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Klenk, Michael

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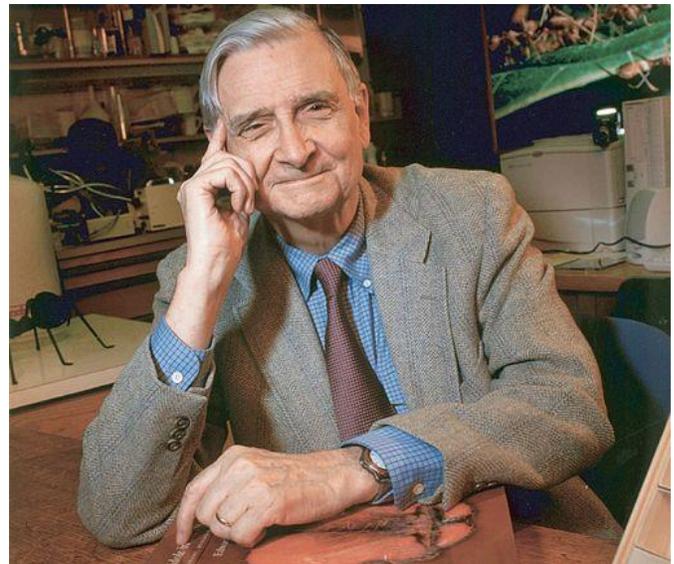
CHAPTER 8.

EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

MICHAEL KLENK

INTRODUCTION

As the world's leading ant expert, Edward Wilson could have led a tranquil and joyous academic life. But in his book *Sociobiology* from 1975, Wilson extended his work on evolutionary explanations of social behavior—which helped him a great deal in understanding the behavior of social animals like ants, bees, and horses—to human behavior. As Wilson later wrote, all of the book's 575 pages were well received but for the last, brief chapter on human evolution (Wilson 2002, vi). In that chapter, Wilson suggests that evolution could explain *moral* behavior in humans: humans are moral, prosocial animals because being moral and prosocial had evolutionary advantages. Indeed, he urged that “scientists and humanists should consider together the possibility that the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologicized” (Wilson 2002, 562).



[Edward O. Wilson](#) by Jim Harrison via Wikimedia Commons. License: [CC BY 2.5](#)

Wilson's suggestion caused outrage far beyond the academic ivory tower. Many associated evolutionary theory with crude claims about the “survival of the fittest,” which some regimes used to justify wars and euthanasia, and they feared that approaching ethics from the evolutionary perspective would justify racism, sexism, and imperialism.¹ In effect, Wilson's academic life after the publication of the book was far from tranquil; his talks were controversial, shouted down by

1. Cf. Segerstrale (2000)

protesters, and at a conference in 1978, an opponent even expressed his dismay by emptying a can of water over him.

However, looking behind Wilson's sensational rhetoric of "removing ethics from the hands of the philosophers" we find a more level-headed claim about methodology in ethics (Wilson 2002, 562). Wilson called for studying ethics just as we study other social, psychological, or biological phenomena. In other words, Wilson called for a so-called naturalistic approach to ethical questions (which will be explained in further detail below). Of course, we can ask many different questions about ethics and, as we will see, some are more suited to a naturalistic approach than others. But the debate about the legitimacy of evolutionary ethics has largely abated in favor of Wilson's proposal. Many aspects of evolutionary ethics are thriving and have led to exciting research programs that have made tremendous progress since Wilson's book. And Wilson, rest assured, came out of the controversy emboldened and unscathed. It seems that he did lead a joyous academic life after all.

This chapter first introduces naturalistic approaches to ethics more generally and distinguishes methodological ethical naturalism (the focus of this chapter), from metaphysical ethical naturalism. The second part then discusses evolutionary ethics as a specific variant of methodological ethical naturalism. After introducing the concepts of evolutionary theory that are relevant for evolutionary ethics, I will sketch the history of evolutionary ethics, which offers an interesting lesson about why it became a controversial topic, and then focus on four central questions about ethics that can be approached from within the framework of evolutionary ethics:

1. What should we do?
2. Why are we moral?
3. Are there moral facts?
4. Can we have justified moral beliefs and moral knowledge?

TWO APPROACHES TO NATURALISM IN ETHICS: METHODOLOGICAL AND METAPHYSICAL

Wilson advocates methodological ethical naturalism, which is primarily a view about the best ways to study ethics. Naturalists in this sense argue that at least some ethical questions can be studied just as we try to answer questions in other fields of scientific inquiry. Ethics, in other words, is *continuous* with science.

A central commitment of methodological ethical naturalism is to widen the net of our sources for ethical inquiry. For example, we can use anthropological, psychological, biological, and literary sources to inform our theorizing about ethics.² Such a multitude of sources contrasts with the more traditional way of doing moral philosophy by conceptual analysis. Conceptual analysis is a method often used by philosophers to investigate ethical questions. It involves reflection about when a concept, such as "goodness" or "freedom," applies and how it relates to other concepts. Using conceptual analysis to understand what moral goodness is, for example, means analyzing the conditions in which the concept "moral goodness" applies. Conceptual analysis is guided by one's

2. E.g. Kitcher (2011); Flanagan (2017); Appiah (2009)

understanding of and intuitions about the concept in question. Since much of the academic philosophy studied by North American and European philosophers still is, or has been, done by North Americans and Europeans (despite the fact that academic philosophy is being done in other parts of the world, too), many existing conceptual analyses of ethical terms are really conceptual analyses of Western concepts. However, psychologists and philosophers have argued that intuitions about (ethical) concepts vary quite significantly.³ If these claims are true, it would be a problem insofar as we want to learn what *moral goodness* is, rather than what the *concept of moral goodness of Western academics* is. Hence, the naturalist has a good case for taking into account more than just (predominantly Western) intuitions. Evolutionary thinking is one such source, and we will cover it in greater detail below.

In contrast to methodological naturalism, which is primarily a view about how to conduct ethical inquiry, metaphysical ethical naturalism is primarily a view of what exists. Both views are related but distinct, as an analogy with ghosts illustrates. It would be one thing to find out in scientifically respectable terms why people believe in ghosts, which would be methodological naturalism, but quite another to say what ghosts are in scientifically respectable terms, which would be the goal of the metaphysical naturalist.⁴

Metaphysical naturalists say that there are no non-natural or supernatural entities in this world. On most accounts of drawing the line between “natural” and the rest, this excludes God or gods, ghosts, human spirits, or a soul that is not part of the physical body. Morality seems to fall on the non-natural or supernatural side of things to many philosophers. One reason is that moral facts seem quite unlike ordinary facts about, say, the weather or geology, due to their normative force. To illustrate, if I state an ordinary fact like “Mitt went to the grocery store” or “gold is denser than iron,” I describe a state of the world, but I do not seem committed to acting in one way or another. In contrast, if I say “it is morally wrong that Mitt stole the money,” I not only describe the world, but also seem to commit myself to act in a certain way. It sounds strange to say, for example, that “it is morally wrong that Mitt stole the money but we should do nothing about it.” Moral facts, it seems, have a certain prescriptivity built into them, and this is one reason it seems that moral facts cannot straightforwardly be reduced to natural facts. (To wit, moral facts, such as the fact that killing is wrong, not only *describe* the world like other facts, but they also give reasons for acting, or *prescribe* certain courses of action.)

As a solution, some metaphysical naturalists abandon moral facts altogether. Since there are no moral facts at all on this view, this is, of course, a straightforward way to live up to one’s naturalistic aspirations.⁵ Typically, however, when moral philosophers speak about moral naturalism, they have in mind a version of metaphysical ethical naturalism that is committed to two theses. First, moral facts exist. Second, moral facts can be described in purely natural terms.⁶ For example, consider the moral theory utilitarianism (see [Chapter 5](#)). A simple version of utilitarianism holds that the only thing of intrinsic value is happiness and that our only obligation is to maximize happiness. On this

3. See Zamzow and Nichols (2009).

4. See Joyce (2016).

5. E.g. Mackie (1977; Ayer (1936)

6. E.g. Railton (1986); Brink (1989); Boyd (1988)

view, moral properties reduce to the property of being conducive to happiness, which is a psychological quality that fits quite well into the worldview provided by science.⁷ The major philosophical project of metaphysical naturalists is to explain how exactly moral facts relate to natural facts, which raises some fascinating issues.⁸ For present purposes, it is important to note that you can be a methodological naturalist without being committed either to one of the two forms of metaphysical naturalism or to metaphysical naturalism in general. That means you can embrace methodological naturalism but deny that there are only natural facts. From now on, we will focus on methodological naturalism, and in the next section, we will see how evolutionary ethics is a particular instance of methodological ethical naturalism.

EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS AS METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH TO NATURALISM IN ETHICS

Evolutionary Theory and Ethics

Evolutionary ethics takes into account the findings of human evolutionary psychology, a field of study that explores how evolutionary forces helped shape not only how humans function and what we look like (what evolutionary biologists call the human “phenotype”), but also how we behave, feel, and think.⁹ Evolutionary ethics is thus a way in which we can widen the net of sources that inform ethical inquiry.

Evolutionary psychology itself is based on the theory of evolution by natural selection applied to human beings, first described by Charles Darwin in 1871 in his book *The Descent of Man*. In this book, Darwin argued that we humans are the descendants of a “hairy quadruped, furnished with a tail and pointed ears, probably arboreal in its habits, and an inhabitant of the Old World” (Darwin 1871, 389).

Darwin’s theory describes natural selection as the differential survival and reproduction of individuals due to differences in phenotype. Natural selection is a key mechanism of evolution, the change in heritable traits of a population of individuals over time. Natural selection works similarly to artificial selection. Take a dog breeder, for example, who selects only docile dogs to breed. Over multiple generations, the dogs he breeds will get more and more docile. The major difference between artificial selection and natural selection is that natural selection does not have a “selector.” Instead, environmental conditions cause some phenotypes (and consequently, their genotypes) to be able to survive and reproduce better compared to their competitors. Organisms that are better adapted to the environment, perhaps through random mutations of their genetic code, are said to have a greater fitness as they have a greater chance of passing on their genes. Thus, over time, fitness-enhancing changes in the genotype spread in the next generation. The theory of evolution by natural selection provides the starting point for evolutionary ethics, as we will see in the next section.

7. See Joyce (2016).

8. See Railton (2017).

9. Some evolutionary biologists include these features in what they call the “extended phenotype.” See Dawkins (2016).

What Should We Do?

When Darwin published *The Descent of Man*, people immediately began to think about the relations between his theory of human evolution and ethics. One of the important early proponents of an ethical theory inspired by evolutionary theory was Herbert Spencer. Spencer, born in 1820 in England, argued that Darwin's evolutionary theory would not only *explain* but also *justify* moral behavior. He became known as the foremost defender of the branch of evolutionary ethics that attempts to deal with answers to the question what we ought to do (more on this below), and he was a key figure in popularizing Darwin's ideas in application to the study of ethics. A recollection by Frederick Pollock, who studied at Cambridge University in England during the height of Spencer's popularity, nicely illustrates the enthusiasm with which many adopted the new way of thinking about ethics:

We seemed to ride triumphant on an ocean of new life and boundless possibilities. Natural Selection was to be the master-key of the universe; we expected it to solve all riddles and reconcile all contradictions. Among other things it was to give us a new system of ethics, combining the exactness of the utilitarian with the poetical ideals of the transcendentalist. We were not only to believe joyfully in the survival of the fittest, but to take an active and conscious part in making ourselves fitter. (Clifford 1879, 33)

The research program inspired by Spencer provides an important lesson about the pitfalls of evolutionary ethics. (See the box on Social Darwinism for more details.) Spencer's followers thought that evolutionary theory could show that certain moral principles or rules are justified. Recall one of the core premises in evolutionary theory about the role of individual differences in natural selection. Fit phenotypes survive and reproduce more or better than unfit phenotypes. For this reason, many have thought that finding out what is evolutionarily successful shows us what is morally good. Darwin's theory has been, mistakenly, taken as a justification for the belief that it is right for the strong to crowd out the weak and that the only hope for human improvement lays in selective breeding.¹⁰

10. See Paul (2006).