

## Evolution and ethics

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**Abstract:** The paper deals with main principles of ethics and focuses especially on evolutionary ethics. First part encloses what is ethics and what are main features of evolutionary ethics. The author than points out onto fact and value dichotomy as one of the main problems of evolutionary (meta)ethics.

**Keywords:** evolution; ethics.

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# 1 Introduction

The aim of this essay is to deal with the problem of evolutionary ethics. The theory of evolution has reached its popularity and affected many areas of thinking. Therefore it is not a surprise that it influenced philosophy as well as ethics. In this essay I will try to discuss some problems related to this topic. First I will describe the main principles of evolutionary ethics and then I will try to point out on some questions within this topic. In this essay I will focus primarily on the problem of metaethics and less on the normative ethical discussion (eg. question: Can evolutionary ethics provide justification for war, fascism or some other oppressive systems if it is based on survival of the fittest?). But I am aware of the fact that I have many ideas oversimplified.

## 2 Ethics

My essay deals with the evolutionary ethics. But what is ethic? Ethics is philosophical discipline that “involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior.” (Fieser, 2009) Ethics is a tool for regulation of human behavior. There are various normative-ethical as well as metaethical theories. One of the interesting approaches is evolutionary ethics. Evolutionary theory affected many areas of our life. But how it is connected with ethics or particularly metaethics?

Metaethics is deals with so-called second order questions (about ethics), while normative ethics deals with so-called first order questions (normatives). I think that the most interesting metaethical question is: what is the source of morality? Because “[m]etaethics investigates where our ethical principles come from, and what they mean.” (Fieser, 2009) This question can be connected with evolutionary and biological approaches to ethics. The problem of the source of morality seems to be central for metaethical discussion. How can we respond to it according to evolutionary approach? And how is evolutionary ethics connected to the metaethical problem of objective morality? I will try to find short answers to these questions, but first I will shortly explain what the main idea of evolutionary ethics is.

## 3 Evolutionary ethics

What is evolutionary ethics? The answer can be found in the early development of evolutionary theory. „The biologization of ethics started with the publication of *The Descent of Man* by Charles Darwin (1809-1882) in 1871.“ (Schroeder, 2005) Ch. Darwin is famous prominent author of evolutionary theory. Almost everybody who has heard the term evolution is familiar with his name. The father of evolutionary theory also started to deliberate about the evolutionary ethics. „[...] Darwin devoted a large chapter of the book to evolutionary explanations of the moral sense, which he argued must have evolved in two main steps.“(Schroeder, 2005). These two steps are as follows:

„First, the root for human morality lies in the social instincts.“ (Schroeder, 2005) According to Schroeder „today’s biologists would explain this as follows. Sociability is a trait whose phylogenetic origins can be traced back to the time when birds “invented” brooding, hatching, and caring for young offspring. To render beings able to fulfill parental responsibilities required social mechanisms unnecessary at earlier stages of evolutionary history. For example, neither amoebae (which reproduce by division) nor frogs (which leave their tadpole-offspring to fend

for themselves) need the social instincts present in birds. At the same time as facilitating the raising of offspring, social instincts counterbalanced innate aggression. It became possible to distinguish between “them” and “us” and aim aggression towards individuals that did not belong to one’s group. This behavior is clearly adaptive in the sense of ensuring the survival of one’s family.” (Schroeder, 2005)

The second step of development of ethics started according to Schroeder’s interpretation of Darwin “with the development of intellectual faculties, human beings were able to reflect on past actions and their motives and thus approve or disapprove of others as well as themselves. This led to the development of a conscience which became ‘the supreme judge and monitor’ of all actions.” (Schroeder, 2005)

Similarly J. Collier and M. Stingl in their article pointed out that we can understand moral behavior as: “Adaptive processes acting on small bands of human and proto-humans produced instincts that promoted not only individual survival, but also an overlay of nepotistic, reciprocal altruistic and true altruistic instincts capable of overriding individual interests all in the service of the ultimate end of gene survival. As society developed, these instincts were articulated according to epigenetic rules into social conventions and laws in an increasingly complex social environment.” (Collier, Stingl, 1993, p.2)

Thus according to evolutionary approach, ethic stems from instincts that evolved into moral rules and regulate behavior between humans. Proponents of evolutionary ethics, so-called evolutionary naturalists, believe “that morally relevant human motivation, and consequently our moral values are significantly constrained by evolution.” (ibid. p. 1) <sup>2</sup>

According to claims stated above it seems that evolutionary ethic is based on facts that were observed by natural sciences. For instance instincts can be understood as facts and they provide basis for ethics. But is it really so? Can we purely rely on biological facts while thinking about morality?

## 4 Is / ought problem

The main problem that emerges in evolutionary (meta)ethics is so-called is/ought problem.<sup>3</sup> It seems to be obvious that evolutionary ethics deals with facts as well as values. So how can be these two spheres properly interconnected? Or are they completely independent?

D. Humes law<sup>4</sup> and G. E. Moores naturalistic fallacy<sup>5</sup> became well-known in ethical and metaethical discussions. It is popular to point out in ethical discussion on the problem of is/ought and/or fact/values dichotomy.<sup>6</sup> We cannot derive ‘ought’ from ‘is’, values from facts and we cannot reduce moral goodness to some natural property.

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<sup>2</sup> There is also an important question of the role of free will in evolutionary theory and especially ethics but I won’t deal with this problem in this essay.

<sup>3</sup> I will use it in this essay in many cases synonymously for Humes law, Naturalistic fallacy and fact/value dichotomy but I am aware of fact that it’s oversimplifying of the problem.

<sup>4</sup> See: Hume, D. 1739. *Treatise Concerning Human Nature*.

<sup>5</sup> See: Moore, G.E. 1903. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge University Press

<sup>6</sup> However H. Putnam labeled this strategy as discussion-stopper: “The worst thing about the fact/value dichotomy is that in practice it functions as discussion-stopper; and not just a discussion-stopper, but a thought-stopper.” (Putnam, 2002, p.44)

If we rely on this assertion above, we can easily agree with following claims: The observation that certain human behavior patterns have evolved does not imply that they are 'right'. (Laland, Brown, 2002, p. 105) R. Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* wrote: "I am saying how things have evolved I am not saying how we humans morally ought to behave (1976)." (ibid, p. 105) Similarly E. O. Wilson wrote: "There is a dangerous trap in sociobiology, one which can be avoided only by constant vigilance. The trap is the naturalistic fallacy of ethics, which uncritically concludes that what is should be<sup>7</sup> (1973)".(ibid, p. 105)

Thus D. Humes law seems to prevent straight inference from 'is' to 'ought'. Similarly G.E. Moores naturalistic fallacy based on the open question argument<sup>8</sup> prevents reducing moral properties to natural properties that can be observed by natural sciences. According to G. Sayre-McCord D. Hume has pointed out that "no moral conclusion follows non-problematically from nonmoral premises." (Sayre-McCord, 2009). For example from factual statement based on evolutionary research eg. K. Lorenz's claim that "fighting and war are the natural<sup>9</sup> expression of human instinctive aggression" (Laland, Brown, 2002, p.60) does not follow that war is right and we should support it.

G. Sayre-McCord writes that if we suppose that there are moral facts that "are thought of as at least compatible with science. One thing Moores Open Question Argument still seems to show is that no appeal to natural facts discovered by scientific method would establish that the moral facts are one way rather than another." He continues: "The mere fact that moral facts might be compatible with natural facts does nothing to support the idea that we could learn about moral facts." (Sayre-McCord, 2009) This is very interesting claim especially while we are thinking about evolutionary ethics.

But let us continue where we can find is/ought problem in evolutionary ethics. Clear example of is/ought problem in evolutionary ethics of Ch. Darwin were illustrated by D. Schroeder: So how does Ch. Darwin derive "ought" from "is"?

1. Child A is dying from starvation.
2. The parents of child A are not in a position to feed their child.
3. The parents of child A are very unhappy that their child is dying from starvation.
4. Therefore, fellow humans ought morally to provide food for child A.

According to D. Schroeder Ch. Darwin writes that: "happiness is an essential part of the general good."<sup>10</sup> (Schroeder, 2005) Therefore, those who want to be moral ought to promote happiness, and hence, in the above case, provide food. However, the imperceptible move from "is" to "ought" which Hume found in moral systems, is also present in this example. Thus, Darwin

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<sup>7</sup> Of course this is really oversimplified version of naturalistic fallacy.

<sup>8</sup> However the argument is not uproblematic. On the problem of Open Question Argument has pointed out e.g. W. Frankena (see e.g, Miller, A. 2003. *An introduction to contemporary metaethics*. Oxford: Blackwell publishing p. 15)

<sup>9</sup> There is also the problem in understanding „naturalness“. (see e.g. Siipi, H. 2008. *Dimensions of Naturalness*. In: *Ethics and Environment* 13(1).)

<sup>10</sup> „Being influenced by utilitarianism, Darwin believed that the greatest-happiness principle will inevitably come to be regarded as a standard for right and wrong by social beings with highly evolved intellectual capacities and a conscience.“ (Schroeder, 2005)

derives ought from is when he moves from the empirical fact of unhappiness (number 3.) to the normative claim of a duty to relieve unhappiness (number 4.). (Schroeder, 2005)

But is it really so that the facts and values are independent? How can there be ethics? What is the basis for evolutionary ethics then? Of course there are some advantages of Hume's law and Moore's fallacy. For instance we can argue, as E.O. Wilson and R. Dawkins did, that the claims of evolutionary theories are value free, because they are based on pure facts and therefore we cannot judge them from moral point of view. Let us recall R. Dawkins's claim: "I am saying how things have evolved I am not saying how we humans morally ought to behave." (Laland, Brown, 2002, p.105) But can we apply this idea to evolutionary ethics? It seems to be problematic while we are thinking about evolutionary ethics that is based on the idea that instincts evolved to morality.

But maybe this is not a problem. As I wrote in the beginning of my essay ethics can be divided into normative ethics (that deals with the normative questions eg. how to behave, what moral rules are most appropriate) and metaethics (that deals with so-called second order questions as what is the source of morality etc.). It seems to be that Dawkins's claim can support evolutionary metaethics because he can provide the answer how ethics evolved. But he is trying to avoid normative ethical question: what is the morally right behavior?

Collier and Stingl have distinguished approaches to evolutionary ethics that claims that moral values can be given biological explanation (e.g. M. Ruse) and stronger position which holds that can explain and justify moral values (e.g. R. Richards). (Collier, Stingl, 1993). The second approach is than going further and trying to justify normative ethical claims. It seems that it also bridges normative ethics and metaethics and probably also descriptive ethics.

But if the naturalistic fallacy is right is then evolutionary ethics nonsense if it is based on the idea presented by Richards that "biology can both explain and justify fundamental moral values" (Collier, Stingl, 1993, p.2)? How can be this claim compatible with Hume's law and Naturalistic fallacy?

According to J. Collier and Stindl Robert Richards argues that "all fundamental principles must be justified by reference to facts and that if justifying norms by facts is fallacious there can be no justification of norms." (ibid. p.4) But is it possible to justify moral norms by facts? Isn't it fallacious?

R. Richards "assumes that humans are genetically constrained to hold community welfare as highest good. [...] [W]e should try to do things that achieve this end." (ibid. p.4) He is trying to overcome the is/ ought dichotomy. But how does he know that humans are genetically constrained to hold that community welfare is the highest good? Does he rely on the (moral) intuition? Does he have some evidence based on facts? He writes: "the evidence shows that evolution has, as matter of fact, constructed human beings to act for the community good." (ibid, p.4)

How can he support that it is matter of fact that evolution has constructed human beings to act for the community good? Isn't he just influenced by the descriptive claim that "to act for the community good is what we mean by being moral" (ibid, p.4)? It seems that is/ought problem emerges here again and that it is the most powerful enemy of evolutionary ethics.

But can we really (and especially in this case) distinguish fact and values? One possible way how to bridge is/ought dichotomy seems to be the idea of 'good for' for example claiming that

moral instincts are *good for us*<sup>11</sup> similarly as “drinking clear fluids can be good for us”.(ibid. p.5) Collier and Stingl refute idea that the world is value neutral the idea that was based on the presupposition “that value is always in the service to some end and that the world itself does not have any end.” (ibid. p. 8) They claim that world does have end, because it naturally produce creatures that have ends. They wrote that natural values are then: pleasure, avoidance of pain and intelligence, because any organism needs nutrients, etc. They claim that this is also the basis for objective morality. (ibid, p. 8)

In spite of my oversimplification of the topic in this essay it seems that we have to admit that fact/value dichotomy is not so sharp if we want to hold evolutionary ethics that will provide explanation and justification of morality on the basis of (natural) facts. Many authors (like H. Putnam<sup>12</sup>, J. Searle<sup>13</sup> etc.) have pointed out that fact/value dichotomy is not so sharp as was described for example by Hume and argued by logical positivists<sup>14</sup>. But then it seems that we have to be more careful about statements that assert evolutionary theories, because they might be not so value free as one might think.

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<sup>11</sup> Or good for our genes. (Collier, Stingl, 1993, p. 5)

<sup>12</sup> See eg: Putnam, H. 2002. *The Collapse Of Fact/Value Dichotomy And Other Essays*. Cambridge Harvard University press.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g.: Searle, J. 1964. *How to derive ought from is*. The Philosophical review

<sup>14</sup> See e.g: Ayer, J. 1936. *Language, truth and logic*. Victor gollance.