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Restoration Quarterly

- 129 A Brief Background
to Recent Christology
GLENN E. BOYD
- 145 Striving for Balance
LEONARD ALLEN
- 149 Exegesis of Joel 2:1-11
DAVID FLEER
- 161 The Development and Failure of the
Nineteenth-Century Evolutionary
Theory of Ethics
DUANE McCAMPBELL
- 173 Book Reviews



The Development and Failure of the Nineteenth-Century Evolutionary Theory of Ethics

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The development, elaboration, and eventual failure of the nineteenth-century evolutionary theory of ethics constitutes one of the most interesting chapters in the history of ethics; at the same time, it demonstrates one of the major weaknesses of the theory of evolution. Although the nineteenth century witnessed the eventual acceptance of the Darwinian explanation of evolution as a process which proceeds through the nonethical process of natural selection, it was only reluctantly that scientists of the Victorian era came to accept a theory of evolution that promised no ethical guidance for humankind.

This study attempts to trace the development of evolutionary ethics from its enthusiastic beginnings to its grudging failures, failures which were acknowledged by most evolutionists by the beginning of the twentieth century. It should be added, however, that evolutionary ethics enjoyed a significant revival in the 1940s that continues to exert a strong influence in theological circles and to a lesser degree in those of biology. In theology, Teilhard de Chardin developed a religious interpretation of evolution, while in biology men of the stature of Julian Huxley and B. F. Waddington added their prestige. Although this revival has proved significant, this article will be limited to the original theory.

Nineteenth-Century Alternatives to Darwinism

In order to account for the early enthusiasm about evolutionary ethics and its eventual decline, it should be helpful to outline two nineteenth-century alternatives to the Darwinian theory, theories which made more room than current evolutionary theory makes for ethical interpretations of nature.

The first of these, known as Lamarckian evolution, was popular until the end of the century among evolutionists who were interested in ethics. Lamarck, who preceded Darwin by a generation, had introduced the ideal of evolution earlier in the century, but his views had been rejected in his own lifetime in favor of species immutability.

Along with the upsurge of interest in evolution following *The Origin of the Species* came a revived interest in Lamarckianism. Lamarck had argued that evolution proceeds through acquired characteristics. Thus habits and physical

strengthening could be passed on to offspring. Theoretically, a parent could acquire physical, intellectual, or even moral qualities through effort and then transmit those acquired qualities to his offspring. Such an explanation of the way natural selection works had an appeal to religiously and morally minded people for it seemed to indicate that evolution rewards effort.

B. F. Waddington points out that Lamarck's theory is much less attractive to modern scientists than Darwin's for the reason that Lamarck started with the concept of will whereas Darwin started with facts, hard facts that can be counted and entered on a ledger. But for this very reason—that Lamarck began with will—Lamarckian evolution had an appeal to ethical thinkers including even Darwin himself. Lamarckian evolution was especially approved by American philosophers such as John Fiske and Charles Sanders Peirce. Although the theory is now largely discarded (at least outside the Soviet Union), its popularity was an important factor in early enthusiasm for evolutionary ethics.

A second theory, known as cosmic evolution, extended the process of evolution to the entire universe. Herbert Spencer, who was an evolutionist before Darwin, argued that Darwinian biology was only a special illustration of a general principle. Evolution, he argued, was a cosmic law, not confined in its operation to biological species alone. Belief in cosmic evolution promoted belief in progress. Theologians found this convenient for their purposes since they were able to put God in charge of this evolutionary process.

The evolutionary theory that eventually prevailed in scientific circles was much less optimistic. First of all, it saw natural selection as a process limited to the biological life on this planet and, second, it was discovered that the survival of the fittest did not necessarily lead to ethical improvement. Nevertheless, whenever evolutionists have been strongly interested in ethics, they have tended to revive cosmic evolution. This was the case with Julian Huxley and perhaps even more dramatically with Teilhard.

For the background of this article it should be kept in mind that the rise and failure of evolutionary ethics was intimately related to the rise and fall of these two alternatives to Darwinism.

In turning to the original theory, it should be stressed that arguments in favor of evolutionary ethics proceeded along two different lines of thought. First, advocates of the theory attempted to explain how humans came to be moral beings; that is, they tried to account for the fact that in the evolutionary process humankind alone appears to develop a conscience. The original Darwinian theory attempted to explain how humans acquired such a powerful and unusual capacity. In the second place, advocates of evolution attempted to derive a standard for ethical behavior from the methods seen at work in the evolutionary process. This effort eventually produced two distinctly different but interrelated lines of argument. First, there was the effort to prove that since evolution works by the law of natural selection, the proper procedure for humankind was to stand aside to

permit the survival of the fittest. This movement came to be known as social Darwinism even though, ironically, Darwin himself was not a social Darwinist. On another level, some theorists made application of their theory to the study of metaethics—the branch of philosophy which studies the status of ethical standards. In British philosophy, metaethics has been primarily concerned with defining such ethical words as “good” and “ought.”

Advocates of evolutionary ethics offered several definitions of the word “good,” all clustered around the word “life.” Whereas social Darwinism attempted to give humankind a standard for ethical behavior, metaethics attempted to justify the stand philosophically. Since the evolutionary standard and arguments for its justification are interrelated, they will be examined together in the second part of the article.

First, however, attention will be directed toward explaining how it happened that humankind alone came to be an ethical animal. Since humans were seen as only beings at a higher level of animal existence, it was necessary to find those qualities present in animal life which could conceivably evolve into such a moral phenomenon.

Evolution and Ethical Mankind

Although Charles Darwin published *The Origin of the Species* in 1859, the impact of the evolutionary thesis was not fully felt until 1871, when he published *The Descent of Man*. Here Darwin applied the principle of natural selection to humans and gave a great stimulus to the effort to understand humankind as a product of nature. J. H. Randall has described the effect of this theory on man’s understanding of himself:

Man’s relation to nature was basically altered. He was no longer a fallen angel, but a great ape trying to make good, the last and best-born of nature’s children.¹

But even with the threat to human dignity implied by such a theory, Darwin himself recognized that humankind has a distinct greatness, a greatness which cannot be easily explained away. That greatness could be summed up in the short but demanding word “ought.” In *The Descent of Man*, Darwin wrote:

It is the most noble of all the attributes of man, leading him without a moment’s hesitation to risk his life for that of a fellow creature; or after due deliberation impelled simply by the deep feeling of right or duty, to sacrifice it in some great cause.²

After thus paying tribute to conscience, Darwin proceeded to inquire whether conscience could be explained simply in terms of natural history; that

¹J.H. Randall, “The Changing Impact of Darwin on Philosophy” in *Darwin*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Philip Appleman (New York: Norton, 1970) p. 412.

²Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: Collier and Sons, 1901), p. 134.

is, Darwin was inquiring whether conscience could be seen as a natural outgrowth of qualities found in animal life. In answer to his own question, Darwin offered the proposition that any animal endowed with social instincts would "inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed as in man."³ The first step in acquiring a conscience was thus the development of social instincts which lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of its fellows. The second step, possible only after highly developed mental powers appeared, was the development of the mental state that causes images of past actions and motives to pass through the brain.

Several questions already suggest themselves, the most urgent being that of how social instincts were acquired, given the presupposition of evolution. For the present let us concede that somewhere in the evolutionary process certain animals did acquire social instincts. It is a much smaller problem to understand how such animals acquired opposing tendencies which Darwin called self-regarding instincts. These are the natural impulses of hunger, self-preservation, and procreation.

It was out of conflict between social instincts and self-regarding impulses that conscience was seen to arise. The conflict which is first felt as a conflict between the desire to please others and also to satisfy one's self has a surprising outcome. The surprising fact is that the social instincts often prevail. Darwin marveled at this fact and asked:

Why should a man feel that he ought to obey one instinctive desire rather than another? Why is he bitterly regretful if he has yielded to a strong sense of self-preservation and has not risked his life to save that of a fellow-creature? Or why does he regret having stolen food from hunger?⁴

The "ought," according to Darwin, arises from social instincts. But why is this the case when the self-regarding instincts seem stronger and are so natural that they need not be cultivated? Darwin concedes that the self-regarding instincts are more powerful, but they are temporary in duration; whereas, the consequences which follow on failure to obey social instincts are ever present for those who live in a group. Darwin writes concerning those who live in groups: "They feel at all times, without the stimulus of any special passion or desire, some degree of love and sympathy for them."⁵

If a person suppresses an instinct such as hunger, he may feel pain; but later, when he is well fed, this denial will be all but forgotten. On the other hand, if the same person runs from danger rather than come to the rescue of a companion, he is continually reminded of his failure by the sight of his lost companion's

³Ibid., p. 135.

⁴Ibid., p. 150.

⁵Ibid., p. 153.

family and friends. Social instincts thus become more pressing because people are constantly reminded of their failures to help others in need. When self-regarding instincts are denied, however, their denial is soon forgotten.

Two questions yet remain unanswered. The first is how could the presence of conscience aid in the struggle for survival when the fierce struggle of natural selection would seem to favor ruthless behavior. A second concerns the origin of social instincts. It is easy to see how self-regarding instincts developed, but why did self-sacrificing instincts originate?

In answer to the first, Darwin argues that, in the struggle for survival, social instincts have survival power. Further, the process of evolution itself tends to promote the growth of moral consciousness. According to natural selection, stronger organisms prevail in the struggle for existence. However, on the group level it appears that qualities such as self-sacrifice, cooperation, and love would give the tribe with the largest number of such members an advantage in the struggle for survival. Darwin concludes: "Thus the social and moral qualities would tend sharply to advance and be diffused throughout the world."⁶

The immoral individual might survive by ruthless behavior, but not the group. The other major figures of the period, Herbert Spencer and T. H. Huxley, proceeded to explanations in closely related ways. William Quillian, in a piercing critique of this subject points out:

The interest of the Evolutionary Naturalists in ethics was primarily naturalistic rather than evolutionary. That is to say, the dogma is: we must explain the unknown by the known and the known is the sense-known.⁷

Thus, to explain the unknown, which is *conscience*, these early evolutionists reverted to what was most explainable, that is, animal instinct.

In regard to the second question concerning the origin of social instincts, Darwin was not so confident. A major part of the explanation he eventually proposed was the role played by habit. He suggested that at least some animal instincts were acquired by practice. A remote ancestor practiced social virtues and survived and then passed on this strengthened social instinct to his offspring. Through repeated practice and the work of natural selection, it eventually became the conscience of man.

At this point, however, the Darwinian explanation ran into trouble, for it fell back on the Lamarckian doctrine of evolution according to acquired characteristics. Quillian points out the anomaly of this: "This introduction by Darwin of Lamarckian principle is rather strange in view of certain earlier statements in which he expressed contempt for Lamarck."⁸ Even more serious was the accep-

⁶Ibid., p. 176.

⁷William Quillian, *The Moral Theory of Evolutionary Naturalism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945), p. 12.

⁸Ibid., p. 75.

tance in the 1880s of the thesis by Weisman that changes in bodily or somatic cells are not passed on through changes in germ cells and the consequent process of natural selection. Again Quillian brings out the significance:

It is very likely that habits do produce certain modifications in the brain structure of an individual, but these changes occur only in the body or somatic cells, which, so far as present investigations can determine, seem to have no influence upon succeeding generations.⁹

A second part of Darwin's explanation of social instincts ran into the same trouble. He found part of the explanation of instinct as due to changes in the environment. But these changes also could alter only body cells. Similarly, Herbert Spencer explained the presence of social instincts as the accumulation of the experiences of utility. This would also be a Lamarckian thesis.

When Julian Huxley attempted in the 1940s to reestablish the doctrine of Evolutionary Ethics, he began by noticing Quillian's attack of Darwin's and Spencer's analysis.¹⁰ He conceded that Quillian was correct in basing his attack on the weakness of Lamarckianism. He further conceded that modern evolutionary naturalism finds three errors with these nineteenth-century explanations: that instincts are certainly not inherited habits or sentiments; that conscience is not an instinct in any sense in which that word can be used; and that Darwin denied any virtue to purely individual activities.

This last point suggests a new criticism of the evolutionary account. Early evolutionists equated morality with social actions entirely. Yet each person discovers that his conscience concerns actions which involve no one else. He may feel pangs of conscience for overeating or for drinking too much. He feels a demand to be honest with himself. Such duties may be just as compelling as those connected with social duties; yet as self-regarding instincts they would not receive the social disapproval required to develop a conscience. Even so, some of a person's most important duties are to himself, and a normal conscience will enforce those duties to himself as much as to others.

After conceding that Quillian was correct in basing his attack on the Lamarckian features of Darwin's and Spencer's explanation. Huxley claims that Quillian's explanation was weakened because it did not include twentieth century representatives. The new generation of naturalists has abandoned the Lamarckian approach and turned to the psychological explanations initiated by Freud. Huxley dated the beginning of modern naturalism at the turn of the century:

The modern period of evolutionary naturalism may be dated very precisely from the turn of the century with the novel outlook of Freud in psychology and the Mendelians in biology.¹¹

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Julian Huxley, *Touchstone for Ethics* (New York: Harper, 1947), p. 29.

¹¹Ibid.

Huxley then gives an account of conscience in Freudian terms. This version traces the rise of conscience to a conflict arising in the infant's second year. The mother comes to represent the external world and also mediates its impact. To the child, the mother becomes both the source of satisfaction and the source of authority. As the source of authority, she generates anger, hate, and destructive wishes; while as the source of satisfaction she is also loved. This conflict is normally won by love, and the destructive attitudes are branded with guilt. Conscience then comes to be attached to certain attitudes which have been overcome by love.

Daiches Raphael, in pointing out the failure of the original Darwinian explanation of the origin of conscience, states that the failure was so complete that modern evolutionists follow Huxley's example in searching for other explanations. Current psychology has abandoned the use of natural selection as an explanation of the moral faculties and, instead, tries to show how conscience is built up from other mental endowments with this result:

The evolution of ethics as portrayed by modern psychologists and social scientists, therefore, had little in common with the specifically Darwinian concept of evolution through natural selection.¹²

Evolutionary Ethics

A second aspect of the debate concerned the attempt of evolutionists to develop an ethical standard. This effort included, as mentioned earlier, both an attempt to give an evolutionary definition of ethical terms and to establish a criterion for ethical decisions.

The effort to base ethical standards on the workings of nature is one of the most ancient appeals of ethics; thus it was only natural that the new key to nature—evolution—should be appealed to for an ethical standard.

According to William Quillian, there was a demand at this time by scientists for moral reform. While there always seems to be a demand for moral reform, this demand was based on growing faith in science. Most calls for moral reform have been calls to recover old but neglected values. The scientists of the Victorian era, however, found fault with the ancient standards themselves. They used the failure of the old standards to demand moral reform. Their demand for moral reform was based on three factors: (a) the undesirable results of theological ethics which, it was claimed, promoted a selfish condition of the heart because of its promise of a posthumous reward, (b) the inexactness of utilitarianism (the prevailing philosophical ethics), and (c) the gap left by the disappearance of theological ethics.

¹²D. Daiches Raphael, "Darwinian and Ethics" in *A Century of Darwin*, ed. S. A. Barnett (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1959), p. 336.

Of the three promoters of evolution—Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer, and T. H. Huxley—only Spencer fully embraced the evolutionary theory that came to be called social Darwinism. Darwin himself was no social Darwinist. Contrary to other evolutionists of the time, Darwin did not believe that natural selection takes place only by brutal struggle. Not only were social virtues of value to people living in groups, they were also of value to some animals. Huxley completely rejected the idea that ethical standards could be learned from the laws of nature. In fact, he argued that ethics and natural selection were antagonistic to each other and that ethical behavior must work against the destructive forces of nature. Thus, while the first part of this article dealt with an issue on which all three of the major evolutionists were in agreement, this second part will concern an issue which was fully endorsed only by Herbert Spencer.

Spencer's main concern was to establish the scientific character of an ethical standard based on evolution. A similar effort made earlier in the nineteenth century to put ethics on a scientific basis was utilitarianism. According to this philosophy, happiness is the highest good for humankind and thus the basis for deciding any ethical question is to ask which alternative would bring the most happiness.

Jeremy Bentham had worked out an elaborate mechanism for measuring various pleasures. For example, eating a steak would have so many units of pleasure, called lots; while a martyr, who sacrifices himself for others, would have another total made up of the same basic units. The appeal of such a theory was that pleasure seemed the kind of thing which could be measured scientifically. If it could, ethical questions could be resolved on a scientific basis.

Bentham's successor, John Stuart Mill, accepted pleasure as the standard of ethics but protested against treating all pleasures in a quantitative way. He saw a qualitative difference between the pleasures a pig might enjoy in eating and the pleasure a human being might feel in intellectual pursuits. In a famous expression, he asserted he would rather be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied. Pleasures were discovered to be far too different in quality to be scientifically compared; thus the conviction was widely felt that a more scientific standard for ethics must be found.

Spencer thought he had found that more scientific standard in the apparent goal of evolution, the goal that he understood to be life. Spencer could not settle on life alone, however, for he continually modified it by qualitative distinctions. For example, he argued at one point that higher forms of life are better because they display better and more numerous adjustments of acts to ends. At this point Spencer elaborates what seems a quantitative standard, for he argues: "And along with this greater elaboration of life produced by the pursuit of more nu-

merous ends, there goes that increased duration of life which constitutes the supreme end."¹³

If length of life is the supreme end, some of the lower animals are superior to human beings. Spencer, however, backs off from saying that the ethical standard is length of life alone. He modifies this by saying.

Hence, estimating life, by multiplying its length into its breadth, we must say that the augmentation of it which accompanies evolution of conduct, results from increase of both factors.¹⁴

Now the goal of evolution is seen to be both length and breadth of life. But the scientific argument disappears when breadth is introduced. Breadth of life is even less measurable as a standard than pleasure, inasmuch as breadth of life includes many subjective experiences, even pleasure. Length of life is not the standard, for some in a few years reach achievements which others cannot accomplish in a hundred. Breadth of life is a more worthy goal but totally unmeasurable.

One possibility remains for the evolutionist and that is the possibility that the goal of evolution is the total amount of life—the maximum number of years—for all living forms. This raises more questions than can be answered. For example, which is preferable, long life for a few or shorter life for many? Another question would concern the value of various forms of life. We might scientifically decide which of two alternatives would produce the greater quantity of life, but this would still leave our pressing ethical questions unanswered.

Spencer recognized that amount of life was not enough. In addition to his introduction of breadth of life as part of the standard, at one point (in the same book) he fell back on hedonism itself. This is seen in his claim that there is one question which ethics must ask: Is life worth living? He then asks whether pessimists and optimists have anything in common and he answers, "Both their arguments assume it to be self-evident that life is good or bad, according as it does, or does not bring a surplus of agreeable feeling."¹⁵

Thus, Spencer returned to hedonism, a doctrine that he had rejected as being too unscientific. He went so far as to say that evolution has been a mistake if it does not provide a surplus of agreeable feeling. Spencer thus failed to give a satisfactory explanation of the ethical term "good" on evolutionary grounds. Nevertheless, evolutionary ethics could still be vindicated if advocates could show that the evolutionary process gave ethical guidance. Spencer and others did attempt to demonstrate that by observing the way evolution works we can learn how people should live.

¹³Herbert Spencer, *The Data of Ethics* (New York: Hurst, 1879), pp. 23-24.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

The question which then arose was that since natural selection is working for progress, what should humankind do? The answer given at first was that people should stand aside and permit nature to work. Since evolution progresses by the survival of the fittest, people should not intervene. The worthless would be destroyed in the struggle for existence. This philosophy became known as Social Darwinism and became influential in American social thought, with one long-lasting effect—the recurring science of eugenics.

It should be remembered that Darwin himself rejected Social Darwinism. As noted earlier, he felt that the social qualities of helping others had survival value, and he also felt that to ignore the helpless would do more damage to the human spirit than would be gained from eliminating the weak.

Perhaps the best refutation of evolutionary ethics in the nineteenth century was offered by T. H. Huxley, the fervent defender of evolution. Huxley argued that natural selection is the antithesis of ethics. Nature is destructive; ethics must be creative. Huxley used the difference between a cultivated garden and the wild brush in the forest as an example of the difference between ethical activity and nature. The garden, cultivated by human effort, is soon strangled by nature when abandoned. Like John Stuart Mill, Huxley saw nature as a killer. It works to destroy everything humans do. Optimism has prevented people from seeing this. "It prevented them from seeing that cosmic nature is no school of virtue, but the headquarters of the enemy of ethical nature."¹⁶ The thief and murderer follow nature as much as the philanthropist. A romantic view of nature has kept man from seeing that "to be natural" is not the same as to be virtuous. Actually, ethics has built up an artificial world to fight against the forces of nature. Huxley thought that right and wrong were ethical qualities learned from some other source than nature and thus he rejected evolutionary ethics. His grandson, Julian Huxley, has tried to reestablish ethics on an evolutionary basis.

However, the majority of professional philosophers have rejected evolutionary ethics, even though theologians and some scientists have not. The British philosopher Anthony Flew points out that most British philosophers have rejected evolutionary ethics out of fear of committing the naturalistic fallacy. This fallacy, identified at the turn of the century by G. E. Moore, occurs when we try to substitute a natural quality for the ethical term "good." A natural quality would be any physical or psychological quality such as pleasure, happiness, or even love. The naturalistic fallacy is involved when anyone says that the total meaning of "good" can be replaced by a natural term such as pleasure. According to Moore, if we say "good means pleasure," what do we mean when we say "pleasure is good"? Surely we do not mean "pleasure is pleasure." Moore concluded that terms such as "good" cannot be replaced by natural terms. Good and right are known directly, just as colors are known. Moore applied this test

¹⁶T. H. Huxley, "Evolution and Ethics" in *Touchstone for Ethics*, p. 87.

to Spencer's ethics with convincing results. To Spencer's view that more evolved life is better, Moore replies:

It may, of course, be true that what is more evolved is also higher and better. But Mr. Spencer does not seem aware that to assert the one is in any case not the same thing as to assert the other.¹⁷

As Moore points out, Spencer does an about-face and switches to pleasure as the highest good. Pleasure is even less suitable as a substitute for good than more evolved. However, when evolution falls back on pleasure, it has abandoned its own stand.

There are other reasons that contemporary British philosophy rejects evolutionary ethics. One arises from the widespread rejection of the belief in inevitable progress, which went with evolutionary ethics. The only philosophy that takes this doctrine seriously now is dialectical materialism, and it has no scientific base. In contemporary philosophy the idea of an evolutionary ethic is seen as a corollary of the belief in inevitable progress. Today, this belief is so discredited that there is amazement that the theory had such hold.

Anthony Flew, in trying to explain why the theory of natural selection intimated the doctrine of inevitable progress, finds that much of its strength lay in the deceptiveness of the phrase "survival of the fittest." The word "fittest" has a definite moral connotation. As such, it easily appears that the doctrine of natural selection is producing better and better things through competition. However, as Flew points out, "survival of the fittest" meant only the survival of those fittest to survive. In this way, the capacity to reproduce, which is marked in lower classes of society, would be a fitness. Flew indicates that an ethic based on natural selection would be quite different from what is normally understood:

If anyone were to complain using this present Darwinian criterion of fitness, that some particular social arrangement encourages the multiplication of the unfit and the extermination of the fit, then his complaint would be plainly self-contradictory.¹⁸

Further, Flew regards the term "natural selection" as misleading, for selection implies choice or purpose. Such a phrase contributed to the ready acceptance of "natural selection" as a surrogate for divine providence. Flew sees the danger here of misleading people to overlook the fact that natural selection is blind and nonrational. The dominant view, therefore, of current philosophy is that evolution offers no assurance either of continued progress or of any certain ethical guidance.

¹⁷G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), p. 49.

¹⁸Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (London: Macmillan, 1967), p. 14.