


Building blocks of morality

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Most of us agree about the rules or norms of morality, what philosophers call substantive or normative ethics: be kind to small children, do not cheat on exams and return your library books on time. The big disputes come over foundations, metaethics. This article considers the four main positions. Firstly, *religious ethics*: Here you appeal to the will of God. The problem is not everyone believes in God, and could God make it okay to mark up library books and not return them? Secondly, *platonic ethics*: Ethics exists eternally in a super-sensible world, along with mathematics. The problem is why it should appeal to us and how do we know about it? What if different people have different intuitions? Thirdly, *objective naturalised ethics*: Here, value is found in nature, probably in the processes that led to the beings of greatest value, humans. The problem is how this happened because the main theory of evolution, Darwinism, denies that there is any direction to the developmental process. Fourthly, *subjective naturalised ethics*: It is all a question of the emotions that evolution has given us to get along in life and produce more humans. The problem is that this makes ethics relative. If we had evolved like bees, females' greatest imperative would be to kick their brothers out of the house as winter approaches. What to do? What to do? Next time ask a preacher not a philosopher!

Contribution: The time has come for philosophers generally and students of ethics particularly to come to grips with the fact that human beings are modified monkeys (evolution) not modified mud (Genesis). This essay compares two approaches to 'evolutionary ethics' – Social Darwinism and moral non-realism – expressing a decided preference for the latter.

Keywords: Morality; Normative ethics; Metaethics; Christian non-natural morality; Secular non-natural morality; Evolutionary ethics; Darwinian non-realism.

Introduction

Morality! Love your neighbour as yourself. Avoid self-abuse. And – a favourite of philosophers – never use a yellow marker to highlight passages in a library book. As David Hume pointed out, moral claims are about obligations – what one ought and ought not to do. They are to be distinguished from factual claims: $2 + 2 = 4$. Grace Kelly was the best female film star, ever. Job prospects for people with a PhD degree in philosophy are on a level with job prospects for typewriter repairmen. A lot of people think you can go from the one to the other. Hume (2000) would have none of it:

In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God, or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence. For as this *ought*, or *ought not*, expresses some new relation or affirmation, 'tis necessary that it should be observed and explained; and at the same time that a reason should be given, for what seems altogether inconceivable, how this new relation can be a deduction from others, which are entirely different from it. (p. 302)

So, let's start from the fact that there is something different about moral claims as opposed to factual claims. What then makes morality tick? What are its building blocks? A useful division – the kind of thing that comes up on the exam in Philosophy 100 – is between what we ought to do and why we ought to do what we ought to do. The first level is known as 'substantive' or 'normative ethics'. What should I do? The second level is known as 'metaethics'. Why should I do what I should do? Another useful division – Philosophy 100 again – is between 'non-natural ethical systems' and 'natural ethical systems'. Note that here, we are not talking about what you

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should do – it is unnatural for grown men to rape little children – but rather whether your foundations lie in nature or elsewhere.

To explain these divisions in more detail, it is best to get right into examples, so let us do this. Start with the non-natural and another division – that Philosophy 100 exam is a tough one! – between the ‘religious non-natural’ and the ‘non-religious non-natural’. Both these approaches would exemplify what one would call an ‘objective’ approach. What if the truth has nothing to do with human wants or wishes or any such thing? Another way of putting this would be to say that the non-natural positions are not into ‘relativism’. There is one morality and it is good for all. Yet another way is to talk in terms of ‘realism’. Are the foundations of morality real – existing ‘out there’ – or are they non-real, more creations of the mind?

Christian non-natural morality

To show the religious non-natural position, let us take Christianity as representative of a religious world picture with an ethical system. We take Christianity because it is a good exemplar not because it is better than any other religion. Indeed, some would say that a religion like Buddhism is much more into the ethical than Christianity. At the substantive or normative level, we learnt we should love our neighbours as ourselves: The Love Commandment. There are of course lots of other substantive exhortations, some biblically based, some less so. And there are differences between Christians. Is abortion always morally wrong or it is acceptable, morally required in fact, to allow some abortions some of the time? To stay relatively non-controversial, in cases of rape or where the future child is fated to a lifetime of genetically caused pain? Note that often the differences are less about the substantive morality, as such, and more about the facts of the case. It could be that you are morally obliged to shove a knife into this person and I am not. The difference being that we have a patient with appendicitis and you are a skilled surgeon and I am not. Note also that it is often very difficult to know precisely what the facts are of the case. Take the First World War. The Bishop of London was a great cheerleader for the British side. Here is a typical sermon (cited in Marrin 1974):

To save the freedom of the world, to save Liberty's own self, to save the honour of women and the innocence of children, everything that is noblest in Europe, everyone that loves freedom and honour, everyone that puts principle above ease, and life itself beyond mere living, are banded in a great crusade we cannot deny it – to kill Germans: to kill them, not for the sake of killing, but to save the world; to kill the good as well as the bad, to kill the young men as well as the old, to kill those who have shown kindness to our wounded as well as those fiends who crucified the Canadian sergeant, who superintended the Armenian massacres, who sank the *Lusitania*, and who turned the machine-guns on the civilians of Aerschott and Louvain – and to kill them lest the civilisation of the world should itself be killed. (p. 175)

The question of course is who exactly is my neighbour? The Good Samaritan would have regarded Germans as his neighbours. The Bishop of London clearly did not, although showing that we are all rather complex; later in the war he spoke strongly against bombing children in response to the Germans bombing British children (Ruse 2018:96).

The second level, why should I do what I should do, is the metaethical level. Here, many Christians would appeal to the will of God. You should do what God wants you to do. I was raised a Quaker in the years after the Second World War. Being a pacifist was not easy – fighting Hitler was seen by most to be a moral obligation – but that is what God wanted. Turn the other cheek. I should say that this appeal is not unproblematic. As Plato pointed out in the *Euthyphro*, there is the question of whether God wants us to do the good because it is good, or is it good because God wants it? In the first horn of the dilemma, it seems we are appealing to a different foundation than God, one to which even God is subject. In the second horn, it all seems so arbitrary. Could God really make it a good thing to mark up library books? One should note that there are traditional responses to these conundrums. You can say that what God wants is indeed the beginning and end of discussion. The God of Job seems a bit this way. ‘Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding’. My world. My choice. Don't whine. Or you can go the Catholic route of natural law. God creates but as He creates, He builds in morality. We should do what is natural. Hence, as God gave us anus for defecating, anal intercourse is immoral. I am not saying that this is the end of the argument. As in the surgeon case, you might argue that the facts are relevant. As we have come to see, for example, that homosexual orientation is just as natural as heterosexual orientation – studies on humans and other animals show this – then the morality of anal intercourse might well be re-evaluated (Ruse 1988).

Secular non-natural morality

What of someone who is not religious, at least not in the Christian-religious sort of way, who nevertheless wants a morality not grounded in human desires and wants – it is of course going to be applicable to human nature – and who wants it objective, not relative in any sort of way? Most likely in philosophical circles this is going to be someone influenced by Plato. Plato did believe in a God, the Demiurge of the *Timaeus*, and he identified this God with the Good, the ultimate Form of the Republic. St Augustine Christianised all of this, identifying the Good of Plato with the God of the Bible. But one can see how a non-believer might seize onto Plato's thinking, seeing the world of the Forms as the place of ultimate, objective rationality – like mathematics outside time and space, existing eternally. The whole system is held together by the Form of the Good, in other words it is an intensely moral system justified by the ultimate in non-natural entities.

The prime examples of secular Neoplatonists were the British philosophers associated with Cambridge at the beginning of

the 20th century (Ruse 2017), above all, Bertrand Russell and G. E. Moore. Russell (1959) wrote:

I came to think of mathematics, not primarily as a tool for understanding and manipulating the sensible world, but as an abstract edifice subsisting in a Platonic heaven and only reaching the world of sense in an impure and degraded form.

My general outlook, in the early years of this century, was profoundly ascetic. I disliked the real world and sought refuge in a timeless world, without change or decay or the will-o'-the-wisp of progress. (p. 155)

Russell was the mathematician. Moore was the ethicist, and he too was into Platonising, actually writing of his system: 'I am pleased to believe that this is the most Platonic system of modern times' (Baldwin 1990:50). Moore's system is well known, expounded in the book that was still compulsory reading for British philosophy undergraduates well into the second half of the 20th century. *Principia Ethica* starts with a sterling defence of the Humean distinction between matters of fact and matters of morality. To think that the latter can be derived from the former is a mistake of the most egregious form. It is to commit what Moore (1903) called the 'naturalistic fallacy':

Ethics aims at discovering what are those other properties belonging to all things which are good. But far too many philosophers have thought that when they named those other properties they were actually defining good; that these properties, in fact, were simply not 'other', but absolutely and entirely the same with goodness. This view I propose to call the 'naturalistic fallacy'. (p. 10)

Moore's point is that the goodness of something is not the same as its natural attributes. Saving a small child from drowning is good, but the saving is not in itself good, but something that we judge to be good.

What then for Moore is goodness? He is not terribly interested in substantive ethics, referring to it somewhat dismissively as casuistry. 'Casuistry aims at discovering what actions are good, *whenever they occur*'. Moore (1903) adds, perhaps a little condescendingly:

Casuistry, not content with the general law that charity is a virtue, must attempt to discover the relative merits of every different form of charity. Casuistry forms, therefore, part of the ideal of ethical science: Ethics cannot be complete without it. (pp. 4-5)

It is important, but Moore doesn't really want to go into it. One presumes that substantive ethics is more or less what a Cambridge fellow would consider good and acceptable conduct. No doubt care of library books would be high on the list.

Turning to metaethics, Moore does not think that simply being non-natural is enough to avoid the naturalistic fallacy. You commit the fallacy if you put morality down to the will of God.¹ He speaks in terms of non-natural properties, which

¹This charge seems to hold only if you think the will of God obeys the independent good. If, like Job, you think the will of God defines what is good, then it is not so obvious that the fallacy is being committed.

somehow exist *sui generis*. Obviously, these are much like the Platonic Forms, if not the Form of the Good itself. Moore's point is that just as mathematics – $2 + 2 = 4$ – is binding on us, so also is goodness binding upon us. It is not something of this world, but something that informs and constrains this world, which of course raises the very difficulties that many have to a Platonic view of mathematics. Such a view is very attractive – in fact, Russell said that every mathematician is a Platonist – because you do seem to be discovering things rather than inventing them. The man who discovered the proof of Fermat's Last Theorem (Andrew Wiles) did not make it up. It was not a fictional story like *David Copperfield*. What more natural to think therefore that there is a real world of mathematical entities – and likewise a real world of ethical entities. There are problems, starting with the difficulty of seeing why these ethereal entities should be discoverable by us and applicable to the natural world. We can see a rabbit. What does it mean to say we can see π ? Rabbits eat our lettuces. How does π get into the act? A circle's circumference is governed by π , but what on earth does that mean? These sorts of issues lead many to take a much more empirical, naturalistic approach to mathematics and hence to morality. $2 + 2 = 4$ is a generalisation from experience, sort of thing. And whatever morality is, it must be the same sort of thing.

So much for a secular non-natural approach to morality, it has virtues, but critics will feel that it does not do an entirely adequate job of keeping the natural at bay. Let us turn therefore more wholeheartedly to the natural and see where that leads us.

Traditional evolutionary ethics

Just as I made a somewhat Job-like decision to choose Christianity as my example of a religious ethical position – my decision so like it or lump – so I am going to make a similar kind of decision for an example of a naturalistic ethical position: Evolutionary ethics. I should say that, as with Christianity, there really are good reasons for the choice, so there are good reasons for the choice of evolution as my example of a naturalistic foundation, starting with the fact that there has been a lot written on it, and that these days it is very much discussed, for and against.

With my fondness for distinctions, you will not be surprised to learn that I see two evolutionary approaches to ethics, one clearly objective and the other subjective, not necessarily in an individual having any choice but in the sense of not something dictated by nature and subject to change given different circumstances (Ruse 1986; Ruse & Richards 2017): again, not exactly non-relative against relative, but certainly non-relative in being beyond circumstances and relative in being a function of circumstances. Start with the objective approach, generally the one that people have in mind when they think of evolutionary ethics. It often goes with the name Social Darwinism, although as we shall see this is a little bit of a misnomer and as Social Darwinism generally reaps total

condemnation which, as we shall see, is not necessarily totally well-taken (O'Connell & Ruse 2020).

Remembering the division between substantive or normative ethics and metaethics, start with asking how this traditional, objectivist, evolutionary ethics regards the prescriptions of morality. What ought we to do? The answer is simple. We ought to follow and promote the ways of evolution. Generally, and this is a major reason for the bad reputation because it is thought that as evolution comes through a struggle for existence, we should cherish and promote such a struggle. And it is indeed true that there are those who make such prescriptions. Consider Herbert Spencer, Darwin's contemporary, a fellow Englishman and equally devoted to an evolutionary world picture.

Blind to the fact that under the natural order of things, society is constantly excreting its unhealthy, imbecile, slow, vacillating, faithless members, these unthinking, although well-meaning, men advocate an interference, which not only stops the purifying process but even increases the vitiation – absolutely encourages the multiplication of the reckless and incompetent by offering them an unfailing provision and discourages the multiplication of the competent and provident by heightening the prospective difficulty of maintaining a family (Spencer 1851:323–324).

Dreadful. Not that his admirers were much better. According to Andrew Carnegie, a Scottish-born American steel baron: 'The law of competition may be sometimes hard for the individual, [but] it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest in every department' (Carnegie 1889:655). Academia was also onside. Thus, according to Yale sociologist William Graham Sumner (1914):

A drunkard in the gutter is just where he ought to be ... The law of survival of the fittest was not made by man, and it cannot be abrogated by man. We can only, by interfering with it, produce the survival of the unfittest. (p. 25)

Perhaps expectedly, the pre-World War I German militarists excelled at this sort of thing. General Friedrich Von Bernhardi left no place for the imagination in his best-selling *Germany and the Next War* (1912). 'War is a biological necessity', and hence: 'Those forms survive which are able to procure themselves the most favourable conditions of life, and to assert themselves in the universal economy of nature. The weaker succumb'. Anticipating horrible philosophies of the 20th century (Von Bernhardi 1912:10, quoted by Crook 1994):

Might gives the right to occupy or to conquer. Might is at once the supreme right, and the dispute as to what is right is decided by the arbitrament of war. War gives a biologically just decision, since its decision rests on the very nature of things. (p. 83)

Hitler ([1925] 1939) apparently just soaked up this sort of thing:

All great cultures of the past perished only because the originally creative race died out from blood poisoning.

The ultimate cause of such a decline was their forgetting that all culture depends on men and not conversely; hence that to preserve

a certain culture the man who creates it must be preserved. This preservation is bound up with the rigid law of necessity and the right to victory of the best and stronger in this world.

Those who want to live, let them fight, and those who do not want to fight in this world of eternal struggle do not deserve to live. (p. 1)

It is not surprising therefore that most dreadful of documents, the Wannsee Protocol, recorded by Adolf Eichmann, of the meeting in 1942 to determine the fate of the Jews – the 'Final Solution' – has Social Darwinism right there in the middle:

Under proper guidance, in the course of the final solution the Jews are to be allocated for appropriate labor in the East. Able-bodied Jews, separated according to sex, will be taken in large work columns to these areas for work on roads, in the course of which action doubtless a large portion will be eliminated by natural causes.

The possible final remnant will, since it will undoubtedly consist of the most resistant portion, have to be treated accordingly, because it is the product of natural selection and would, if released, act as the seed of a new Jewish revival (see the experience of history).² (n.p.)

About the only redeeming feature of this terrible story is that Social Darwinism is truly misnamed. The saintly Charles Darwin had nothing to do with any of it. It is much better called Social Spencerianism or some such thing. A rose by any other name. It is still an appalling philosophy. The very antithesis of what we normally think of as ethical thinking and behaviour.

Actually, the philosophy is not entirely misnamed. Darwin might not have been the worst. He was not entirely clean-handed. He had some fairly traditional social Darwinian views about other races, writing late in life to a correspondent (Letter 13230, Darwin Correspondence Project, to William Graham, July 3, 1881):

I could show fight on natural selection having done and doing more for the progress of civilisation than you seem inclined to admit. Remember what risks the nations of Europe ran, not so many centuries ago of being overwhelmed by the Turks, and how ridiculous such an idea now is. The more civilised so-called Caucasian races have beaten the Turkish hollow in the struggle for existence. Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilised races throughout the world.

This however is but one side to the story, starting with the fact that Spencer was writing probably before he became an evolutionist. By the end of the decade, around the time that the *Origin* was written (1859), Spencer was taking a much more organicist view of society, with different elements working together. He was much less harsh on nature's unfortunates, and when it came to international relationships he was positively pacifistic. He deplored spending on armaments – by the end of the 19th century Britain and Germany were engaged in a fierce naval arms race – and thought that international trade was the key to harmonious living across and between

2. See <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-wannsee-protocol>.

societies. He argued that 'conduct gains ethical sanction in proportion as the activities', become 'less and less militant and more and more industrial ...'. He agreed that militant societies may have had their role to play in the early stages of evolution. Today, they are otiose. The need of a struggle for existence will fade away (Spencer 1882):

But now observe that the inter-social struggle for existence which has been indispensable in evolving societies, will not necessarily play in the future a part like that which it has played in the past. Recognizing our indebtedness to war for forming great communities and developing their structures, we may yet infer that the acquired powers, available for other activities, will lose their original activities. (p. 242)

It is accepted that 'without these perpetual bloody strifes, civilized societies could not have arisen, and that an adapted form of human nature, fierce as well as intelligent, was a needful concomitant' – war in the past had its role and function. Now, however, with the arrival of modern societies, 'the brutality of nature in their units which was necessitated by the process, ceasing to be necessary with the cessation of the process, will disappear' (Spencer 1882:242).

Andrew Carnegie (1889) was likewise more tempered than you might think. To put the earlier quote in full context (Carnegie 1889):

The price which society pays for the law of competition, like the price it pays for cheap comforts and luxuries, is also great; but the advantage of this law are also greater still, for it is to this law that we owe our wonderful material development, which brings improved conditions in its train. But, whether the law be benign or not, we must say of it, as we say of the change in the conditions of men to which we have referred: It is here; we cannot evade it; no substitutes for it have been found; and while the law may be sometimes hard for the individual, it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest in every department. (p. 655)

Carnegie is well known for his statement that no one should die rich. He put his philosophy into practice by giving substantial portions of his fortune to the founding of public libraries. Note that this was still evolutionary. Natural selection has the alternative name of the 'survival of the fittest'. Rather, as in the earlier Spencer quote, determining on the non-survival of the non-fittest, public libraries were places where the poor but bright child could go and thereby better themselves. The increased chances of survival of the fittest.

Nothing much positive can be said about either Von Bernhardt or Hitler, except that their main sources of inspiration – if that is the right word – came not from evolution but from home-grown, Germanic philosophies. I have remarked elsewhere, 'the ethical health of peoples is preserved in their indifference to the stabilisation of finite institutions; just as the blowing of the winds preserves the sea from the foulness which would be the result of a prolonged calm, so also corruption in nations would be the product of prolonged, let alone "perpetual" peace' (Hegel 1991:324). Thus, the philosopher Hegel. The crack about perpetual piece was aimed at Kant,

who had promoted a kind of proto-Spencerian hope for amity between nations. (Given Spencer's flagrant use of unacknowledged ideas of others, it is less that Kant was a forerunner of Spencer and more that Spencer was in the tradition of Kant.) Hitler likewise had his Germanic sources, not the least being those hero-elevating operas of Wagner. The passage quoted is really against the Jews – not an obsession of Darwin whose main interest in Jews was in whether circumcision can be transmitted in a kind of Lamarckian fashion. Would Jews after a few generations be born without foreskins? (Apparently not.) The English-born son-in-law of Wagner, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, in his *Die Grundlagen des neunzehnten Jahrhundert (Foundations of the Nineteenth Century)* (1899) portrayed recent history as a battle between Aryans – 'great, heavenly radiant eyes, golden hair, the body of a giant, harmonious musculature' and so forth – and the Jews – 'materialistic, legalistic, limited in imagination, intolerant, fanatical, and with a tendency toward utopian economic schemes' (Richards 2013:214–215). And so on and so forth. Chamberlain became a great admirer of Hitler, who in turn made a favourite of Chamberlain.

Whatever it is called, traditional evolutionary ethics had a long shelf life through the 20th century. Writing in the 1930s and 40s, the ardent evolutionist Julian Huxley, grandson of Thomas Henry Huxley, the great supporter of Darwin and older brother of the novelist Aldous Huxley, thought – not surprisingly – that (particularly at the societal level) we should be promoting the virtues and benefits of science and technology. Responding to the Great Recession, we find that Huxley was a great enthusiast for the public works funded by Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Although stepping somewhat warily because he did not want to be seen as endorsing the war preparations of the National Socialists – the building of the Autobahnen for example – Huxley was fairly unrestrained in his encomia for the Tennessee Valley Authority that project bringing electricity to large parts of the American South (Huxley 1943).

Closer to the present, as Julian Huxley's prescriptions reflected the challenges of his era, so the prescriptions of the ant specialist and sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson reflect the challenges of our era. Wilson has concern about the environment, specifically about biodiversity (Wilson 1984, 1992, 2012). He worries a great deal about the ways in which modern society is destroying the natural habitat and how with this comes the subsequent decline of natural resources and species diversity. Wilson sees humans as having evolved in symbiotic relationship with nature. Wilson believes, in an almost aesthetic way, that humans need the growing living world. An environment of plastic would kill, literally as well as metaphorically. In *The Future of Life*, Wilson (2002) declares:

[A] sense of genetic unity, kinship, and deep history are among the values that bond us to the living environment. They are survival mechanisms for us and our species. To conserve biological diversity is an investment in immortality. (p. 133)

So much for the normative level of this kind of evolutionary ethicising, what of the metaethical foundations? It is here we

see why I characterise it as an objectivist approach. As has already been coming apparent in some of the quoted passages, especially those just given by Wilson, the justification for taking the processes of evolution as imperatives lies in the supposedly progressive nature of evolutionary change. Blobs to humans, monad to man. It is a fact of nature – nothing dictated by us but existing objectively, independently of us humans – that the evolutionary process is one of climbing upwards. Not without diversions but, in the end, steadily upwards. Hence, because progress in itself is a good thing – humans are of more value than warthogs and warthogs than slimy primitive fish, and those fish over naked cells – it is our moral obligation (normative ethics) to promote it. Spencer is forthright in his enthusiasm for progress. Drawing on German sources, Spencer saw progress (in the organic world) as marked by a kind of increasing complexification. ‘It is settled beyond dispute that organic progress consists in a change from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous’. Spencer ([1857] 1868) then broadened from the organic to the social:

Now, we propose in the first place to show, that this law of organic progress is the law of all progress. Whether it be in the development of the Earth, in the development of Life upon its surface, in the development of Society, of Government, of Manufactures, of Commerce, of Language, Literature, Science, Art, this same evolution of the simple into the complex, through successive differentiations, holds throughout. From the earliest traceable cosmical changes down to the latest results of civilization, we shall find that the transformation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous, is that in which Progress essentially consists ...

It is clearly enough displayed in the progress of the latest and most heterogeneous creature – Man. It is alike true that, during the period in which the Earth has been peopled, the human organism has grown more heterogeneous among the civilized divisions of the species; and that the species, as a whole, has been growing more heterogeneous in virtue of the multiplication of races and the differentiation of these races from each other. (p. 244)

Darwin is into this too. I quote the concluding lines of the *Origin of Species*, the most famous passage in the history of science:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet

has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (pp. 489–490)

The story continues down to the present. Carnegie thought the struggle was necessary for progress. So did Von Bernhardt. ‘Without war, inferior or decaying races would easily choke the growth of healthy budding elements, and a universal decadence would follow’. Elaborating (Von Bernhardt 1912):

Every nation possesses an individuality of its own, and all progress among nations is based on their competition among themselves. As the competition among nations leads occasionally and unavoidably to differences among them, all real progress is founded upon the struggle for existence and the struggle for power prevailing among them. (p. 26)

This is a good thing (Von Bernhardt 1912):

That struggle eliminates the weak and used-up nations, and allows strong nations possessed of a sturdy civilisation to maintain themselves and to obtain a position of predominant power until they too have fulfilled their civilising task and have to go down before young and rising nations. (p. 26)

Julian Huxley was a fanatic on the subject of progress and so also is Edward O. Wilson. The question is not whether progress occurred, but why it occurred. He writes of ordered pinnacles, with humans alone occupying the last and highest. ‘Exactly how he alone has been able to cross to this fourth pinnacle, reversing the downward trend of social evolution in general, is the culminating mystery of all biology’ (Wilson 1975:382). Wilson (1992) expands on this:

The overall average across the history of life has moved from the simple and few to the more complex and numerous. During the past billion years, animals as a whole evolved upward in body size, feeding and defensive techniques, brain and behavioural complexity, social organization, and precision of environmental control – in each case farther from the nonliving state than their simpler antecedents did. (p. 187)

Adding (Wilson 1992):

Progress, then, is a property of the evolution of life as a whole by almost any conceivable intuitive standard, including the acquisition of goals and intentions in the behavior of animals (p. 187)

The connection is made readily. Evolutionary progress is a good thing. It leads to value. Hence, our moral obligations – our normal prescriptions – are to promote it. ‘Ethics has for its subject-matter, that form which universal conduct assumes during the last stages of its evolution’ (Spencer 1879:21). Continuing (Spencer 1879):

And there has followed the corollary that conduct gains ethical sanction in proportion as the activities, becoming less and less militant and more and more industrial, are such as do not necessitate mutual injury or hindrance, but consist with, and are furthered by, co-operation and mutual aid (p. 21)

It is the same story from Spencer to Wilson.

What of criticisms? We have already encountered the objections to traditional Social Darwinism and, whilst

agreeing that these are surely well taken, we have seen also that there is a different side to the picture, where evolutionary progress comes as much from cooperation and mutual help as from harsh struggle. Thomas Henry Huxley criticised this kind of evolutionary ethics for its brutal implications. For him, moral progress is to be achieved by denying our animal nature. It is true that evolution has led to physical progress (Huxley 1893):

Man, the animal, in fact, has worked his way to the headship of the sentient world, and has become the superb animal which he is, in virtue of his success in the struggle for existence. (p. 51)

Adding (Huxley 1893):

For his successful progress, throughout the savage state, man has been largely indebted to those qualities which he shares with the ape and the tiger; his exceptional physical organization; his cunning, his sociability, his curiosity, and his imitativeness; his ruthless and ferocious destructiveness when his anger is roused by opposition. (p. 51)

Nevertheless, for moral progress (Huxley 1893):

[I]n proportion as men have passed from anarchy to social organization, and in proportion as civilization has grown in worth, these deeply ingrained serviceable qualities have become defects. After the manner of successful persons, civilized man would gladly kick down the ladder by which he has climbed. He would be only too pleased to see 'the ape and tiger die'. (p. 52)

To which the defender of this kind of evolutionary ethicising would reply – with justification – that no one thinks that all progress demands harsh struggle. Darwin knew the score. His hypothesis suggested that sociality could come through what today is known as 'reciprocal altruism' – you scratch my back and I will scratch yours (Trivers 1971; Darwin 1871):

In the first place, as the reasoning powers and foresight of the members became improved, each man would soon learn that if he aided his fellow-men, he would commonly receive aid in return. From this low motive he might acquire the habit of aiding his fellows; and the habit of performing benevolent actions certainly strengthens the feeling of sympathy which gives the first impulse to benevolent actions. Habits, moreover, followed during many generations probably tend to be inherited. (pp. 1, 163–164)

He added (Darwin 1871):

But there is another and much more powerful stimulus to the development of the social virtues, namely, the praise and the blame of our fellow-men. The love of approbation and the dread of infamy, as well as the bestowal of praise of blame, are primarily due, as we have seen in the third chapter, to the instinct of sympathy; and this instinct no doubt was originally acquired, like all the other social instincts, through natural selection. (pp. 1, 164)

Elaborating (Darwin 1871):

To do good unto others – to do unto others as ye would they should do unto you, – is the foundation-stone of morality. It is, therefore, hardly possible to exaggerate the importance during rude times of the love of praise and the dread of blame. (pp. 1, 165)

Agree, if only for the sake of argument, that Darwinian evolution can yield normative prescriptions that any decent human being would recognise as moral. Is this enough? Those in the tradition of Hume, even more those in the tradition of G. E. Moore, would say that the whole exercise is futile. You cannot derive ought from is. You cannot go from the way the world is to the way that the world ought to be. True, humans are at the endpoint of evolution. True, generally we prefer humans to warthogs – although there are people, starting with my late headmaster who gives me pause on this. Any value we read into the situation is value we read in, rather than value we find out there. This kind of evolutionary ethics is objective. It is also false.

I am not going to make a definitive judgement here. I have long endorsed Hume's principle or law, and I am not about to repudiate it here. However, I think it would be silly to deny that people who argue this way do have a point. To experience the breathtaking beauty of the Canadian Rockies as the sun rises above the mountains does not much feel like you are reading in value. Nor does the beauty of that early flower or the joy of puppies or kittens gambolling without care. Having written an article on ethics with E. O. Wilson, I can attest that it is not so much that he repudiates the naturalistic fallacy. He just simply cannot see it. Entirely secular as he is, it makes no sense to him to say that the world is without value. Why does he feel this way? As always, the clue to what is at stake here lies in history. From the time of the Greeks down to the Scientific Revolution, the root metaphor of science was that of an organism – organicism (Ruse 2013). Plato's *Timaeus* was the exemplar. Then, after the Scientific Revolution, the root metaphor was that of a machine – mechanism. Organisms do have value, and thus it makes sense to look for values in nature. Machines, at least as understood after the Revolution, do not have value. They are just contraptions working blindly according to unbreakable laws. Hence, for the organicist the naturalistic fallacy has no hold or meaning even. In the post-Revolution world, it was the German Romantics – Goethe, Schelling, Oken – who embraced the organic metaphor (Richards 2003). This was passed on through Schelling to Spencer – who got most of his Schelling via the plagiarism of Samuel Coleridge – and then in turn Spencer influenced both Julian Huxley and E. O. Wilson. Wilson got it from the Spencerians at Harvard, entrenched from the beginning of the 20th century. Wilson used to have a picture of Spencer on his wall, more prominently than that of Darwin. (Neither as prominent as Wilson getting a medal from the then-president Jimmy Carter!) In short, one really does have a paradigm difference. (Late in his career, Thomas Kuhn (1993) explicitly linked paradigms with metaphors.)

Darwinian non-realism

What then is the other paradigm? What is the more subjectivist view of Darwinian ethics? Again, we start with the substantive ethics/metaethics division. At the substantive level, we ask what we feel the norms of ethics truly are. By and large they are going to fit in with our evolved nature. Without endorsing it completely, John Rawls' theory of

justice fits nicely here. Rawls asks that we be just and for him justice is fairness. To find what is fair, we put ourselves in the 'original position', not knowing our place in society. If we knew we were going to be beautiful and intelligent and female, we would maximally reward beautiful, intelligent females. But we might end up as ugly males, thick as two short planks. We would lose out. Rawls asks that we design society so everyone can be maximally rewarded. This does not mean identity. If the only way you can get people to do dirty, dangerous but societally valuable jobs, then you pay accordingly. But how do we get this kind of social contract situation in society? The trouble with social contract theories is that no one really sat down to hammer out the rules. Here biology steps forward (Rawls 1971):

In arguing for the greater stability of the in Darwin's own writings and those of his contemporaries, principles of justice I have assumed that certain psychological laws are true, or approximately so. I shall not pursue the question of stability beyond this point. We may note however that one might ask how it is that human beings have acquired a nature described by these psychological principles. The theory of evolution would suggest that it is the outcome of natural selection; the capacity for a sense of justice and the moral feelings is an adaptation of mankind to its place in nature. (pp. 502–503)

As Rawls notes, none of this gives us any metaethical justification for our thinking. 'These remarks are not intended as justifying reasons for the contract view' (p. 504). What to do? What to do? One way out is to suggest that there is no metaethical justification! This is a position akin to emotivism, the ethical theory popular in the middle of the last century. Moral claims are just claims recording emotions. Love little children is on a par twitch I hate spinach. That is all there is to the matter. Moral non-realism.

Two questions intrude. Firstly, why should we accept that there is no metaethical justification, other than out of desperation. Darwinians say that the answer to this question lies in the non-directionality of the evolutionary process. We could have evolved in quite a different way and have different ethical norms. Darwin (1871) spotted this:

I do not wish to maintain that any strictly social animal, if its intellectual faculties were to become as active and as highly developed as in man, would acquire exactly the same moral sense as ours. In the same manner as various animals have some sense of beauty, though they admire widely different objects, so they might have a sense of right and wrong, though led by it to follow widely different lines of conduct. If, for instance, to take an extreme case, men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering. Nevertheless the bee, or any other social animal, would in our supposed case gain, as it appears to me, some feeling of right and wrong, or a conscience. (pp. 1, 73)

If ethics is objective, then it is going to hold however we evolve. Our nature is irrelevant. It is like saying paedophilia

is wrong. It is wrong even if, through no fault of your own, you have an innate tendency to molest small children. Even if everyone has such a tendency, the rape of German women by Russian soldiers towards the end of the last War was wrong, and even though it was encouraged by their superiors.

How then can we be certain that true morality does not demand that sisters kill their brothers? We could go through life entirely deceived. That doesn't sound like morality at all. It must be subjective at least in the sense of applying to creatures as we actually are. Suppose it is subjective in applying to the kind of people we are, but objective in being natural according to the kinds of people we are. Killing brothers is natural and hence ethically demanded of ant-people. Killing brothers is non-natural and hence not ethically demanded of humans like us. You still have more relativism than I think someone like G. E. Moore would find acceptable. In any case, suppose we are as we are now, but that fortuitously – perhaps a quirk of culture – instead of loving our neighbours we had what I call the John Foster Dulles (Eisenhower's Secretary of State during the Cold War) attitude to neighbours. Hate the Russians – you should hate the Russians – but realise that they hate you and feel that they should hate you, so negotiate and get on together. You are a regular human being like us, but you go through life blissfully ignorant of the true objective morality. Love your neighbour as yourself. This is surely a *reductio ad absurdum*. If objective morality is anything it is something that should be accessible to us as a matter of course, irrelevant of culture. $2 + 2 = 4$ for people of all cultures. Why not love your neighbour as yourself?

Secondly, why and how does morality work? Why don't we just break the rules? I leave the spinach on the plate. So what? I am mean to little children frightening them with tales of bogey men. So what? Why don't we break from normative ethics and do what we will? Because in some sense we objectify ethics, in the sense that, even if it is subjective, no more than an emotion, it appears to us as although it were objective. Love little children doesn't just mean I want to love little children, it means that I ought to love little children whatever my other emotions. As Wilson and I have said elsewhere: 'Ethics is an illusion put in place by natural selection to make us good cooperators' (Ruse & Wilson 1985:108). Ethics has no metaethical justification, but we think it does and have to think it does for it to work. Love little children means something different from I like little children. It tells you that even if you don't care for little children – you find them annoying, squalling brats – you ought nevertheless to love them in the sense of giving help when they need it.

This then is the subjective approach to Darwinian ethics. Are the prescriptions, the normative rules, going to be that different from those of say the Christian or of G. E. Moore for that matter? I can assure you that the Darwinian ethicist does not think it is okay to mark up library books, and you should return them on time! By and large, I do not

see much difference. One thing is that where non-Darwinian objectivists often run into problems, the Darwinian sits back smugly thinking that no one thinks that adaptations – and morality is an adaptation for group living – are always going to work perfectly. The old chestnut showing difficulties between deontological theories like that of Kant and consequentialist theories like that of Mill is that of the prisoner-of-war guard who gets bribed by Red Cross candy. In giving it to him you escape and return home with vital information to bring the war to a speedy end; but you are corrupting the guard and not treating him as an end in himself. The Darwinian shrugs his or her shoulders and says that perhaps there is no proper answer. The main point is that we do not spend most of our lives bribing prison guards – we do spend them helping others and so forth – and evolved ethics works pretty well here.

There is perhaps one difference from the Christian. He or she is committed to the dictates of God. Jesus tells us: 'Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth' (Mt 5:5). I do not think Darwinians will have much truck with that (O'Connell & Ruse 2020). They rather respect vigour and a willingness to have a go. Not blind force or strength but effort and determination in the pursuit of good ends. Take Thomas Henry Huxley. Although somewhat paradoxically he always had doubts about the full applicability of natural selection, he was in person the perfect Darwinian man (Desmond 1998). Rising from modest beginnings, he became a professor of anatomy, dean of the new science university in South Kensington, member of the first London School Board, leader of government commissions, Privy Counsellor, non-stop lecturer and author of some of the greatest articles of all time. At the same time, he battled crushing depressions, refusing to let them triumph. Darwinian substantive ethics owes much to Christian ethics, but it is coloured with the norms of Victorian society – as it is coloured by the norms of society today. Don't we teachers respect the student who will not give up, who finds disappointments spur to more effort and who in the end triumphs? Not much meekness there, thank God – at least, thank Darwin!

Envoi

'You Are Old, Father William' is a poem by Lewis Carroll that appears in his 1865 book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. It is recited by Alice in Chapter 5, 'Advice from a Caterpillar'. Alice informs the Caterpillar that she has previously tried to repeat 'How Doth the Little Busy Bee' and has had it all come wrong as 'How Doth the Little Crocodile'. The Caterpillar asks her to repeat 'You Are Old, Father William', and she recites:

'I have answered three questions, and that is enough', Said his father; 'don't give yourself airs! Do you think I can listen all day to such stuff? Be off, or I'll kick you down stairs!'

I have given you enough to think on if you ask about the building blocks of morality. More questions, and I will kick you downstairs.

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