

Evolutionary Ethics: A Phoenix Arisen

ABSTRACT. Evolutionary ethics has a (deservedly) bad reputation. But we must not remain prisoners of our past. Recent advances in Darwinian evolutionary biology pave the way for a linking of science and morality, at once more modest yet more profound than earlier excursions in this direction. There is no need to repudiate the insights of the great philosophers of the past, particularly David Hume. So humans' simian origins really matter. The question is not whether evolution is to be linked to ethics, but how.

We humans are modified monkeys, not the favored creation of a benevolent God, on the sixth day. The time has therefore come to face squarely our animal nature, particularly as we interact with others. Admittedly, so-called evolutionary ethics has a bad reputation. However, the question is not whether evolution is connected with ethics, but how. Fortunately, thanks to recent developments in biological science, the way is now becoming clear.

I begin this discussion with a brief historical introduction to the topic. Then I move to the core of my scientific and philosophical case. I conclude by taking up some central objections.

Social Darwinism

In 1859 Charles Darwin published his *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. In that work he argues that all organisms (including ourselves) came through a slow, natural process of evolution. Also, Darwin suggested c

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mechanism: more organisms are born than can survive and reproduce; this leads to competition; the winners are thus “naturally selected,” and hence change ensues in the direction of increased “adaptiveness.” It is hardly true that Darwin, or even science generally, brought about the death of Christianity; but after the *Origin* increasing numbers turned from the Bible towards evolution, in some form, for moral insight and guidance (Ruse 1979a; Russett 1976). The product was generally known as social Darwinism, the traditional form of evolutionary ethics—although, as many have noted, despite its name, it owed its genesis more to that general man of Victorian science, Herbert Spencer, than to Darwin himself (Russett 1976).

A full moral system needs two parts. On the one hand, you must have the “substantival” or “normative” ethical component. Here, you offer actual guidance as in, “Thou shalt not kill.” On the other hand, you must have (what is known formally as) the “metaethical” dimension. Here, you are offering foundations or justification as in, “That which you should do is that which God wills.” Without these two parts, your system is incomplete (Taylor 1978).

To the social Darwinians, the metaethical foundations they sought lay readily at hand. They exist in the perceived nature of the evolutionary process. Supposedly, we have a progression from simple to complex, from amoeba to man, from (as Spencer happily pointed out) savage to Englishman (Spencer 1852; 1857). This progress is a good thing and conveys immediate worth. We need no further justification of what ought to be. And now, at once, we have the substantival directives of our system. Morally, we should aid and promote—and not hinder—the evolutionary process. Furthermore, if, as was supposedly claimed by Darwin and certainly echoed by Spencer, the evolutionary process begins with a bloody struggle for existence and concludes with the triumph of the fittest, then so be it. Our obligation is to prize the strong and successful and to let the weakest go to the wall (Ruse 1985).

Of course, as many pointed out—most splendidly Darwin’s great supporter and ardent co-evolutionist, Thomas Henry Huxley (1901)—none of this will do. Metaethically

