

Evolution and Ethics

Lecture for PHIL 3334:
Philosophy of Biology

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Possible Relationships

- 1) Evolution supports or somehow gives us ethics
- 2) Evolution undermines ethics (debunking)
- 3) Evolution is irrelevant to (normative) ethics

Papers we read:

- 1) Ruse and Wilson, (1986)
“Moral Philosophy as Applied Science”
- 2) Sober, (1994)
“Prospects for an Evolutionary Ethics”
- 3) Sober, (1994)
“Did Evolution Make Us Psychological Egoists?”
- 4) Horn, (2017)
“Evolution and the Epistemological Challenge to Moral Realism”
- 5) Sterelny and Fraser, (2017)
“Evolution and Moral Realism”

Sober on altruism

It is very important to distinguish two kinds of altruism:

- 1) enhancing the welfare of another at a cost to self (economic altruism)
 - 2) a behavior that is ultimately motivated by a desire to enhance the welfare of another (psychological altruism)
- If we think of “welfare” in 1) as fitness, we get “biological altruism”

Sober on altruism

Dawkins is talking about economic altruism (only look at the effects not the motives) and it seems sort of puzzling why natural selection could lead to such behaviors. But it can:

- 1) kin selection — actually, your genes are in other bodies so helping them IS enhancing a gene's fitness
- 2) reciprocal altruism — things can be genuinely costly in the short term but as long as they are beneficial (on average) in the long run, they can evolve

[—Note that plausibly, this is misnamed and is not really altruistic at all]

Sober on altruism

Next question, what about psychological altruism? Would natural selection weed that out?

— Lets call the view that we always have only ultimately selfish (self-directed) desires **psychological egoism**. Did evolution make us psychological egoists?

There is no reason whatsoever to think so. Very often it is beneficial for you (fitness wise) to genuinely care about others. An easy case of this is parental care. If you care for your kids based on ultimately selfish desires, it might work. But it is probably much more effective to actually just love them and aim for their good

Ruse and Wilson

E. O. Wilson in *Sociobiology* (1975) suggests that “the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologicized” (pg 562)

This paper is a high-level first pass at what he means and why this is important

Ruse and Wilson

“Biology shows that internal moral premises do exist and can be defined more precisely. They are immanent in the unique programs of the brain that originated during evolution.”

“The constraints on this [mental] development are the sources of our strongest feelings of right and wrong, and they are powerful enough to serve a foundation for ethical codes.” (174)

Ruse and Wilson

Examples of epigenetic rules are how color vision works, how various phobias work, and more

The suggestion is that moral rules are like this. No behaviors are fixed, but “moral reasoning is moulded and constrained by epigenetic rules” (183)

Consider moral norms against incest. There are evolutionary reasons that we feel the way we do

Sober's response

Sober starts by distinguishing two kinds of claims:

1) descriptive claims about why we believe what we do (the vast majority of Americans alive now believe that killing animals for food is morally permissible)

2) normative claims about moral facts (killing animals for food is morally permissible)

Sober thinks that evolution (and science generally) is relevant to claims of the first type but not the second

Hume's thesis

David Hume (in *A Treatise of Human Nature* 1739) suggested that normative claims (killing is wrong) cannot be deduced from purely descriptive claims (killing is against the law, killing causes pain, most people believe that killing is wrong)

Sober accepts and even strengthens the thesis to the non-deductive case (descriptive claims don't even provide support for normative claims)

Basic meta ethics

Consider two basic metaethical questions:

1) Are moral claims ever true?

—If no, then Sober calls the view

“**subjectivist**” (other authors would call it a form of nihilism or error theory)

—If yes then 2) Are these claims true independently of what people think?

—If yes, **Realism**, if no, **Conventionalism**

Basic metaethics

Ruse and Wilson don't have a clear meta ethical picture

In some places, they suggest that these deep moral feelings we all have help to define moral truth

In other places, they talk as though there are no objective moral truths - that morality is a kind of illusion caused by our genes

An opening?

Sober does leave one small opening for those who think that evolution is relevant to ethics. Here is argument (G) [for genetic]

- 1) We believe the ethical statements we do because of evolution and because of facts about our socialization
- 2) Therefore, no ethical statement is true

An opening?

Sober suggests that argument (G) would be plausible if we added the following premise:

(A) The processes that determine what moral beliefs people have are entirely independent of which moral statements (if any) are true

—— Note that this is exactly what the debunkers believe!

Horn on evolutionary debunking

Horn argues that if moral realism is true, then it is very plausible that our moral beliefs are not justified. This is because (roughly) we would have these beliefs whether or not they were true

We aren't "tracking the truth"

Direct tracking

One kind of tracking would be direct tracking - we make the moral judgments that we do because they are true

The problem is that we make the judgments we do because they are adaptive. But they would be adaptive even if false. So we can't be *directly* tracking the truth

Indirect tracking

Here the suggestion is that we are tracking something which is just correlated with the moral truth. It just so happens that being moral is in fact good for us

The problem here is that we have no way to be sure what we are tracking and whether we are close, off in one direction or another, way off entirely, etc. What if moral reality was just VERY different? We wouldn't know

Sterelny and Fraser

Sterelny and Fraser do think that evolution (including genetic and cultural evolution) is partially tracking moral reality

They think that the moral truths are those that would support cooperation and enhance social cohesion

It turns out that human societies are such that being moral is pretty good for you and we can learn about moral reality by seeing what works

Moral knowledge is a “fuel for success”