AGAINST EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

ROBERTO UREÑA

The theory of evolutionary ethics suggests that the biological process of natural selection can supply a foundation for morality. I will argue that evolutionary ethics is incapable of providing such a foundation, because it lacks empirical and rational evidence to support it, because it yields unacceptable moral outcomes, and because it cannot overcome the 'is-ought' problem.

§1: THE PLACE OF EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS IN CONTEMPORARY SCHOLARSHIP

The theory of evolutionary ethics, once dormant, is stirring in academia again—not so much among professional philosophers as among the biologists and psychologists. More and more, the natural sciences tout their assurance that the origins of moral sentiment, and perhaps of morality itself, are to be found in evolutionary biology.[1] More and more, there is a sense that, as de Waal expresses it, "morality requires and probably has an evolutionary explanation."[2]

At the present time, such talk is largely relegated to the natural sciences. Philosophically, evolutionary ethics has long been considered an empty ethical theory, having been—so it is supposed—sufficient-

1 See, for instance, Dennis L. Krebs, "Morality: An Evolutionary Account," *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 3, no. 3 (2008): 149-172, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-6924.2008.00072.x.

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ly dealt with by Thomas Huxley, and G. E. Moore.[3] This discrepancy between the opinions of the philosophers and the metaethical speculations of natural scientists, especially at a time when natural scientists are brazen in their claims of a coming explanatory omnipotence,[4] casts philosophers skeptical of such claims in a poor light.[5] There are, however—as I will argue—good reasons to be skeptical. The natural sciences are fully capable, it will be admitted, of describing all natural phenomena—that is, of explaining how things *are*. The natural scientist, however, must 'remove the sandals from their feet' when approaching the subject of ethics—for ethics is not the study of how things *are*, but of how things *ought to be*.

Still, there are high hopes by natural scientists that the field of ethics, too, like the fields of physics, biology, and psychology, will succumb to the relentless march of scientific progress. Nearly fifty years ago, biologist E. O. Wilson wrote that "the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologicized."[6] Slowly, steadily, biologists have been marching to the drumbeat of Wilson and others, advancing on the subject of morality.

The purpose of this paper is to check these advances. To that end, it will be important to understand precisely what evolutionary ethics is, before considering the problems with this theory.

§2: DEFINING EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

The theory of evolutionary ethics has been generally divided into three distinct categories: descriptive evolutionary ethics, prescriptive evolutionary ethics, and evolutionary metaethics.[7] Descriptive evolutionary

3 For a brief discussion of Huxley and Ruse on the subject, see Doris Schroeder, "Evolutionary Ethics," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Accessed 15 Nov 2023), https://iep.utm.edu/evol-eth/#H2.

4 Consider, for instance, a quote from Peter Atkins' provocatively titled chapter, 'The Limitless Power of Science': "There is no reason to suppose that science cannot deal with every aspect of existence." Peter Atkins, "The Limitless Power of Science," in *Nature's Imagination: The Frontiers of Scientific Vision*, ed. John Cornwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 125.

5 The late Stephen Hawking argued as much in his much-acclaimed book on the interplay between philosophy and science, cited below: "Philosophy is dead," he pronounced, because it "has not kept up with modern developments in science." Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design*. New York, NY: Bantam Publishing, 2012. Quotes are from page 5.

6 E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975, 562.

7 William FitzPatrick, "Morality and Evolutionary Biology," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2021), ed. Edward N. Zalta, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/entries/morality-biology/.

ethics is concerned with the question of why human beings consider certain actions to be moral or immoral. Prescriptive evolutionary ethics is concerned with grounding ethical theory in the biological evolution of the human being. Evolutionary metaethics is concerned with the question of whether and how evolutionary theory pertains to the field of ethics as a whole.

For the present purposes, this paper will not consider the question of evolutionary metaethics, and will deal solely with the descriptive and prescriptive aspects of evolutionary moral theory. Thus, there are only two claims which this paper will consider with regards to evolutionary ethics. The first claim, which is the descriptive evolutionary ethics claim, is that moral sentiments are grounded in natural selection. In other words, the reason why human beings consider any particular action to be morally 'good' or morally 'evil' is because nature has selected for human beings with those particular moral sentiments. For example, on this theory, human beings consider the act of murder to be wrong because human beings with an aversion to murder—both to murdering others and to seeing others murdered—are more likely to survive and pass on their genes than human beings without such an aversion. As such, over time, human beings have nearly universally come to consider the act of murder as something which 'ought not to be done.'

It should be noted, of course, that the question of whether or not moral sentiments can be explained by natural selection is largely a matter of empirical inquiry. While there may be immediate objections to the idea of moral sentiments as a product of natural selection—for instance, on the grounds that such would seem to suggest an equalization of 'moral sentiment' and 'morality'—it is beyond the scope of this paper to address these concerns. Rather than engage in biological investigation or metaethical speculation, I will instead treat this first claim as a given.

The second claim of evolutionary ethics, which is the prescriptive claim, is that the summum bonum is to pass on one's genes—that is, to reproduce.[8] In other words, "actions that increase the long-term capacity of survival in evolutionary terms are good and actions that decrease this capacity are bad."[9] As this second postulation made by evolutionary ethics is not empirically falsifiable, but is rather a philosophical statement, the focus of the present paper will be on the validity of this aspect of evolutionary ethics. Henceforth, for the sake of simplicity, when I use the term 'evolutionary ethics,' it will be in ref-

8 Throughout this paper, for the sake of simplicity, the terms 'pass on one's genes,' 'reproduce,' and 'procreate' will be used synonymously.

9 Doris Schroeder, *op. cit.*

erence to this second claim. To that end, it will be important to consider the arguments made in favor of reproduction as the summum bonum by the proponents of evolutionary ethics.

§3: SUPPORTING ARGUMENTS FOR EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

Perhaps the chief argument made in favor of evolutionary ethics is that—unlike most other moral theories—evolutionary ethics grounds ethics does not require a metaphysical framework, and requires few ambiguous terms. In particular, evolutionary ethics avoids the somewhat problematic task of having to define and explain the existence of 'moral facts.'[10] On an evolutionary ethical basis, what makes a moral statement 'true' or 'false' is not the correspondence of that statement to some moral fact, such as a standard of perfection, but whether or not natural selection has so inclined human beings to believe such a moral statement. As stated by John Teehan and Christopher diCarlo:

> The notion that ethical truths are "out there" waiting to be discovered is itself the remnant of a pre-scientific mode of thought. It stems back to a time when not only ethics, but science itself was under the magisterium of religion. The progress of modern science can be viewed as a process of freeing the study of nature from religious/metaphysical constraints and establishing its own magisterium.[11]

In an age when all that is not directly established in mathematics or the natural sciences is 'committed to the flames,'[12] evolutionary ethics enables the moral theorist to avoid metaphysical entanglements by providing a significantly more concrete grounding for morals.

A second argument in favor of evolutionary ethics is its capacity to answer a number troubling moral questions in a more satisfying manner than many other moral theories. For instance, it has been generally observed that, across cultures and ages, most human beings share similar moral codes.[13] Such a fact presents a problem to moral theories which maintain that moral codes—or, at least, moral sentiments—are a product of individual, family, or societal decision. From an evolutionary moral perspective, however, this phenomenon has a simple and

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10 See Michael Klenk, "Evolutionary Ethics," in *Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics*, ed. George Matthews and Christina Hendricks (Montreal, QC, Canada: Rebus Press, 2020), 76-89; 85.

11 John Teehan and Christopher diCarlo, "On the Naturalistic Fallacy: A Conceptual Basis for Evolutionary Ethics," *Evolutionary Psychology* 2, no. 1 (2004), https://doi.org/10.1177/147470490400200108.

12 A paraphrase of David Hume's famous statement in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.

13 See, for instance, John C. Gibbs, et al, "Moral Judgment Development Across

empirical explanation: Human moral sentiments are encoded in the common gene pool of humanity, thus accounting for the similarities in moral codes across societies. Richard Dawkins—though not a proponent of evolutionary ethics[14]—seems to agree with this explanation of moral sentiments when he says: "We have a moral sense which is built into our brains, like our sexual instinct or our fear of heights."[15] Another problem which is readily resolved by the evolutionary moral theory is the question of where the compulsion to act in a morally good way comes from. By addressing the question of morals scientifically, rather than philosophically, evolutionary moral theorists avoid abstract speculation regarding the mechanics of how morality 'works.' Without having to posit any transcendent basis of moral compulsion—such as a God who punishes wrongdoing, or a karmic system—evolutionary ethics finds the source for moral compulsion in the natural proclivities of human beings, which are ultimately rooted in the natural desire to procreate and pass on one's genes.[16]

§4: OBJECTIONS TO EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

A. Responding to the Positive Arguments

Before considering potential arguments against evolutionary ethics, I wish to assess the validity of the evidences presented in favor of evolutionary ethics. First, there is the assertion that evolutionary ethics does not require a metaphysical framework, and, in particular, does not need to posit the existence of moral facts. I grant that this is true of descriptive evolutionary ethics, but it is not true of prescriptive evolutionary ethics. The instant that evolutionary ethics moves from attempts at explaining moral sentiments to explaining what our moral sentiments *ought* to be, the evolutionary ethicist must posit some reference point—such as a moral fact—by which to judge what 'ought' and 'ought not' mean. Natural selection cannot, in and of itself, provide a foundation for morality. Something else besides 'The behavior X is ultimately a product of natural selection' must be posited before arriving at the conclusion 'X is a moral good.' This will be further explored in a moment, in the discussion on the 'is-ought' problem, and so I will refrain from further comments on this point until then.

Cultures: Revisiting Kohlberg's Universality Claims," *Developmental Review* 27 (2007), 443-500, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2007.04.001.

14 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, 3.

15 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2006, 214.

16 See Robert J. Richards, "Evolutionary Ethics: A Theory of Moral Realism," in *The Cambridge Handbook of Evolutionary Ethics*, ed. Michael Ruse and Robert J. Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 144-145 and 148-149.

The second point made by evolutionary ethicists—namely, that the broad explanatory power of evolutionary ethics is evidence in its favor—is only a half-truth. To use the example mentioned earlier, it is true that the commonalities in moral codes across ages and cultures is a fact in need of explanation, and it is likewise true that evolutionary ethics provides a powerful solution to this problem. The answer of evolutionary ethics, however, is not the only plausible answer. For instance, quite independent of passing on one's genes is the seemingly universal human goal of maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain.[17] It should, therefore, be at least as plausible to say that all human beings act so as to maximize pleasure and minimize pain as it is to say that human beings act so as to stand a better chance of procreating.

On the question of moral compulsion, once again, evolutionary ethics, if true, would provide a strong answer to the question of why most individuals feel morally compelled to act one way as supposed to another. But the fact that one feels an instinctual compulsion to act in a particular way is by no means an indication that such a person morally *ought* to act that way. By what means does the evolutionary ethicist declare of any one instinct, '*That* is the moral instinct'? Take an individual who finds themself in a heated argument with a bitter and obnoxious neighbor. The instinct rises up to find some blunt object and batter the neighbor's skull in. In the moment, such a thought feels right—the thought may even be pleasurable to the individual's mind—and yet the individual refrains from doing so, not from lack of instinctual drive to commit the act, but from a sense of moral duty. Indeed, if this hypothetical individual were to follow through with their desires and commit their act of violence, most of society would be morally outraged, and condemn such an individual. It is true, one might argue, that one feels the moral instinct not to batter another's skull in, and it is this which holds our hypothetical individual back—but this does not answer the question: Why ought our hypothetical individual to follow the 'moral' instinct rather than the 'immoral' instinct? Once again, the rejoinder may come that it isn't a matter of 'ought'—it is simply a fact that human beings generally, as a matter of their evolutionarily-ingrained instincts, follow their 'moral' instincts rather than their 'im-

17 See, for instance, Ruut Veenhoven, "How Universal Is Happiness?" in *International Differences in Well-Being*, ed. Ed Diener, John F. Helliwell, and Daniel Kahneman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 328-350. See also Irwin Goldstein, "Pleasure and Pain: Unconditional, Intrinsic Values," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1, no. 2 (1989), 255-276, https://doi.org/10.2307/2107959.

moral' ones.[18] Let it be so—it yet remains a fact that some people do not follow their 'moral' instincts, and one must ask why such a person ought to be condemned. After all, society does not normally condemn individuals who act counter to the instincts of the majority. For example, it is a fact that most human beings predominantly use their right hand when holding and using objects.[19] Must society, then, condemn those who are left-handed, for not possessing the same instincts as the majority of their right-handed counterparts? The notion seems preposterous—there appears to be, in this case at least, a clear and qualitative difference between a 'moral instinct' and an 'amoral instinct.' The theory of evolutionary ethics can explain why human beings feel moral compulsion—it may even serve to explain what the 'qualitative difference' between a moral feeling and an amoral feeling consists of—but to claim that the compulsion is a reason in itself to be ethical is a leap of logic.

B. Unacceptable Moral Outcomes

Besides the weaknesses of the positive arguments in favor of evolutionary ethics, there remain several challenges beyond these. The first of these objections is that acting based on an evolutionary moral theory will lead to unacceptable moral outcomes. Now, the word 'unacceptable,' of course, carries a moral connotation, and, as such, this objection immediately runs the risk of circular reasoning. This, however, can be avoided: I will use 'unacceptable moral outcomes' to mean outcomes which the majority of individuals would feel to be morally wrong. Thus, 'unacceptable' refers not to morality itself, but to the moral sentiments of 'normal' individuals.

An interesting example of the unacceptability of evolutionary morals can be found in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, wherein Fyodor Karamazov and his son Dmitri are engaged in a violent competition to marry the same woman, named Grushenka. In the midst of this conflict, Ivan Karamazov—the son of Fyodor Karamazov and Dmitri's half-brother—is asked to comment on the situation, to which he gives the somewhat apathetic reply of: "One reptile will devour

18 This, at least, is the argument made by Richards. See Robert J. Richards, *op. cit.*, 144.

19 It should be noted, tangentially, for the sake of the argument, that handedness is largely a biological trait, and thus a product of natural selection. Thus, the instinct for right-handedness is analogous to the instinct for morality for the purposes of the present example. See Shan Shan Jing. "Hand Dominance: Nature, Nurture, and Relevance for Hand Surgeons," *Journal of Hand and Microsurgery* 14, no. 1 (2022), 111-112, DOI: 10.1055/s-0040-1713557.

the other. And serve them both right, too."[20] Here, in Ivan's comment, it seems, is an application of the evolutionary moral theory which—I suspect—yields an outcome which most people would consider to be unacceptable. There is a common moral sentiment that individuals, especially individuals sharing familial ties, should strive to cooperate and behave altruistically toward one another, rather than seek conflict. Nonetheless, on an evolutionary moral basis, where the greatest possible good is to pass on one's genes, it seems that filial competition in this particular case is the inevitable—and perhaps morally favorable—outcome. Cooperation in this situation, after all, is impossible: father and son cannot both 'pass on their genes' through Grushenka—and even if they did, that, too, would grate against typical moral sensibilities. The question then arises: Who *ought* to marry Grushenka? On an evolutionary moral basis, the answer, as Ivan Karamazov suggests, is: Whichever one can physically dominate the other. From a 'survival of the fittest' perspective, in a case where Fyodor and Dmitri must compete to reproduce, the 'fitter' of the two should be the one to procreate. This outcome ultimately benefits humanity as a whole, as it serves to 'strengthen' the human gene pool. Thus, perhaps the evolutionary ethicist can even declare, alongside Ivan, 'Serve them both right'!

Of course, the case of *The Brothers Karamazov* is not the only conceivable instance in which evolutionary ethics may lead to unacceptable outcomes. For instance, it seems plausible that one might be able to justify rape in certain cases, or slavery, on an evolutionary moral basis. Both involve the subjugation of other human beings against their will—usually considered to be morally wrong—and yet both increase the moral offender's chances of passing on their genes. That this, at times, happens to be to the detriment of other human beings is irrelevant to the question, since all that is important is that the individual passes on their genes, irrespective of how the individual's reproductive strategy affects the reproductive success of others.

Against this charge, the evolutionary ethicist may counter that each of these cases portrays evolutionary ethics in an unfair light. Returning to the case of Fyodor and Dmitri, it may be argued that there is, in fact, no correct answer to the question of who should marry Grushenka. As the situation is both morally ambiguous and morally outrageous from the outset, it would seem that any moral theory would struggle to produce a morally 'acceptable' outcome, and so to attack evolutionary ethics's failure in this case is essentially 'hitting below the belt.' This argument, however, fails to recognize that—while the situation is morally ambiguous and morally outrageous—yet there are

20 Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, tr. Constance Garnett, (New York, NY: The Lowell Press, 1880), 153.

possible resolutions to the problem, as long as the summum bonum is not passing on one's genes. For instance, Fyodor and Dmitri might settle their contest with a game of chess to avoid bloodshed, or they might appeal to a third party to help them discuss their difficulties—or, perhaps best of all, Fyodor and Dmitri might allow Grushenka herself to choose between the two of them.[21] While, from an evolutionary perspective, conflict seems to be the only possible option, there are viable alternatives from other moral theories, and so the failure of evolutionary ethics in this case is a legitimate challenge to the theory.

All in all, however, the case of *The Brothers Karamazov* is a fictional example—and such cases, if they do occur, are rare, and most likely never reach the point showcased in Dostoyevsky's novel. The cases of rape and slavery, however, are much more serious, as they are certainly not hypothetical.

Against the charge that evolutionary ethics cannot address the moral wrongs of rape or slavery, the evolutionary ethicist may point out that human beings have evolved to be a social species, and as such, an evolutionary moral theory must take this into consideration.[22] Seen thus from a societal perspective, society as a whole benefits most when human beings cooperate, rather than forcibly subdue one another. After all, social groups with intra-group conflict are less likely than social groups without such conflict to survive and pass on their genes. This is also to say nothing of potential societal sanctions which may be levied against those considered to be morally aberrant, thus making it more difficult for offending individuals to pass on their genes in the future. Therefore, while on an individual level, it would seem that there are certain cases when evolutionary ethics yields 'unacceptable' moral

21 Someone may comment that this is actually the evolutionarily preferable outcome. I will simply observe that I see little *evolutionary* reason for either male party to concede defeat to the other simply on the basis of the female's preference. Furthermore, while mating competitions in nature are, of course, for the purpose of winning the right to pass on one's genes with a female or a group of females, I can think of few if any instances in which the female herself decides the contest. Even if such an instance did occur in nature, however, it remains to be seen that this is the 'right' way to settle a dispute, as opposed to merely 'a' way.

22 It should be noted that there are two schools of thought with regards to evolutionary biology. The first school maintains that natural selection operates predominantly on the individual level, while the second holds that natural selection operates predominantly on the group level. This, of course, creates two schools of evolutionary ethical thought. The anticipated objection here would presumably come from a proponent of the latter school of thought. See Michael Klenk, *op. cit.*, 83-84.

outcomes, on the societal level such problems are avoided.

This counter-objection, however, forgets that natural selection—the underlying process which provides the basis for evolutionary ethics' summum bonum—should theoretically select for individuals whose moral sentiments are primarily inclined to their own benefit. Even from a societal perspective, natural selection will favor individuals who seek their own individual good, rather than the good of society. Consider, for instance, two individuals in society. The first individual seeks the wellbeing of society only insofar as increasing societal wellbeing increases their own reproductive success. The second individual seeks the welfare of society even at their own reproductive expense. Because the individual who seeks their own reproductive success will have a greater chance of passing on their genes than the individual who is willing to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their fellow society members, natural selection will select for the former type of individual over the later type. Seeing as those moral sentiments which are favored by natural selection are—almost by definition—strategically selected for their ability to promote the individual's procreative success, and as procreative success is the supreme ethical goal for any individual on the theory of evolutionary ethics, it stands to reason that individuals ought not to consider societal welfare in their moral decision-making if it is to their reproductive disadvantage. Thus, the evolutionary ethicist may approve of the rapist—as long as the rapist can act with sufficient discreetness, so as to not attract the reproach of society—as well as the slaveholder—so long as the slaveholder holds their slaves with the approval of their society.

But all of this, the evolutionary ethicist might maintain, presupposes that the moral sentiments of individuals are inclined toward such acts as rape and slaveholding. Yet moral sentiments, as they are observed in actuality, are not so inclined—rape and slaveholding are considered to be morally unacceptable, after all—which would seem to undermine the previous counter-argument. All that this fact shows, however, is that the moral sentiments of human beings—whether or not they are products of natural selection—are at least not solely oriented toward the alleged summum bonum of passing on one's genes.

A second potential objection to the assertion that evolutionary ethics yields unacceptable moral outcomes is that, while there are select occasions in which morally unacceptable acts, such as rape or slaveholding, might be condoned on an evolutionary moral theory, actions such as these are, in general, nonbeneficial for the individual. For the sake of simplicity, let us only consider the case of rape as it pertains to this line of argument. While in certain circumstances a rapist may 'get away' with their act without any societal consequences, this is not

often the case—more often than not, the rapist is caught and punished. Thus, one ought not to commit the act of rape, as the future consequences of such an act are more likely to be harmful than beneficial to the individual. Another similar, though somewhat distinct, form of this argument might be to take a more Kantian route: While rape may benefit one particular individual at one particular moment in time, if all human beings saw fit to rape one another whenever they chose, the result would be a net detriment to the species. Thus, one ought not to commit the act of rape, because of the moral 'non-universalizability' of the act.[23]

These two objections, however, can be dealt with simultaneously. In both cases, the argument shifts the focus away from the individual's benefit to society or the species' detriment. But on what grounds does the evolutionary ethicist make such a move? It has already been established that nature selects for self-concerned individuals over individuals who are not self-concerned. Thus, in the moment of moral decision—that is, when the individual must consider for themselves whether or not an action which they are to undertake is morally right or morally wrong—the individual must not be concerned about the societal consequences of their decision, or about the hypothetical scenario of all human beings acting as they are acting. Rather, the individual must judge for themself, in their particular moment and in their particular circumstance, whether or not their action will serve to facilitate the passing on of their genes or not. If so, then—irrespective of the means—that action is good. If it be by rape, then by rape; if by marriage, then by marriage. On an evolutionary moral basis, the two would appear to be morally indistinguishable.

C. The Is-Ought Problem[24]

The second attack against the theory of evolutionary ethics is the 'is-ought' problem, as made famous by David Hume.[25] The problem involves the question of what kind of argument would be required to be able to conclude that passing on one's genes is, in fact, the summum bonum. It is true that human beings, generally speaking, pass

23 The logic is paraphrased in part from Kant's Categorical Imperative. See the first section of Kant's *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*.

24 It may be noticed that I choose to address the more general 'is-ought' problem, rather than the more specific 'naturalistic fallacy,' as put forward most famously by G. E. Moore. This is because several—and, in my opinion, persuasive—counter-arguments have been made against the naturalistic fallacy. See, for instance, Oliver Curry, "Who's Afraid of the Naturalistic Fallacy?" *Evolutionary Psychology* 4, no. 1 (2006), https://doi.org/10.1177/147470490600400120.

25 See David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*; Book III, Chapter I.

on their genes and desire to do so—and, moreover, that if all human beings ceased to pass on their genes, then the human species would cease to exist. But this does not answer the question of why one *ought* to pass on their genes. Why, after all, should the cessation of human existence be considered a moral wrong? One may multiply facts about what *is* the case *ad nauseum*—for instance, one may point out that human beings have a natural instinct to pass on their genes and preserve the existence of the species. This, however, still does not answer the challenge. One need only ask: But why ought human beings to act based on their natural instincts? As philosopher William FitzPatrick points out: "Regardless of why one has a given [instinct], the question for a rational agent is always: is it right for me to exercise it, or should I instead renounce and resist it as far as I am able?"[26] There is no biological fact for the evolutionary ethicist to fall back upon which can justify the idea that human beings ought to consider passing on their genes as the greatest possible good.

Perhaps the strongest reply available to the evolutionary ethicist is to appeal to teleology.[27] While it may be true that no biological fact can justify the summum bonum of passing on one's genes, the evolutionary ethicist may maintain that, from a biological perspective, the purpose of human life is survival and genetic propagation. As Richard Dawkins once famously put it: "We are machines built by DNA whose purpose is to make more copies of the same DNA. That is exactly what we are here for… It is every living object's sole reason for living."[28] The argument may now run as follows[29]: For any thing with a given purpose, the 'goodness' of that thing consists in its accomplishing that purpose. For example, if the purpose of a knife is to cut, then the 'goodness' of the knife consists in its ability to cut. A knife that cuts well is a 'good' knife, whereas a knife which does not cut well is a 'bad' knife. Likewise, for all living things: If the purpose of all living things is to pass on their genes, then the 'goodness' of a living thing consists in its ability to pass on its genes—and, as human beings are living things, then the 'goodness' of human beings also consists in their ability to pass on their genes. As all human actions may thus be measured against this ultimate human goodness, it may thus be safely asserted that the summum bonum is to pass on one's genes. In this way, by positing the idea of a biological 'purpose for life,' the evolutionary

26 William FitzPatrick, *op. cit*.

27 This teleological appeal is a common method of overcoming the is-ought problem, perhaps most famously espoused and defended by Alasdair MacIntyre in his 1981 book *After Virtue* (University of Notre Dame Press).

28 Richard Dawkins, "The Ultraviolet Garden," *Royal Institute Christmas Lecture*, No. 4 (1991).

29 This argument is largely derived from Book I of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

ethicist may diffuse the is-ought problem.

There are three problems with this defense. First, it seems arbitrary to choose 'passing on one's genes' as the purpose for the existence of living things. On a biological level, after all, reproduction is merely one of a plethora of functions performed by any living thing. As there is nothing inherently value-laden about reproduction, one may justly ask: Why choose 'passing on one's genes' as the essential life-purpose, rather than some other life function? The evolutionary ethicist may respond that reproduction, as the mechanism by which natural selection operates, constitutes the most essential life-function, and as such, opting for 'reproductive success' or 'passing on one's genes' as the summum bonum is not arbitrary. This, too, however, has a problem: It is not *a priori* obvious that passing on one's genes—even from a biological perspective—constitutes the most essential life-function. For instance, by the same line of argumentation presented above, it could be argued that 'survival' is the teleological aim of humanity and all living things—and that as such, the 'goodness' of human beings consists in their capacity to survive. On what grounds does the evolutionary ethicist claim that reproduction is more essential than survival? Without resorting to some external value system, it seems an impossible task for the evolutionary ethicist to non-arbitrarily determine whether or not reproduction—or any other life-function—is 'most essential.' Absent a non-arbitrary purpose for humanity, the is-ought problem remains for the evolutionary ethicist.

The second problem with the teleological defense for evolutionary ethics stems from the source of this teleology. It may be asked: From whence does the evolutionary ethicist derive the notion of purpose? One can speak about the purpose of a knife because the knife was made by some individual who designed the knife for the intended purpose of cutting. Indeed, apart from some intention or design on the part of an individual, a thing cannot be thought of as having a purpose. A body of water, for instance, cannot be thought of as existing for the purpose of swimming in, unless some individual had prepared that body of water with that purpose in mind. But if—as most evolutionary biologists maintain—living things were not made, but are the products of the 'blind forces' of natural selection, then the evolutionary ethicist must find some other source for the purpose of human beings. One possible means of doing this might be to understand the purpose of an individual as existing not within the individual, but in a community of individuals.[30] Consider that a single cell has no purpose, unless it is

30 This argument is put forward by Yoshimi Kawade, "On the Nature of the Subjectivity of Living Things," *Biosemiotics* 2 (2009), 205-220, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12304-009-9041-9.

connected to a community of similar cells into an organ—say, a heart. But the heart itself has no purpose, unless it likewise is connected to a community of organs in an organism, for the purpose of facilitating genetic propagation. But even genetic propagation is itself impossible apart from a community of organisms—at least, for sexually reproducing organisms, such as human beings. Thus, one might still, in this 'hierarchy of purposes' find a quasi-transcendent source for the purpose of human existence. This argument, however, seems to conflate 'practical function' with 'teleological purpose.' The two are entirely distinct. A heart, it is true, may be practically functionless absent the rest of the organism, but this does not necessarily mean that it is teleologically purposeless. Likewise, the heart may be teleologically purposeless, and yet serve a practical function. This attempt too, then, fails to establish reproduction as a real teleological end capable of overcoming the is-ought problem.

The third and final problem with positing 'passing on one's genes' as a teleological end for humanity is that the 'ought' which such a teleology produces is an 'ought of adequacy,' not a 'moral ought.'[31] Returning to the example of the knife: It is true that the 'goodness' of the knife consists in its capacity to cut, and so one 'ought' to use the knife for cutting. It would be strange, however, if this 'ought' were construed to be a moral 'ought'—as though cutting into something with a knife was a moral good. The same argument can be applied to human beings: It may be true that the biological 'goodness' of a human being consists in their capacity to reproduce, and so, perhaps, one 'ought' to use one's body for that purpose. This, 'ought,' however, like the previous 'ought,' is merely an ought of adequacy. It would be strange, merely on this basis, if one were to suggest that reproduction was a moral good.

Here the evolutionary ethicist might object that there is—at least, with regards to human beings—no distinction between an 'ought of adequacy' and a 'moral ought.' In other words, it may be that what is called an 'ought of adequacy' for other things is what human beings consider a 'moral ought' in themselves. Hence, there appears to be an essential difference between the statements 'A knife ought to cut,' and 'A human ought to reproduce,' simply because the latter involves a human being. This argument, however, does not consider that all 'ought' statements refer implicitly to human beings. There is no 'ought' inherent in a knife, or in any other object, if that object bears no relationship to a human being. This is because, by nature, the concept of

31 I develop this argument from Shalina Stilley, "Natural Law Theory and the 'Is'--'Ought' Problem: A Critique of Four Solutions." *Dissertations (2009-)* (2010), Paper 57, https://epublications.marquette.edu/dissertations_mu/57/.

'ought'—whether it be an ought of adequacy, or a moral ought—exists only in tandem with an agent possessing a will. Furthermore, the ought of adequacy and the moral ought are entirely distinguishable in this 'willing agent,' so that the ought of adequacy cannot be equated with the moral ought. For example, a human being may use a knife to cut carrots, or they may use the same knife to cut human fingers off of other people's hands. Both situations involve the ought of adequacy—in fact, both involve the 'good' of the knife—but only the latter situation involves a moral ought, that is, one ought not to cut human fingers, even if 'cutting' is the 'good' of the knife. Here the ought of adequacy and the moral ought are neatly distinguished for the human being. But if the ought of adequacy and the moral ought can be so distinguished, then it cannot be argued that the ought of adequacy produced by the evolutionary ethicist's teleological appeal is equivalent to a moral ought. It can thus be seen that—in light of the three problems highlighted here—the theory of evolutionary ethics cannot demonstrate that reproduction constitutes a meaningful teleological end for humanity. Without this teleology, the is-ought problem remains for evolutionary ethics to solve. Satisfying answers are not forthcoming.

§5: CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the lack of strong evidence in favor of the evolutionary ethical viewpoint, as well as its inability to reasonably resolve either the 'unacceptable' moral outcomes of its theory or the is-ought problem renders it an impossible theory to justifiably support. In all candidness, the evolutionary moral perspective is an overreach of the natural sciences into the ethical sphere. Insofar as there is real content in the word 'morality,' the natural sciences have no place in the field of morals. It is the role of the natural sciences to describe behavior, and to explain the causal connections between natural phenomena, not to distinguish between 'good' and 'evil.'

Of course, the evolutionary ethicist may, in response to all of the arguments here presented, simply reply that morality does not exist anyway—that is, they may adopt the metaethical view that the biological theory of evolution disposes of the possibility of morality in the first place. This paper, however, has not sought to address such concerns, and they must be dealt with separately.

With regards to the descriptive aspect of evolutionary ethics mentioned previously, such a field of study may prove fruitful, as long as the distinction between 'moral sentiment' and 'morality' is maintained. Let descriptive evolutionary ethics demonstrate that my aversion to lying is the result of natural selection. The question of *why* lying is actually wrong, apart from my—or anyone else's—believing it to be so, remains.

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