into different areas, mental functions are abstract concepts that cannot be solely ascribed to certain physical areas. The psychologist Justin Barrett⁵ eloquently describes the brain as a workshop consisting of different tools. He differentiates between three types of mental tools with which we interpret our reality, which evolved in human ancestry. Although these tools all function unconsciously/intuitively and instantaneously, they inform our conscious/reflective thoughts and decisions. The tools are: *Categorisers* (Object detection device, Agency detection device, Face detector, Animal identifier, Artefact identifier) that acquire information through the senses. The agency detection device, to describe but one, is hypersensitive for intentional agency, to pick up both natural agents but also so-called supernatural agents which might not even exist objectively. Humans easily tend to "see" more than meets the eye, and in survival circumstances it makes sense to rather play safe than be sorry when it comes to detecting a real agent or just an illusion; *Describers* (Object describer, Living-thing describer, Theory of mind, Artefact describer) add detail to the identified information. The Mind-reader ("Theory of Mind") in this group, for instance, fills in the details of the intentional subjects/agents that were identified by the agency detector. People are by nature mind-readers, to try and determine the fears, intentions, desires, convictions and values of other agents, both human and non-human. "Theory of Mind" seems to be a uniquely evolved human capacity, markedly also to assist and regulate our social interactions (along with the social facilitators, see below) and ensuring survival through sensing what others might think and plan. Many researchers, however, are convinced that this very "smart" mental tool might also be present in some non-human animals, even be it limited (e.g. chimpanzees).⁶ *Facilitators* (Intuitive morality, Social exchange regulator, Social status monitor),⁷ the main focus of this contribution, regulate our social relationships. They developed over many thousands of years to regulate people's social interactions, establish and maintain morality and confirm group ties, in short, providing us with "social intelligence"⁸ with immense adaptive advantages. Before going into more detail about these different pro-social facilitators, suffice to say that the intuitive moraliser gives us a "gut feeling" of right or wrong to ensure the well-being of the group. Group-life adopted a

Cognition (ed. Peters Carruthers and Andrew Chamberlain; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-12.

⁵ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 3-6; see also Krebs, *Origins*, 6, 203.

⁶ Frans B. M. de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 72.

⁷ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 6, states: "...many facilitators seem to come into their own only in middle childhood through adulthood."

⁸ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 28.

structure of give-and-take, and therefore the social exchange regulator developed that confirms people's natural feeling of reciprocity (who owes what to whom). The role that conceptualised counter-intuitive beings (gods, ancestors, spirits, etc.) play in this give-and-take ethos is informative in ensuring the moral fibre of a society, the latter characterised by responsibility, mutual caring, fairness and cooperation.⁹ The social status monitor intuitively registers who the most influential person would be to associate with, to advance one's own status.

The *intuitive morality* tool operates below consciousness¹⁰ but evokes an intuitive verdict of something to be right or wrong. An example of the latter is the killing of an innocent person¹¹ and the accompanying (gut) feeling of utter shock experienced by the onlooker. This tool seems to be born out of our capacity for emotional contagion (that we share with animals)¹² triggering an appropriate instinctive/impulsive action, that translates into empathy¹³ and finally becomes filtered through our rational thought (where we leave the animal world behind) allowing us to reflectively conclude on the right or wrong of specific actions. When strong emotions are experienced they become a catalyst to ensure behaviours,¹⁴ also rationally motivated behaviours, to avoid these wrongs (or others, such as fighting, stealing, selfish acting, etc.) and ensuring the well-being and survival of the group/society.¹⁵ Although there is a universality of humans' natural dispositions and judgements of what is right and wrong, one should be aware of cultural-specific constructions of right or wrong. For instance, some cultures are quite satisfied that even the shedding of blood is morally in order: ". . . that one kills by custom his first two children, or that a husband has a right of life and death over his wife, or that it is the duty of the child to kill his parents before they are old."¹⁶

The *social exchange regulator*, or who owes what to whom, provides us with the intuitive conviction that good behaviour should be rewarded and bad behaviour needs to be punished.¹⁷ Leda Cosmides and John Tooby define social exchange as follows: ". . . cooperation between two or more individuals

⁹ Krebs, *Origins*, 24.

¹⁰ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 47, 48.

¹¹ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 53, indicates that this tool collaborates closely with the social exchange regulator, which requires fairness or "tit for tat."

¹² Emotional "fight or flight" reactions stem from the old or primitive brain that we share with other animals – see Krebs, *Origins*, 143.

¹³ De Waal, "Morality," 37.

¹⁴ De Waal, *Primates*, 18; Krebs, *Origins*, 200.

¹⁵ Krebs, *Origins*, 216: "A sense of moral duty probably originated in the emotions and motivational states that disposed early humans to behave in prosocial ways. This sense helped them reap the long-term benefits of group living."

¹⁶ Turiel, *Culture of Morality*, 38, following Ruth Benedict.

¹⁷ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 53.

for mutual benefit . . . It manifests itself in . . . ritualized gift giving, the exchange of favours between friends, trade in a market economy and barter. . . .¹⁸ It originated in the Pleistocene environment as a result of human group living but it is also found amongst non-human, social (cooperative) animals manifesting *inter alia* in elementary or simultaneous reciprocity between close kin (e.g. I lick you, and you lick me). In humans (and probably some primates) this evolved into sophisticated forms of indirect reciprocity,¹⁹ for instance the donating of blood to people you don't know in order to ensure a future, indirect return benefit when you might be in need. Social exchange happens not only between human agents but includes super-human agents as well. Sacrifices to gods or ancestor spirits to appease them are believed to be rewarded at some stage, whenever the god deems it fit and in whatever way.²⁰ Cosmides and Tooby have developed a computational theory of social exchange to capture the sophistication of the human brain-mind to manage social exchange, and point out a few prerequisite cognitive capacities required to be in place among early humans:²¹ the ability to recognise individuals,²² to memorise previous interactions, to communicate one's own values to others and detect another's.²³ They point out that human minds have naturally endowed algorithms to determine costs and benefits²⁴ and also procedures to detect "cheaters" and "free-riders."²⁵ The latter, usually only a few individuals can easily destroy a group and without the capacity to detect them, a moral society built on (*inter alia*) social exchange would not have survived.²⁶ Once they are detected, they are shunned and even ostracised whilst cooperators are favoured.²⁷ Apart from intuitive detection, gossip can also interestingly serve to expose them. Gossip is as old as humankind itself, especially to exchange strategic information about survival (food, safety, procreation, etc.). This helps to position oneself strategically and also to be informed subtly of possible "cheaters."²⁸ Gossip arouses contradictory feelings, because it satisfies the craving for information to strengthen one's position but it can also signal a "loose tongue" and therefore someone not to be

¹⁸ Cosmides and Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology," 52; Høgh-Olesun, "Human Mind," 5, aptly refers to humans as "default score-keepers."

¹⁹ Krebs, *Origins*, 176.

²⁰ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 54.

²¹ Cosmides and Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology," 60.

²² Cosmides and Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology," 61, refers to a fascinating 1975 study of Bahrick *et al.* that indicated that the rate of face recognition and remembrance is 90%, even after 34 years (see face detector tool above).

²³ "Mind-reading" by means of the "Theory of Mind" tool obviously also assists in detecting possible cheaters, says Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 99.

²⁴ Cosmides and Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology," 51, also refer to this ability as a "shared grammar of social contracts."

²⁵ Cosmides and Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology," 57, 86.

²⁶ Cosmides and Tooby, "The Logic," 196.

²⁷ Krebs, *Origins*, 176.

²⁸ Cosmides and Tooby, "Evolutionary Psychology," 70; Krebs, *Origins*, 197.

trusted. If others in turn gossip about you, then your position is weakened. As groups became increasingly bigger, it became more difficult to expose "free-riders" and "cheaters" that undermine the group and endanger its survival. In this context, it makes sense to postulate a god whose omnipotence and omniscience allowed it to observe humans' covert behaviour, and act as the perfect moral arbitrator²⁹ to punish and reward as needed. As counter-intuitive beings (gods) they are believed to possess absolute strategic knowledge necessary for survival and also of the roles that humans fulfil in this endeavour. With their god's-eye view³⁰ on things they become "morally concerned supernatural policing agents,"³¹ upholding the moral order by rewarding good people and punishing bad people. If punishment is done by fellow group members it can also become costly, because those that are punished can retaliate. If this is, however, left to the gods this problem (along with the difficulty of detection) is solved and the gods become a marvellous cultural solution relieving all sorts of existential anxieties.³²

Krebs points out five categories or pillars for morality, namely respect for authority, self-control, altruism, fairness and honesty.³³ The respect for authority is mediated by the so-called *social status monitor* that according to Barrett ". . . attempts to determine the high-status members of a group with whom it would be important to form alliances, or from whom it would be profitable to learn and imitate."³⁴ This mental tool, similar as those previously referred to, intuitively and spontaneously evokes our showing of deference to authority figures. High-status individuals and their material resources signal their capacity for survival and reproduction. Barrett's circumscription indicates that it might be beneficial to one's own status and material welfare to have friends in high places but there is more to it. To imitate and learn from them acknowledges not only their success but also has an evident moral dimension, as they are the carriers of a society's values. Gods for instance, who are believed to be omniscient, social-moral arbitrators become the "guarantors of moral behaviour" upholding the moral order or social code.³⁵ This also applies to those high-ranking individuals who have delegated power from the gods/ancestors, namely kings, chiefs, elders, parents, *et cetera*. The process of learning from them is described as infocopying, a direct form of social learning.³⁶ This means

²⁹ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 51.

³⁰ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 120.

³¹ Ara Norenzayan, "Why We Believe: Religion as a Human Universal," in *Human Morality & Sociality: Evolutionary & Comparative Perspectives* (ed. Henrik Høgh-Olesun; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 65.

³² Norenzayan, "Why We Believe," 65.

³³ Krebs, *Origins*, 14.

³⁴ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 5.

³⁵ Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 50; see also Krebs, *Origins*, 84.

³⁶ Henrich and Gil-White, "The Evolution," 172, 175.

to copy high-status members without reinventing the wheel and allowing for limited individual learning only. Individual learning can be costly in a survival environment. Just as we are default score-keepers through our social exchange regulator we are also default infocopiers through our social status monitors.

Animals also show deference to high ranking members in their group, and although Joseph Henrich and Francisco Gil-White differentiate between status that is achieved through (agonistic) dominance in the animal world and (non-agonistic) prestige in human societies,³⁷ both status styles are present among both. The well-known development psychologist Jean Piaget argued a strong case that children, almost blindly and with the emotional mixture of fear and awe,³⁸ spontaneously obey their parents as those far greater than themselves, and this continues into adulthood with our almost impulsive bowing before authority.³⁹ However, even though small children intuitively obey their parents they also question them rationally, and this comes naturally. If parents want to enforce immoral rules on their children, they just as easily make their own moral judgements distinct from the social convention that (all) authority needs to be respected.⁴⁰ And this rational deliberation to critically oppose some forms of authority continues into adulthood. Although there are arguments for the first sparks of morality amongst animals, for example "parenting," or the show of deference amongst primates, they cannot be regarded as moral agents.⁴¹ Humans' show of deference exemplifying their moral stance exceeds those of primates to also include authority figures they have never met and far beyond their own social group (e.g. kings, presidents, prime ministers of other nations). They also obey conceptualised supernatural figures, the whole array of divine authorities which are absent in the animal world. And humans obey and bow to abstract carriers of authority like laws, rules and traditions in the absence of the personal enforcers of these, which animals probably do not do.⁴²

How do people go about recognising high status figures and conferring prestige onto these individuals? Henrich and Gil-White indicate that in general skilled individuals will have higher status.⁴³ In the Kgalagadi good hunters will freely be awarded the status to lead the hunt. Older people will receive more prestige than younger ones (given that they do not become mentally challenged) and this seems to be almost universal across societies. Both these categories will also be privileged above others and exempted from certain (low

³⁷ Henrich and Gil-White, "The Evolution."

³⁸ It is quite interesting how this behaviour matches Rudolf Otto's view of the essence of religion, namely an experience of *tremendum et fascinatum* (fear and awe) when in the presence of the divine.

³⁹ Krebs, *Origins*, 77-83.

⁴⁰ Turiel, *Culture of Morality*, 109, 110.

⁴¹ De Waal, *Primates*, 65.

⁴² Krebs, *Origins*, 163, 168.

⁴³ Henrich and Gil-White, "The Evolution," 180-192.

ranking) social obligations to undergird their status. When it comes to learning and imitation, skilled/successful individuals will be preferentially (info-) copied. Those that are prestigious will have influence even outside their field of expertise,⁴⁴ and they are more memorable. When it comes to ethological or behaviour patterns a prestigious individual,⁴⁵ in contrast to a dominant individual, will be paid far more attention: they will be stared at more, will receive more contacts and more followers and will be showered far more with gifts and other tokens acknowledging their status and authority. When people are in doubt about another's status, they will believe others' judgments that are confirmed by "prestige rankings" (medals, university degree, etc.).⁴⁶

It is clear that our pro-social mental tools/mechanisms, the *facilitators* (along with the *categorisers* and *describers*) are innate and these dispositions produce universal moral norms. This process doesn't happen mindlessly as if we are blind automatons and only genetically determined. Our moral systems are also rationally informed and therefore we are able to produce different social codes. Cultural relative moral norms might seem to privilege nurture (e.g. social learning and therefore [only] culturally determined) independent of our nature (genes/neurons/hormones/brain-mind), but this would reinforce the dubious nature: nurture dichotomy. Both are complementary in providing us our social moral universes. As our innate mechanisms produce moral norms, the latter in turn can act as cultural agents in selecting those genes that have guided the shaping of these morality-providing mechanisms.⁴⁷ With the combination of genetic and cultural intelligence we are able to continuously construct new social codes as needed, to satisfy us both rationally and intuitively of right or wrong. It is time to take a closer look at the social code of Proverbs, markedly its illustration of pro-sociality and morality.

C HUMAN PRO-SOCIALITY AND PROVERBS

Our naturally endowed sensibilities to act in pro-social ways, since we live in interdependent groups/societies are complemented and expanded by our unique rational capacities as humans to structure our worlds as liveable, moral environments. This is aptly illustrated by the OT wisdom perspective and the ideal world that it envisaged. Wisdom implies a reflective look at reality, a formulation of rules to allow one to blend harmoniously in with the society of which

⁴⁴ Henrich and Gil-White, "The Evolution," 184 (following Smith & Bliege Bird) note the following: "Among the Meriam of the Torres Strait, great turtle hunters are permitted to speak and are listened to more than others, despite the fact that their skill in hunting turtles gives no direct indication of their skill in public affairs or politics."

⁴⁵ Henrich and Gil-White, "The Evolution," 179, point out that prestigious individuals will often portray a subdominant ethology (e.g. body posture and verbal acknowledgement of humbleness) to convince of their solidarity with their followers.

⁴⁶ Henrich and Gil-White, "The Evolution," 190.

⁴⁷ Krebs, *Origins*, 235-236, 241-242; Barrett, *Why Would Anyone?*, 5.

one is part, and in essence to respect the assumed “order” underlying the society.⁴⁸ This order is markedly a moral order, constituted by authority figures, like parents for instance (representing the phase of unproblematic, family/clan wisdom), who taught their children proverbs that “. . . reflected the *moral values* of the clans and, since people were dependent on one another, the societal *rules* necessary for their survival.”⁴⁹ It is remarkable that Wisdom underwrites all the pillars of morality referred to earlier, namely respect for authority, self–control, altruism, fairness and honesty.⁵⁰ Behind life’s order is God, who in the world indirectly reveals⁵¹ the guidelines for a morally responsible life (e.g. Prov 9:10).⁵² This is to ensure success for the “righteous” (or wise) who respect this order and failure and punishment for the “godless” (or fool) who reject it, the two categories of people that the so–called systemised phase of wisdom came up with.⁵³ Wisdom, at least within the first two phases of development (unproblematic and dogmatised/systematised wisdom) in contrast with the protest phase (see below), is also confident and optimistic about the mastering of this order by adhering to the doctrine of retribution.⁵⁴ The latter, the conviction that a good deed leads to a good consequence and a bad deed to a bad outcome, is proprietary to Wisdom thought as we find it in the book of Proverbs. This doctrine of what goes around comes around, embodies perfectly all that has been said above of our deep–seated intuitions of social exchange; for example Prov 11:1 “The Lord abhors dishonest scales, but accurate weights are his delight.” Fair trade, when material goods are exchanged, is fundamental for a just and well–functioning society. Furthermore, God is the patron of fairness (and morality in general), the social arbitrator who keeps a god’s–eye view on all human actions, especially those that other humans cannot see (false scales),

⁴⁸ James A. Loader, “Tekste met ’n Wysheidsperspektief,” in *Woorde wat Ver Kom* (ed. Ferdinand Deist and Willem Vorster; LOT 1; Kaapstad: Tafelberg–Uitgewers, 1986), 103–122.

⁴⁹ Willem Boshoff, Eben Scheffler and Izak Spangenberg, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Context* (Protea Book House: Pretoria, 2000), 72.

⁵⁰ Krebs, *Origins*, 14.

⁵¹ Loader, “Tekste,” 103.

⁵² “Fear of Yahweh” should probably be understood as acknowledgement of Yahweh – see Roger N. Whybray, *The Book of Proverbs: A Survey of Modern Study* (HBIS; Leiden: Brill, 1996), 136–140. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2004), 100 – 101, points out both a rational aspect to which this expression might refer (e.g. law, statutes, commands, etc.) but also a non–rational aspect, namely an emotional response of fear, love and trust. He concludes with “affectionate reverence” (following C. Bridges). The latter also reminds of Rudolf Otto’s divine experience of “fear and awe” mentioned above.

⁵³ James A. Loader, “Spreek,” in *Tweegesprek met God: Predikers, Digters en Wysgere* (ed. Jasper Burden and Willem Prinsloo; LOT 3; Kaapstad: Tafelberg–Uitgewers, 1987), 45.

⁵⁴ Loader, “Tekste,” 104.

and punishes or rewards accordingly. Our intuitive morality tool is also illustrated in this aphorism, the instinctive feeling of abhorrence towards a "cheater" that exploits innocent buyers. The acceptance of and bowing before authority, spontaneously prompted by our social status monitor, is also aptly illustrated by another proprietary characteristic of wisdom, namely respect for authority and accompanying humbleness (knowing your place in the bigger scheme of things).⁵⁵ Apart from authority figures like God (and their representatives, leaders and kings, see below) and parents mentioned already, the skilled "authors" and teachers of the way of wisdom, were courtiers/scribes (wise counsellors closely aligned to the king) and ("school") teachers.⁵⁶ Authority, however, also becomes embodied in personified wisdom, for instance Lady Wisdom in Prov 1, 8 and 9, Yahweh's beloved artisan and co-creator. And as has been indicated above, authority can also reside in abstractions, like laws, rules and traditions that humans unthinkingly respect. This also pertains to Wisdom itself, described as "instruction," "understanding," "learning," "teaching," "words," "commands," *et cetera* (Prov 4:1-9).⁵⁷ The skilled "wise" in Proverbs offered their ideas on a wide array of strategic topics needed for communal survival and well-being, by way of *inter alia* wisdom reflections and concise aphorisms. The main function of these conventional forms was to persuade of the wise life-style through (rational) argumentation.⁵⁸ The constant

⁵⁵ Loader, "Tekste," 105-106.

⁵⁶ Loader, "Tekste," 106, 120-122, points out three general social contexts of wisdom, namely the early tribal wisdom where the parents functioned as modest philosophers, teaching and advising their children on a wide array of topics needed for a successful life. The second is the so-called court wisdom in the monarchical era to educate courtiers the proper etiquette of court life. The third is the post-exilic wisdom "schools" where a wisdom teacher pedagogically shaped youthful pupils to master life wisely. There is a general consensus amongst scholars that it is not always possible to determine precisely the context and producers of the diverse reflections, short maxims and other genres in Proverbs. Furthermore, the reflective/argumentative perspective, even though proprietary to wisdom as found in the traditionally accepted wisdom books of the OT, often permeates its narrative, prophetic and poetic literature as well (see also Whybray, *Book of Proverbs*, 35). In light of this (if context becomes rather indecisive) it is meaningful to rather ask "what" is said than speculating "who" said it first and "where." Therefore, the "what" of pro-sociality and morality, their acknowledgement and embracement, which transcend specific contexts (whether earlier family, later monarchy or a post-exilic "school" situation) was the purpose of my illustration of these values.

⁵⁷ The terms *musar*, *tôrah*, *dabar*, etc. are closely linked to Yahweh, the ultimate authority.

⁵⁸ Loader, "Tekste," 114. The use of the aphorism on which I focus in this contribution, makes good sense rhetorically within a general wisdom environment/context characterised by argumentation/deliberation/reflection. As a short concise proverb, a truth statement, it persuasively offers advice (instead of a prescription like a law statement - Loader, "Tekste," 112), and simultaneously evokes further critical reflec-

"selling" of (traditional) wisdom in Proverbs to the susceptible, inexperienced youth, also indicates an awareness of possible counter-arguments against the tried and trusted conventions. This confirms our human rationality in search of new insights, instead of just blindly following conventional authority (see below).

It is time to take a closer look at a few examples in Proverbs, exemplifying our human pro-social tools in action, ensuring the values and overall moral well-being of the ancient Israelite society. The focus will be mostly on the short aphorisms found in the older wisdom (Prov 10–29)⁵⁹ and also a brief reference to some sound moral advice to the king in a later collection of different form (Prov 31:1–9). The choice of the short aphorisms is pragmatic. They provide concise general truths about pro-sociality and morality, preventing elongated deliberation (within the short scope of this contribution) of other (equally insightful) reflections in Proverbs on this topic. The immorality of the exploitation of innocent victims through false scales has been indicated above. Apart from the economic sphere, two more examples from the judiciary and one from the domestic sphere illustrate human *intuitive morality*, embedded in the culturally agreed upon ethical order. Proverbs 17:15 "Acquitting the guilty and condemning the innocent – both are an abomination to the Lord," evokes a strong sense of indignation as a corrupt ancient Near East judge commits this wrong (see also Isa 5:20, 23; Amos 5:7).⁶⁰ The first hemistich, presented as a "terse, chiasmic assonance,"⁶¹ and the synthetic parallel of the second hemistich of the social arbitrator Yahweh being outraged, emphatically denounce this turning upside down of the consensually established moral order (Deut 25:1). Proverbs 17:26, translated as an *a fortiori* argument by Waltke,⁶² "If even to fine an innocent person is not good, how much more flogging nobles is against what is upright," continues to expose justice turned upside down. To fine an

tion. In a certain sense it functions like a premise within a logic argument, conveying a general and even "universal" truth as it intends to persuade to a certain lifestyle, in light of my topic to a lifestyle of pro-sociality and morality. As argued in footnote 56 about the values of social intelligence that transcend specific contexts, so also this specific genre as the vehicle thereof (it is not context bound). It is similar to poetry, the "what" and "how" (aphoristic in this case) something is said are more important than the "who" or "where" it was said.

⁵⁹ Loader, "Tekste," 122.

⁶⁰ Lambertus A. Snijders, *Spreuken: Een Praktische Bijbelverklaring* (T&T; Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1984), 15. Barrett has mentioned before that the intuitive morality tool and the social exchange regulator work in tandem, with the obvious implication here of punishment in turn for a corrupt judge.

⁶¹ Bruce K. Waltke, *Chapters 15–31* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2005), 55. Loader, "Tekste," 107, states that the different kinds of parallelisms (including chiasm) in wisdom poetry subtly underline the idea of balance and order.

⁶² Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 46, 63; see also Snijders, *Spreuken*, 116, 120.

innocent person is wrong but to flog⁶³ and so humiliate an innocent noble is even worse. This presumably refers to a very high magistrate who is in a position to impose legal fines to ordinary citizens and flog subordinate nobles in the hierarchical government. Both victims, however, are virtuous and innocent, the innocent person named explicitly and the nobles implied to be innocent by the parallelism of the verse. The parallel endings of both hemistichoi "is not good" (*lō' tōb*) and "against what is upright," (*'al yōšer*)⁶⁴ become an outcry against the violation of the ethics of the community.⁶⁵ Proverbs interestingly expands human intuitive morality to also include the animal world, and expresses the same moral indignation when this is not done. In the domestic sphere, says Prov 12:10: "A righteous man cares for the needs of his animal, but the kindest acts of the wicked are cruel" (see also Prov 27:23–27). The translation of *yd'* ("know") by the NIV as "care" is apt, as this word's wide semantic range includes "empathy."⁶⁶ The *rah^emē* or "compassion" of the wicked, however, is meant as sarcastic, they are inherently cruel. This acknowledgement of the intuitive care for one's domestic animals of a right-minded person echoes the admonition (in similar vein) in Deut 25:4 "Do not muzzle a treading ox."⁶⁷ And it confirms our natural empathetic bond with the animal world.⁶⁸

The *social exchange mental tool* focuses, apart from on the act of social exchange, also on the divine as social arbitrator and exchange partner (it is not only negotiated between humans), on "cheaters" and gossip. A few examples from Proverbs will illustrate: the ever vigilant watching of Yahweh of the deeds and motives of the righteous and the wicked, ensuring the moral healthiness of the society as social arbitrator, is explicitly stated in Prov 15:3: "In every place, the eyes of Yahweh are watching the wicked and the good."⁶⁹ (see also Prov 15:11; 16:2). Yahweh as a typical counter-intuitive being, is not lim-

⁶³ The physical beating of another person, deservedly or undeservedly, evokes our modern moral aversion, as Robert B. Y. Scott, *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes* (AB 18; New York: Doubleday, 1965), 110, verbalizes: "The frequent references to the beating of children and fools (x 13, xii 24, xix 25, 29, xxiii 13–14, xxix 15) throw a glaring light on the educational methods of the time."

⁶⁴ Both Roland E. Murphy, *Proverbs* (WBC 22; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 127, and William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (OTL; London: SCM, 1970), 507, have similar interpretations, namely "against what is right" and "contrary to what is right."

⁶⁵ Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 63.

⁶⁶ Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 526.

⁶⁷ See again footnote 60. Social exchange or retribution implies that also the animal owner will reap the consequences of the treatment of his/her animals (good or bad).

⁶⁸ Snijders, *Spreuken*, 88.

⁶⁹ This translation of Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 149, nicely captures the sequence of the Hebrew with the emphatic opening "everywhere."

ited to time and space, and omniscient⁷⁰ through his constant⁷¹ vigilance of all of humanity, the latter nicely captured by the merism “the wicked and the good.”⁷² The immediate context is that of righteousness through the self–control of the tongue,⁷³ although this verse seems to appear rather suddenly.⁷⁴ Proverbs also acknowledges that human beings are default score–keepers (e.g. Prov 23:6–8), and this is contained in the idea of retribution. What you put in you will get back, your good or bad investment will have a similar return, and always under the watchful monitoring of the social arbitrator: Prov 10:2–3: “²Ill–gotten treasures are of no value but righteousness delivers from death. ³The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.” Ill–gotten or wickedly obtained treasures (the cravings of the wicked), the dishonest and greedy taking (stealing) more than your share has no eternal value and Yahweh will impede this wrongful destroying of society. Righteousness, fairness in your dealings with fellow others on the other hand, will be rewarded abundantly by Yahweh with a full life, it will pre–empt an early unnatural death or social isolation, “social death.”⁷⁵ The poet also underscores this moral truth with a structural emphasis: “In chiasmic, antithetical parallelism v. 3 provides the theological rationale behind the aphorism of v. 2.”⁷⁶ Murphy⁷⁷ adds to the theological rationale that the deed–consequence idea expressed in these two verses is not just a matter of impersonal poetic justice but overseen personally by Yahweh. Furthermore, Yahweh is included even more directly in the social exchange negotiations found in Proverbs, confirming what has been mentioned above that super–human agents (and animals – see footnote 67) are often part of these social “contracts”: Prov 19:17, “He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord and he will reward him for what he has done.” With a chiasm, “he lends to Yahweh – he who is kind to the poor – his deeds – he (Yahweh) will repay him,”⁷⁸ the poet underscores the care for the destitute with whom Yahweh sides (see also Deut 15:1–11). McKane recaps this “deal” succinctly in economic jargon: “This is a credit of righteousness which Yahweh will honour in full. . . .”⁷⁹ What happens to “cheaters”? Proverbs 15:27: “A disturber

⁷⁰ Johannes P. van der Ploeg, *Spreuken* (BOT; Roermond: J.J. Romen & Zonen, 1952), 56.

⁷¹ Subtly expressed through the *qal* participium feminine plural of *sph*.

⁷² Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 614.

⁷³ Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 608–610.

⁷⁴ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 111.

⁷⁵ Snijders, *Spreuken*, 74.

⁷⁶ Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 453; Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 452 footnote 36, recaps how strikingly similar both verses are structured: “. . . both uniquely begin with *lō’* + *Hiphil imperfect* and both employ in chiasmic order the lexemes *šdq* and ‘*rš’*, first as abstracts, ‘wickedness’ versus ‘righteousness,’ and then as adjectives, ‘righteous’ versus ‘wicked.’”

⁷⁷ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 72.

⁷⁸ Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 111.

⁷⁹ McKane, *Proverbs*, 534.

[ruiner] of his own house, one who is greedy for gain, but whoever hates a bribe will have life” [my insertion, HV]. This translation of Murphy⁸⁰ neatly reflects the antithetical chiasm of this proverb (“ruiner of house” – “greedy for gain”– “hater of bribe”–“life”).⁸¹ The “cheater” here is probably an official who is a bribe–taker, his greed for gain qualified by the parallel “gifts/bribes” (*mattānot*) in the second hemistich, and seemingly not innocent as gift–giving elsewhere to maintain good social relations (e.g. Gen 34:12; Esth 9:22; Prov 18:16). He loses “house and home”⁸² and is ruined, in contrast to the honest person who refuses bribes and is rewarded with life. The antithesis between the opening ‘oker (ruiner) and ending with *yih^eyêh* (he shall live), supports its translation of “ruin” (see also v. 25).⁸³ The destroying of this cheater’s “house” becomes a metonymy for his loss of family, health, security and his chattel property like tools, servants, animals and so on – in short, his survival!⁸⁴ It becomes a harsh lesson to those that sabotage the moral functioning of their society. A last and brief comment on gossip in Proverbs is that it is regarded as irresistible as good food (Prov 20:19; 26:22), practised by those who have loose tongues in contrast to those that have self–control (Prov 11:13; 20:19) and gossip can even be part of a kind of Machiavellian strategic positioning during a court case (Prov 25:9–10). When Waltke comments on Prov 20:19 that gossip may not necessarily be a malicious calumny but slanderous gossip that “. . . springs from the immoral flaw of unfaithfulness” is,⁸⁵ it is clear that the wise should refrain from it.

Authority figures in society are intuitively identified by our *social status monitors* to learn from and imitate, provided they are worth respecting and emulating. Their skills, wisdom (also noticeable by age, e.g. Prov 16:11), morality, material riches and large followings signalling their success, also provide the reasons for their elevated status. Amongst the high ranking authority figures (e.g. God, parents, wisdom teachers, scribes and court officials) in Proverbs is also the figure of the king referred to in some of the so–called royal proverbs, on whom the following brief focus will be. The king functions as God’s earthly surrogate to establish and uphold just and fair rule and so ensure a morally intact society.⁸⁶ Authority figures, as has been mentioned, are both the patrons and symbols of their society’s morality. Waltke summarises a com-

⁸⁰ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 110.

⁸¹ Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 637.

⁸² Clifford, *Proverbs*, 154.

⁸³ Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 630, 635, 637; McKane, *Proverbs*, 485, allows for an understanding of ‘kr as “ostracize” (so interpreted by the Nuwe Afrikaanse Bybel) or putting his house outside of normal social intercourse which implies death in ancient Near Eastern thought. However, he finally opts for “destroy.”

⁸⁴ Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 512.

⁸⁵ Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 148.

⁸⁶ Clifford, *Proverbs*, 158.

petent king worth supporting, according to Proverbs, as follows: “A king’s competence includes being reliably kind (20:28), just (16:10; 29:4, 14), righteous (16:12), truthful (16:13), pure and gracious (22:11), discerning (25:2), inscrutable (25:3), disassociating oneself from the wicked (20:8, 26; 25:5; cf. 14:35), and sober (31:4)”⁸⁷ – indeed an authority figure satisfying our moral sensibilities! Taking a closer look at Prov 16:10–15, the king’s authority (status; vv. 10–11), his moral sensibilities (vv. 12–13) and execution of his power (vv. 14–15),⁸⁸ provide some insight into how and why he matches some of our intuitive expectations of high status individuals. Proverbs 16:10–11, “¹⁰The lips of a king speak as an oracle, and his mouth should not betray justice. ¹¹Honest scales and balances are from the Lord; all the weights in the bag are of his making.” The king acts here as a divinely appointed mediator between God and people.⁸⁹ This is captured by the translation of *qesem* as an “oracle” (NIV) and therefore inspired from “above” but not excluding human discernment.⁹⁰ The parallel hemistich to not deviate from justice ascribes to God’s rule of justice, metaphorically exemplified by honest scales in v. 11 (see again Prov 11:1 above).⁹¹ The king’s delegated authority aligns him very close to the all-seeing God (Prov 20:8), to act as an earthly social arbitrator. If the origin of his “skills” to uphold justice is inspired from a divine source, it can therefore also be expected that he has sound moral sensibilities and commitments: Proverbs 16:12–13, “¹²An abomination to kings is doing wickedness because a throne is established through righteousness. ¹³Kings take pleasure in righteous lips, and whoever speaks upright things he loves.” This translation of Waltke⁹² reflects the antithetical chiasm that these two verses form in combination (abomination – righteous throne – righteous lips – loves) to emphasise “right” over “wrong.” Add to this the chiasm of v. 13 (kings – righteous lips – speaks upright things – he loves) and the point of “righteousness” is effectively driven home. In this commitment to justice the king is following the Lord himself (Prov 6:16–19; 15:9) as well as Lady Wisdom (Prov 8:7). Verse 13 emphasises the same high moral standards and skills that the king’s “friends,” his advisers, officials and messengers should live up to,⁹³ in their effort to learn from and imitate this high status person. We do get some impression of dominance status (e.g. wrath born from agonist relationships) and the more positive prestige status (i.e. freely conferred) in the king’s execution of his righteous rule: Prov 16:14–15, “¹⁴A king’s wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it. ¹⁵When a king’s face brightens it means life, his favour is like a rain cloud in spring.”

⁸⁷ Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 605.

⁸⁸ Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 16–22.

⁸⁹ Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 16: “. . . the Lord could be inserted wherever the ‘king’ is found.”

⁹⁰ McKane, *Proverbs*, 500.

⁹¹ Paraphrased by the LXX as “righteous measure” – Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 19.

⁹² Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 5, 19–20.

⁹³ Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 19–20; Murphy, *Proverbs*, 122.

The king’s anger or royal wrath (Prov 19:12; 20:2; 14:35) spells death,⁹⁴ metaphorically depicted here as the messengers of Mot, the god of death. A wise person (humble, repentant, patient, loyal and gentle) can, however, defuse the king’s rage (e.g. 1 Sam 25; Dan 2; Prov 14:35).⁹⁵ The first pole of the merism formed between the two verses is “death” and the other is “life.”⁹⁶ The brightened (and beneficent) face⁹⁷ of the king reflects that of Yahweh (Num 6:25)⁹⁸ and predicts “life,” exemplified with the (synthetic) parallel spring–rain. As we have seen above, a large group of followers is also indicative of the prestige of a high–ranking individual. Proverbs is also very aware of this: Prov 14:28, “A large population is a king’s glory but without subjects a prince is ruined.”⁹⁹ In this first of the royal sayings, the antithetical parallelism emphasises that leadership without a following is an illusion,¹⁰⁰ it is like a captain without a ship. The king in Proverbs needs to be morally anchored in Yahweh to secure his throne (see also Prov 20:28), otherwise he (*rāzōn* – the potentate functioning as a model for all youth) “. . . will die socially.”¹⁰¹ And the latter is precisely the fate of an authority figure that has lost his skills, becoming incompetent. Proverbs also reflects the human capacity for rational critique and rejection of authority gone (morally) haywire, and does not subscribe to a blind, irrational bowing before authority just for the sake of authority. The second last example is from Prov 31:1–9,¹⁰² and although outside the focus of Prov 10–29, it continues with the theme of sound moral advice to ensure the integrity of character of the king. Proverbs 31:1–9 warns against the obsession and overindulgence in women and liquor, as this spells disaster and an end of reign. Standing up for the poor, however, is the right way to go. Another final and telling example of

⁹⁴ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 122; Van der Ploeg, *Spreuken*, 60, speaks of the “Absolute macht der oosterze koningen.”

⁹⁵ Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 21; Clifford, *Proverbs*, 159.

⁹⁶ Waltke, *Chapters 15–31*, 20.

⁹⁷ Henrich and Gil–White, “The Evolution,” 179, point out how subdominant ethology often characterizes prestige individuals (in contrast to dominant ones), e.g. bowing before followers, admitting incompetence in some respects, etc., all to express solidarity with them. In an analogue way Yahweh’s and the king’s shining faces signal solidarity with their followers.

⁹⁸ Murphy, *Proverbs*, 122.

⁹⁹ Throughout human history (pro–social) humans seem to be easily swayed by numbers. This applies to ancient (and modern) politics as Snijders, *Spreuken*, 100, reiterates: “...is het een politieke werkelijkheid dat de naam van een koning in het oude oosten veel te maken had met de omvang van zijn rijk en zijn leger. Israël heeft dat als klein volk tussen de groten ervaren.”

¹⁰⁰ Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 602; McKane, *Proverbs*, 469; Clifford, *Proverbs*, 147.

¹⁰¹ Waltke, *Chapters 1–15*, 604.

¹⁰² Loader, “Spreuke,” 42, divides Proverbs 31 into two separate collections, namely 31:1–9 and 31:10–31, and states that the first is not dateable. Boshoff, Scheffler and Spangenberg, *Ancient Israelite Literature*, 197, however, regard ch. 31 as a single collection, probably post–exilic.

the loss of skills is that of the interaction between the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. Towards the end of his reign the demented, unstable Saul kept on losing support while the upcoming young David went from strength to strength.

Although the social/moral code or wisdom order of Proverbs is persuasively communicated, satisfying both the intuitive and rational sensibilities of its intended audience, it was not "set in stone" for all times. Some of its early readers already started questioning its adherence to the doctrine of retribution, characteristic of the first or unproblematic phase of the wisdom movement. Protest wisdom questioned the explanation of all of life working according to a naïve deed: consequence pattern (see Job, Qohelet and Prov 30:1–4).¹⁰³ Modern readers also notice its class bias, especially that of the courtiers associating closely with the king. They upheld the *status quo* of the existing order at the expense of the poor and have-nots of their society.¹⁰⁴ From a feminist viewpoint, the wisdom order of Proverbs privileges mostly the elitist males – rulers, kings, fathers and sons – and so sustained the hegemony of the male order.¹⁰⁵ These few examples confirm the human capacity for rational deliberation in negotiating new social codes when the old ones (or some aspects of them) have become redundant and outdated. Our pro-social mechanisms are flexible to construct new moral norms when required.

D CONCLUSION

Our evolved pro-social mental tools provided us with social intelligence to live peacefully amongst one another since the early dawn of modern humankind. We not only have the intuitive capacity to act right or wrong but also the reflective (rational) capabilities to negotiate moral norms, to ensure the moral fibre and well-being of our social environment (including our culturally specific world). Altruism, fairness, honesty, self-control and deference for authority have become the moral embodiments (pillars) of our pro-social mechanisms of intuitive morality, social exchange and respect for authority. Ongoing research on how the human brain-mind has evolved and functions within its natural and social environment, providing us with mental tools to construct meaningful "worlds" to live in, holds good future promise to understand our humanness far better. Along with the unravelling of the intricacies of the working of the brain-mind are also its cultural expressions and the need to unravel these as well, which in turn shape the human mind. Our cultural arte-

¹⁰³ Loader, "Tekste," 119–122; On the doctrine of retribution Van der Ploeg, *Spreekten*, 41, correctly says: ". . . slechts gelden *ut in pluribus*, d.w.z. als algemene regel, in de meerderheid der gevallen."

¹⁰⁴ Boshoff, Scheffler and Spangenberg, *Ancient Israelite Literature*, 138.

¹⁰⁵ Laura Hobgood-Oster, "Wisdom Literature and Eco-Feminism," in *The Earth Story in Wisdom Traditions* (ed. Norman C. Habel and Shirley Wurst; EBib; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 37.

facts (e.g. literature, art, etc.) in this process of "worldmaking," also become windows into our human competency to construct meaningful (and in light of this contribution) moral universes.

Ancient Israelite literature as exemplified by the wisdom book of Proverbs provides an apt example of the making and retaining of a moral universe. The same pillars of morality just mentioned and their underlying pro-social originators are all reflected in the ancient wisdom book of Proverbs, providing content to the wisdom order it portrayed. Part of the overall social code, namely living meaningfully pro-socially and morally or socially intelligent, negotiated and constructed within the ideology/dogma of unproblematic wisdom, despite critique against it, worked well for its intended receivers to regulate their specific group-living successfully. Amongst many other things, Proverbs is an apt illustration of our humanness, of our natural and cultural capacity for social and moral living. The same applies to other literatures (old and modern) that can be investigated to also demonstrate human social/moral intelligence both cultural-specifically and universally.

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