

# The Moral Imperative

**6 July 2002**

I understand that one of the new trends among evolutionary biologists has been to attempt to explain the origins of ethical behavior in Darwinian terms. It appears that for some Darwinians, part of the appeal of these new theories is that they might remove the objection to Naturalism from the moral angle. If Darwinism can explain unselfishness, then one seeming contradiction between the theory of evolution by natural selection and the daily experience of normal human beings would disappear.

Apparently the theory is that altruistic behavior has survival value for groups, and that individual organisms that are part of such groups survived better. Thus natural selection favored those individuals who behaved in an altruistic manner, cooperating with others and sharing their food and other resources. Human beings, having abilities that enabled them to cooperate in more complex situations, gained a competitive advantage from behavior that we today call ethical. Conscience, in these terms, is merely another adaptation that brought about the survival of the species. No loving God, no supernatural plan, only the operation of the iron law of natural selection is required.

Does this really do the trick?

Let us begin by assuming two things: first, that evolution by natural selection in Darwinian terms is the means by which organisms have reached the forms they have; and second, that all reality is strictly material. Let us assume that there is no God, no soul, no immortality. Consciousness is simply a series of very complex chemical, electrical, and possibly mechanical events within the brain. When we die, consciousness ceases; there is no survival.

We must therefore keep in mind that evolution is likewise strictly material. Variations arise entirely at random, with no relation to their possible value to the organism, and the differential survival of the organisms that carry them is the sole determinant of whether or not they will continue to appear. In particular, organisms behave in ways that conduce to survival simply because those that do not fail to reproduce. Bacterium or dinosaur or shark or ape, no organism consciously follows a plan for survival, however hard it may be for evolutionists to avoid talking about them as if they were.

Human beings, in this account, are apes with very complex brains, having cognitive abilities that arose as by-products of variations that proved beneficial to survival. By the mechanism described above, patterns of behavior called ethics and morality likewise became characteristic of the species. If ethics are part of the wiring of the brain, it is no surprise that most human ethical systems are rather similar to one another. With the vast array of responses that the human cognitive abilities allow, it is possible for individual human beings to act contrary to these ethical patterns, but human groups that tolerated this deviation did not survive, and therefore the tendency is for other individual organisms to attempt to control such behavior in others.

One might further suppose that in order to explain the imperative they felt that was simply the result of inherited traits, human beings devised notions of

supernatural law and personal immortality to enforce these standards of behavior beyond what mere force could accomplish. Whether based on belief in the survival of vengeful ancestors, or in a karmic wheel of reincarnation, or in a system of heavenly rewards and punishments, the groups that used these methods (without realizing what they really were) tended to survive, so that religious systems became widespread throughout the species. Belief, in this view, is the by-product of behavior, and because it reinforced behavior that led to survival, it survived.

Thus the Darwinian materialist can explain everything, at least in theory; or perhaps he can explain everything away. Now that the roots of religion are exposed, we no longer need it. The individual can simply act for the survival of the species, without all those supernatural trappings, deciding which behaviors will be best on purely naturalistic grounds. After all, we need not fear the principles of natural selection, since we now know that cooperation and altruism and all manner of other desirable sentiments are the result of this selection. We can now simply encourage such behavior for the sake of survival.

Why?

Because the human race, or any other species in the universe, *ought* to survive? Why should I sacrifice for the good of individuals that will live when my consciousness no longer exists? My impulse to do so is just a reflex inherited from my ancestors, all of whom are dead, as I will soon be. Since I have the choice and now (being an enlightened Darwinian materialist) I know that what the unenlightened call my conscience is just a series of chemical events, would it not be more desirable for me to act solely for my own benefit?

To be sure, I do not want everyone to behave like this, since if they did, I should probably find myself at the receiving end of selfish behavior as much as at the giving end. I might try to convince others to behave unselfishly, for example by promulgating religious ideas, while behaving differently myself, only taking care not to get caught. However, might conclude that this is a dangerous course of action, since getting caught is a possibility and the unpleasant consequences outweigh the benefits.

If I can work to convince people that there is some reason why the human race, or life on earth, ought to survive, then my chances for surviving personally will be enhanced. It would not much matter on what ground I convince people of this, as long as they behave in ways that will allow me to survive.

When Voltaire stated that if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him, he was not making a theological but a political statement. An enlightened gentleman like himself could question God, but the masses needed something to keep them in line. We have traced a similarly cynical line of reasoning derived from evolutionary theory, that suggests that the survival strategy for the evolutionist is to keep his ideas as much as possible to himself.

But this is not how evolutionists actually behave. Either they are in fact all liars, or they actually believe that life, and humanity, ought to survive (some deep ecologists argue in favor of life but not humanity, but I am talking about the mainstream). With respect to something, then, they believe in a real *ought*. But where could it come from? If we say belief in it comes from the instincts that have been selected for by differential survival, that does not guarantee that the

belief is true, since the materialist has already claimed to explain away other beliefs that have been selected for. Simply because a belief might be useful does not make it true. To say that ethical principles have contributed to the survival of the human race does not make them good unless the survival of the human race is good. The survival of the human race is a fact, to be sure, but to say that it is also good is itself an ethical judgment. Either the notion of good is meaningless, or there must be something else to explain it.

Materialist evolutionists contend that religious believers are afraid of evolution because without belief in a divine creator, then notions of right and wrong will disappear. Often it appears that the same materialists would like to eliminate at least some notions of right and wrong, while claiming that others can be justified in evolutionary terms. But even if they can explain them, to justify them requires reference to something beyond the theoretical scope of materialism. The evolution of conscience cannot explain the conscience of the evolutionist.