

HUMAN NATURE REVIEW

ISSN 1476-1084
<http://human-nature.com/>

Book Review

What makes us moral? Crossing the boundaries of biology. By Neil Levy. Oxford, UK, Oneworld Publications. ISBN 1-85168-341-0

Reviewed by

John S. Wilkins

A major problem had with evolution by moral philosophers, since Darwin himself, has been the problem of finding any ethical guidance in what it tells us about the world. George Moore famously attacked the evolutionary ethics of Herbert Spencer, inventing the Naturalistic Fallacy along the way. More recently, the inventor of sociobiology, Edward O. Wilson, has had no such compunctions, declaring that what we evolved to be is what we *ought* to do, and were we ants, we should find no moral problem in eating our dead or rejecting equality of castes, but we are human, and should maximize our species' genetic fitness.

The problem is one of naturalizing, or as philosopher Philip Kitcher put it, of "biologizing" ethics (Kitcher 1993). The topic is vast, and hard to approach for undergraduates. Teaching it is even harder, if you want to cover the field properly. This is where this little book by Neil Levy comes in; filling a gap that needed filling.

Levy begins by setting out the problem - what are the moral implications of evolution? Are we mistaken in our naïve self-image? Shall we deflate our moral claims to statements about our biology? As he asks, "Do the sciences of genetics and evolution really imply that morality is bunk, and free will is illusory?"

Darwinian theory is outlined in a simple and direct manner, followed by a brief discussion of the reception of and opposition to it and its defense by Huxley and Herbert (misspelled as Hebert on p7) Spencer. These two mark the extremes of the Darwinian influence on ethics, Huxley denying that our evolution has any strong relation to our ethical duties, and Spencer claiming that evolution is both

progressive and delivers us the Good. Spencer's views, says Levy, led to Social Darwinism.

Darwinism led, indirectly, to eugenics, both positive and negative, leading to the forced sterilizations in the American, European and other nations and ultimately, of course, to the horrific eugenic program of Nazi Germany, and the Holocaust that followed. The eugenic and Social Darwinism programs are morally repugnant, but seem to be based on Darwinian evolutionary facts. How can these be reconciled?

Levy outlines two different responses a Social Darwinist might make – the *primitivist* and the *conservative*. The former says that we are maladapted to our social conditions – evolution hasn't caught up yet. However, overall, our moral systems are based on our biology. The conservative response is that in fact we are adapted to the same conditions in our ancestral past as we now face today, irrespective of social environment, and so we will get morals from our nature.

I have some problems with this approach. For a start, it is unclear to me that there ever really *was* a social Darwinist movement, apart from William Graham Sumner. It is, as historian Robert Bannister argued in a vastly under-appreciated book (Bannister 1988), a term of censure of opponents, much as calling someone a “fascist” is today, whether or not they hold typically fascist ideals. Arguing against “social Darwinism” is a bit like arguing against a strawman wearing a black hat in a western. All of the views held existed, to be sure, but whether they existed as a coherent, or even loosely related, group of ideas is less obvious, despite the many texts that have been written on the topic.

Second, the claim that Darwinism led to Nazism and the Holocaust, even indirectly, is a case of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy. The idea of breeding humans using the techniques of animal husbandry and breeding go back to the Spartans, and are seen in the very widespread ideal of aristocratic breeding in Europe (“blood will out”, for example). Why should Darwin's use of artificial selection as the commencement point for his analogy to what happens in nature be regarded as the *cause* of Nazi horror, when so many *actual* antecedents are there with more obvious effect? It is time to lay this to rest, I think. In fact, it seems to me that the Nazi ideal (and indeed the eugenicists prior to them) was directly opposed to a Darwinian view of evolution, and is more directly similar to the Lamarckian view of evolution as independent lineages progressing up a ladder. This is crucial now, for the anti-Darwinians in America have begun arguing exactly this way in order to denigrate evolution in favor of “intelligent design”. We do not need to hand such egregious misrepresentations to them prepackaged.

Third, eugenics owes, so far as I can tell, almost nothing to evolutionary theory, and everything to the biometric genetics of his cousin Francis Galton and his intellectual heirs and predecessors. Had evolution not been formulated, but Galton's idea of hereditary genius still been, eugenics would have proceeded

almost identically, in my opinion. This conflation of Galton and Darwin, of evolution and eugenics, is a common error in discussions of moral philosophy after the Second World War.

However, Levy's treatment of the ethical issues does not depend on these historical canards. His discussion of the Naturalistic Fallacy is solid (largely because the criticisms Moore laid against Spencer were based on arguments the latter did, in fact, make). He discusses Francis Fukuyama's rejection of genetic counseling and treatment because it attacks our "human nature", leading nicely into matters of the nature or essence of species. And then he addresses the questions: "how did morality evolve?" and "is our mind that of a stone ager in a technological world?"

The chapter on the first question covers in great detail and accurately the issues arising from the genetic altruism versus moral altruism debate, Prisoner's Dilemma models, and its offshoots in iterated games and the evolution of cooperation. This is perhaps the most useful chapter of the book for undergraduate teaching. It is rare to get all the issues covered clearly and completely in a single place. He suggests that morality is an exaptation of moral emotions that were designed to increase fitness, and that morality is not objective. Instead, he rejects a deflationary account of morality and argues in effect for a *sui generis* foundation for moral values.

The third chapter, "The Stone Age mind", is an excellent short coverage of the issues of evolutionary psychology, including the classical examples such as the waist-to-hip ratio, the Wason test, infanticide, rape, and a useful discussion of Baron-Cohen's "systematizing ability" theory about cognitive gender differences. The next chapter discusses genetic determinism and Pinker's "blank slate" attack in admirable detail and clarity. The SSSM/blank slate is, he rightly claims, a parody of standard social science.

Typically, many people identify utilitarian ethics with Darwinian theory, such that if one rejects utilitarianism, one is thought to have rejected Darwinism. I could imagine some people wrongly thinking that Levy has rejected Darwinism. Instead I think it worthwhile that we realize that Darwinian theory and its heirs and successors offer very little in the way of moral guidance. Neither the primitivist nor the conservative account is correct, although it seems to me that the conservative view is the less incorrect, in that we do indeed face the same moral difficulties now, details to one side, that we faced in our evolutionary past. The mistake is to think that facts will do anything more than eliminate unrealistic moral systems and values.

I have a minor quibble about his using a term of, I believe, Eldredge's, when he labels those who take a sociobiological or evolutionary psychological stance "Darwinian fundamentalists". This is a meaningless term of opprobrium, which so far as I can tell means something like "social Darwinian" does – that

someone holds views about the applicability of evolution to human behavior, that the writer doesn't. It advances nothing to call Kitcher, Pinker, Wilson and so on "fundamentalists" – unlike Romanes, these people do not think it a virtue to follow only where the Master has trod, and there are no dogmas to adhere to or be labeled a backslider or unbeliever. Adaptationists, surely, monists perhaps; fundamentalists not at all.

This notwithstanding, this is a well-written and comprehensive book, and would serve well as a classroom text for those new to the debates over altruism and evolutionary ethics. It does not require a degree in any of the disciplines crossed, and it has depth rather than popular rhetoric.

I recommend this book as a useful addition to the teacher's and student's arsenal.

Author

John S. Wilkins, Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Biohumanities Project, University of Queensland, Australia.

References

Bannister, Robert C. 1988. *Social Darwinism: science and myth in Anglo-American social thought, American civilization*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. Original edition, 1979.

Kitcher, Philip. 1993. Four ways of "biologizing" ethics. In *Evolution und Ethik*, edited by K. Bayertz: Reclam.