# 'The Social Instincts Naturally Lead to the Golden Rule': The Ethics of Charles Darwin

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> […] the social instincts […] with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule, "As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise;" and this lies at the foundation of morality.
>
> [DARWIN, *The Descent of Man* (1871), p. 71]

RESUMEN

En *The Descent of Man*, Darwin discute una gran variedad de problemas éticos de manera exclusiva, dice él, desde la perspectiva de la historia natural. Intentando situar los puntos de vista de Darwin sobre la evolución y la ética dentro de las discusiones contemporáneas sobre filosofía moral reviso, en primer lugar, cómo el enfoque que Darwin hace de la evolución y la ética encaja en la metaética contemporánea, especialmente con cuatro teorías de tales como la del error, el expresivismo, el relativismo y el realismo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Darwin, metaética, teoría del error, expresivismo, relativismo moral, realismo moral*.

ABSTRACT

In the *The Descent of Man*, Darwin discusses a wide variety of ethical issues, exclusively, he says, from the perspective of natural history. As an attempt to situate Darwin's views on evolution and ethics into contemporary discussions of moral theory, in this paper I first look at how Darwin's approach to evolution and ethics fits in with contemporary metaethical theory, specifically the four theories of error theory, expressivism, relativism, and realism.

KEYWORDS: *Darwin, metaethics, error theory, expressivism, moral relativism, moral realism*.

The project of assessing how commonplace notions of ethics such as the golden rule fit with an evolutionary framework is not entirely new. Since the mid-nineteenth century, evolutionists have sought to view ethics through

an evolutionary prism. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin himself ventures into this territory, and speculates about evolution and ethics.[1] Darwin's approach is rather well balanced, although not fully developed. Other attempts to bring ethics and evolution together, by comparison with Darwin's, have been notorious blunders and in the minds of some readers today, the very phrase "evolutionary ethics" conjures up these past blunders.

## I. DARWIN AND ETHICS

Darwin's model of evolution by natural selection is a unilevel theory of natural selection; he holds that natural selection selects for individual organisms, not for species, communities, or ecosystems. When it comes to human ethics, then, one would think that Darwin would characterize ethics as an adaptation that solely exists to benefit individual human beings. He does not do this, however. Ethics is an area where Darwin employs a group selectionist model [Alexander (1985), p. 200; Sober & Wilson (1998), p. 4]. Darwin writes, for example, that "although a high standard of morality gives but a slight or no advantage to each individual man and his children over the other men of the same tribe […] an advancement in the standard of morality and an increase in the number of well-endowed men will certainly give an immense advantage to one tribe over another. There can be no doubt that a tribe including many members […] would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection" [Darwin (1871), p. 166].

Aside from the particular model of evolution — whether unilevel or multi-level, Darwin is interested in describing how ethics can make sense in an evolutionary framework. In *The Descent of Man* he discusses a wide variety of ethical issues, exclusively, he says, from the perspective of natural history [Darwin (1871), p. 71]. He discusses various qualities of human beings that are intimately connected with ethics; he calls these qualities collectively "man's moral constitution" [Darwin (1871), p. 106]. These human characteristics include: a moral sense, a conscience, social instincts, parental and filial affections, virtues, sympathy, and other emotions like love, remorse, regret, and shame. Darwin also discusses ethical issues such as the relationship of pleasure and pain to ethics, the place of reasoning in ethics, motives for human moral actions, and the "foundation of morality" [Ibid., pp. 97, 106)]. He raises questions about these issues, such as, where do sympathetic feelings come from? [Ibid, p. 85]. And, are these kinds of characteristics in human beings the result of habit or natural selection? [Ibid., pp. 81-82)]. In numerous places he concludes that although habit can strengthen various human qualities, natural selection did likely have a role in how human beings came to possess many of these characteristics in the first place [Ibid., pp. 80-81, 84)].

As an attempt to situate Darwin's views on evolution and ethics into contemporary discussions of moral theory, in what follows I look at whether Darwin's approach to evolution and ethics fits in with four representative theories from contemporary metaethical theory, specifically error theory, expressivism, relativism, and realism.

## II. DARWIN AND METAETHICS

### a) *Darwin and Error Theory*

I begin with the metaethical account known as error theory. Error theorists argue that there is a fundamental mistake, an error of some kind, at the heart of commonsense morality. John Mackie is well-known for putting forward error theory as an account of the ultimate nature of ethics.[2] Commonsense morality, Mackie says, presupposes the existence of objective values. But there are no objective values: there are no values that are intrinsically motivating. To support this, Mackie offers an argument from relativity, which says there is so much relativity and disagreement in ethics because there are no objective values. He also offers an argument from queerness that says that objective values, if they existed, would be strange entities. How could we come to know them, and how would they connect up to natural features of the world? Mackie says that patterns of objectification explain why people continue to believe in objective values when none truly exist.

Darwin certainly agrees with Mackie that there is such a thing as commonsense morality. The very concept of 'a moral sense' that Darwin uses seems to be shorthand for `commonsense morality' [Darwin (1871), p. 71]. Darwin has provided an evolutionary naturalist's "view of the origin and nature of the moral sense, which tells us what we ought to do" [Ibid., p. 93]. The following are aspects of commonsense morality that Darwin discusses: conscience, sociability, duty, habit, rules/standards of conduct, love and sympathy for others, defending oneself, approval and disapproval of others, services for others, sacrifice for others, and defending others.

A key piece of how Mackie supports error theory is his finding that commonsense morality presupposes the existence of objective values, values that are intrinsically prescriptive. When it comes to ethics, Darwin does acknowledge that human beings can be impelled by an instinctive motive to perform self-sacrificial acts to aid others [Darwin (1871), p. 86]. Darwin does not use the phrase 'objective values', and it may be going a bit far to say that he thinks commonsense morality presupposes an ontological claim that 'objective values exist,' but the tug of morality, the 'being impelled' of morality that has deep roots — deeper than mere habit can explain — is something that appears in Darwin's description of ethics, which is written from the perspective of natural history.

If Darwin's model of evolution does comport with Mackie's character-rization of commonsense morality and objective values, then Mackie's arguments from relativity and queerness retain their force. For when we philosophically reflect on the objective tug of morality we need to ask, if there are objective values that motivate human beings to act morally, why is there so much relativity in ethics? And, if there really were objective values, how do we know about them, and how do they connect with the natural features of the world?

Darwin notes that some people believe that in order for an action to be legitimately regarded as a moral action, it cannot be "performed impulsively" but must be "done deliberately after a victory over opposing desires, or when prompted by some exalted motive" [Darwin (1871), p. 87]. Darwin calls this the view of 'formal morality.' Since he has described actions in which 'moral beings' are 'impelled by an instinctive motive to help others,' he thinks his view differs from a formalist view of moral agency. Although Darwin agrees that someone who struggles against fear, for example, and yet performs a heroic action, will deserve more credit, he does not think that struggling against opposing desires should be the criterion of a moral action. He gives several reasons for this, one of which points to the common occurrence that if we perform a certain action very often we will not need to deliberate or hesitate with that type of action any longer, it will become second nature to us. If it is a good action, Darwin doesn't think we should refrain from calling it moral because we can now perform it effortlessly due to repeated performance.

The position Darwin takes against 'formal morality' bears on Richard Joyce's strategy for defending error theory, in which he views commonsense morality as presupposing that a moral agent is bound to the authority of categorical moral imperatives, regardless of his or her desires. Because *genuine* categorical imperatives are indefensible, argues Joyce, commonsense morality is fraught with error [Joyce (2001), p. 134]. It seems that Joyce characterizes commonsense morality as formal morality, a characterization Darwin finds questionable. Rather than characterize moral actions as always opposed to desires, Darwin suggests that an action can be considered moral if it is performed by a being "who is capable of comparing his past and future actions or motives" [Darwin (1871), p. 88]. An action performed by such a being is considered a moral action "whether performed deliberately, after a struggle with opposing motives, or impulsively through instinct, or from the effect of slowly gained habit" [Ibid., p. 89].

If Darwin, based on his understanding of ethics and social animals, does not acknowledge that commonsense morality presupposes that objective, categorical reasons can be exacted for all moral actions, then he disallows Joyce's first premise. Perhaps natural history is not the place to look for such support. A Darwinian view of evolution will acknowledge that human beings feel a tug of morality, and are sometimes impelled by morality. Even if it is not

felt in every moral action, the pull of morality does provide a background context in the sense that it is one of the basic components of commonsense morality.

### b) *Darwin and Expressivism*

Expressivism is the view that ethics is essentially about the expression of attitudes; ethical claims are expressions of attitude.[3] Since expressivists view moral statements and judgments as expressions of emotion, expressivists hold that moral statements and judgments are not the kinds of claims that can be true or false. Expressivists like Simon Blackburn, for instance, picture the nature of morality in terms of "sentiments and other reactions caused by natural features of things;" they say we "'gild or stain' the world by describing it as if it contained features answering to these sentiments" [Blackburn (1985), p. 152].[4] Ethics comes to this: the world impinges on us and we develop attitudes toward it. Values and ethics are simply a complicated "network of attitudes" [Blackburn (1996), p. 99]. Expressivists like Blackburn appeal to the notion of a moral sensibility, which can be improved, deteriorated or defective [Ibid., (1996), p. 85; (1988)].

Contemporary expressivism is part of an ethical tradition that traces back to David Hume (1739, 1751). British moral philosophers of the eighteenth century frequently referred to the moral sense. Darwin was familiar with this tradition and he, too, frequently refers to the moral sense [Darwin (1871), pp. 71, 73, 87, 93]. Sympathy is another ethical concept from British moral philosophy that Darwin discusses. He approvingly quotes Hume on sympathy [(1871), p. 85, n.19]. Darwin acknowledges and emphasizes that human beings have feelings not only for themselves, but for other human beings, most obviously the "parental and filial affections" [Darwin (1874), p. 41]. According to Darwin "the social instincts lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of its fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them, and to perform various services for them" [Darwin (1871), p. 72]. For Darwin, then, natural feelings of sympathy for others are aspects of the social instincts, which appear in animals and humans. Darwin says that "sympathy … forms an essential part of the social instinct, and is indeed its foundation-stone" [Darwin (1874), p. 42].[5]

In terms of expressivism and feelings of sympathy, the important thing about sympathy being bound up with the social instincts is that, for Darwin, the social instincts are the necessary ingredients for morality: "any animal whatever, endowed with wellmarked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, 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" [Darwin (1874), p. 41]. Darwin has "endeavored to shew that the social instincts, — the prime principle of man's moral constitution — with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule," which "lies at the foundation of

morality" [Darwin (1871), p. 106]. The intellectual powers surely have a place of importance in ethics, as expressivists would agree, but for Hume and the expressivists, intellectual powers alone do not generate ethics. The most necessary ingredient, as the expressivists and Darwin agree, is sentiments and sensibility. Darwin seems to concur with Hume and the expressivists, then, that ethics is ultimately based on feelings.

c) *Darwin and Ethical Relativism*

Expressivists like Blackburn allow that our moral sensibilities can deteriorate, improve, or be defective. One might think that expressivism ends up being an 'anything goes' theory of ethics, a form of ethical relativism. Not Blackburn, though. He says, for instance, that "if everyone comes to think of it as permissible to maltreat animals, this does nothing at all to make it permissible: it just means that everybody has deteriorated" [Blackburn (1985), p. 160]. Blackburn realizes, though, that people might think that expressivism somehow weakens the status of ethics by characterizing ethics as only about emotions. Blackburn thinks his ethical theory based on attitudes does not weaken the status of ethics because his notion of an adjustable network of attitudes that is regulated by fallible, yet tolerably reliable, moral sensibilities provides ethics with ample strength and durability [Ibid., (1985), p. 156].

Although expressivists like Blackburn do not maintain ethical relativism, some ethical theorists do.[6] In general, ethical relativists say it is only meaningful to talk of right and wrong from within a particular set of folkways, conventions, or frameworks. An ethical relativist will say that if I view treating animals cruelly as ethically wrong, it is only because of particular values that are prioritized in the social framework that I subscribe to. Individuals with a social framework in which values are prioritized differently may see nothing unethical with cruelty to animals since that social framework with its particular network of values has historically developed through different folkways. If others do not share our conventions, then they have no moral reasons to refrain from violating our conventions. Gilbert Harman, for one, defends ethical relativism by emphasizing how one's moral reasons are always tied to the conventions to which one subscribes [Harman (1977), p. 113].[7] In terms of the ultimate nature and origin of ethics, ethical relativists view ethics as ultimately dependent on the particular beliefs, opinions, and feelings of groups of individuals.

Where do Darwin's claims about ethics stand with respect to ethical relativism? Darwin does recognize that there are ethical differences from society to society, and also within societies, across time. Darwin observes that some ethical rules are grounded in "strange superstitions" [Darwin (1874), p. 59]. When a rule held sacred by the tribe is breached, he says, it gives rise to "the deepest feelings" [Ibid., p. 59]. He marvels at "How so many strange superstitions have arisen throughout the world;" yet he does

view them as arising "quite apart from the social instincts" [(1874), p. 59].[8] Although he admits variability in ethics, he seems to want to distinguish the ethical rules founded on social instinct from those founded on superstition. Therefore, he would seem to deny that ethics is solely the product of one's culture. Further, though, he says that it's highly probable that "any animal whatever, endowed with wellmarked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become […] developed" [Darwin (1871), pp. 71-72]. He doesn't see the inevitability of gaining a moral sense hitched to the vagaries of one's culture.

### d) *Darwin and Moral Realism*

Although Blackburn defends expressivism he admits that work needs to be done for an expressivist to adequately explain or account for basic ethical elements. Notions such as ethical truth and falsity, surface features of ethical statements, moral reasoning, and moral facts initially seem at odds with an expressivist view of ethics. For when people make ethical claims, engage in moral reasoning, and refer to ethical truths, they don't overtly seem to be expressing their attitudes. This is what Mackie pointed out when he said commonsense morality seems to presuppose that morality is objective and there are objective values. Ethical language does not appear on its surface to only express attitudes; it behaves logically as if it were no different from non-ethical language, which even by Blackburn's judgment, does not have an expressive function.

Now if one were to take these basic ethical elements at face value — ethical truth and falsity, the surface features of ethical statements, moral reasoning, and moral facts — and view them as representing a moral reality that obtains independently of human attitudes or projections, that would commit one to moral realism, our fourth and final metaethical account.[9] There are many ways to fill out the details of moral realism as a theory about the ultimate nature of ethics.[10] Generally, though, moral realism holds that ethics is objective, and its objectivity obtains independently of human opinions about it.

Expressivists hold that the moral sense is grounded in sympathy, sentiment and feeling. Without the ability to feel, we are unable to experience morality, they say. But even if, perhaps, the feeling of sympathy is the key that opens us to moral considerations, that in itself doesn't establish that moral considerations *are* sympathetic feelings. If I need a radio receiver, for instance, to pick up radio waves, that doesn't establish that the radio waves are radio receivers. We're still talking about two different things: the perceiver and the thing perceived. A moral realist will say, then, that expressivists who maintain that ethical claims are expressions of attitudes are collapsing the perceiver and thing perceived into each other. In a previous section I said that Darwin seems to agree with the expressivists that the most necessary ingredient in morality is sentiment and feeling and that ethics is

ultimately based on feelings. A moral realist may simply say that Darwin, too, collapses ethical attitudes with ethical realities.[11]

Yet, a few of Darwin's observations leave conceptual space for moral realism. First, he doesn't think that ethical standards are wholly derivable from one's particular culture; ethical standards are more stably rooted. Second, Darwin believes in moral progress: "as man gradually advanced … so would the standard of his morality rise higher and higher […] the standard of morality has risen since an early period in the history of man" [Darwin (1871), p. 103]. Under expressivism, what could it mean to say that the standard of morality has risen higher and higher? The view that ethics is only about expressing our attitudes sits uncomfortably with the view that ethical standards have risen higher and higher. Moral realism, though, easily accommodates the notion of moral progress. Moral realists would contend that it is with respect to moral reality that the standard of human morality has risen higher.

### III. CONCLUSION

Some evolutionary writers have given the impression that if human biological evolution is part of our worldview then commonplace notions of ethics no longer fit and need to be abandoned so that we can create ethics anew. Looking at Darwin's efforts to see ethics from an evolutionary perspective has provided an example of how taking human biological evolution as part of one's worldview still allows commonplace notions of ethics to fit in and make sense even when placed on an evolutionary foundation, without the need to create ethics anew.

Evolutionary biology, in itself, cannot assure us whether the nature of ethics should be understood as realist or irrealist, since reaching such a difficult verdict depends, as Sturgeon says, "on details that a general Darwinian outlook leaves quite undetermined" [Sturgeon (1992), p. 102]. In looking at Darwin's views on evolution and ethics and situating them among metaethical theories I am not claiming that evolution justifies ethics or provides a sufficient foundation for ethics. These metaethical theories retain their places on the playing field of ethics on the merits of how well they explain various aspects of the nature of ethics.

Justifying a theory on its own playing field, however, is only one way to evaluate a theory. Another way is to ask whether it makes sense with our contemporary understanding of the world. For instance, as a metaphysical theory about reality Thales' claims about water and Democritus' claims about atoms are both contenders in the pre-Socratic period for what ultimate reality essentially amounts to. But if we ask, which of them makes more sense given our contemporary understanding of the world, the answer will be Democritus' atomic theory.

Error theorists claim there is an error at the heart of commonsense morality. Darwin admits that there is a moral sense that can impel human beings into action. Mackie regards the assumption about objective values to be a widespread error. If there were objective values then why do we see so much relativity, Mackie asks. Darwin, though, doesn't appear to be overly concerned with the degree of ethical relativity. Overall, in the course of natural history, Darwin sees moral progress, not unending ethical disagreement. And this is another reason why Darwin's claims about ethics do not sit comfortably with ethical relativism. If there were objective values, Mackie says, they would be queer. Darwin, though, views the objective feel and tug of ethics as grafted onto social instinct, a perfectly natural feature of animals. If Mackie wants to know how we would know these objective values, Darwin would likely say that we feel them with our emotions. After all, Darwin's account does lend itself quite well with expressivism. Whereas error theory and relativism sit uncomfortably with Darwin's account, then, both expressivism and moral realism are suitable metaethical candidates that comport with Darwin's natural history perspective on ethics.

For Darwin, the moral sense tells us what we ought to do. Should we do it though? Why? To answer these kinds of normative questions we should consider normative ethical theories and see if their answers to the 'why be moral?' question can be accommodated in an evolutionary framework[12].

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NOTES

[1] As Flew [(1967), p. 1] points out, Herbert Spencer's work on evolution and ethics predates Darwin's. Nevertheless, though, Flew asserts that Darwin should be the reference point at which to begin.

[2] In his influential *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (1977).

[3] There are many variants of the metaethical position under review in this section. Of the many versions of this metaethical position such as emotivism, non-cognitivism, prescriptivism, quasi-realism, and norm-expressivism, defended by A.J. Ayer (1936), Charles Stevenson (1944), R.M. Hare (1952), Simon Blackburn (1993), and Allan Gibbard (1990) respectively, what they all share in common is the claim that although moral discourse *appears* to be cognitive and behaves cognitively, at bottom moral claims are expressions of emotions, prescriptions or attitudes. Each version of this metaethical position is in keeping with Hume's notion that ethics is ultimately grounded in sentiment.

[4] While some ethical theorists have attempted to describe ethics as intimately connected to theism, expressivists like Simon Blackburn hold that "the appeal to a supernatural order as a foundation for ethics is philosophically famously weak" [Blackburn (1995), p. 20]. Expressivists would rather account for the nature of ethics by making the least amount of metaphysical assumptions. Rather than a metaphysically extravagant and speculative ethic, expressivism keeps ethics down to earth [Blackburn (1985), p. 153; (1995), p. 20].

[5] Consistent with natural selection, Darwin observes that the strength of one's feeling of sympathy is variable [(1874), p. 58].

[6] Harman (1977), Wong (1984), Margolis (1996).

[7] See also Harman (1975); (1996).

[8] There are two other points he makes that acknowledge ethical differences. First, when he says that any animal with social instincts and a well developed intellect would inevitably acquire a moral sense, the moral sense that is acquired, he says, "wouldn't be exactly the same moral sense as ours" [Darwin (1871), p. 73]. Second, he is confident that over time human sympathies have changed; they "became more tender and widely diffused, extending to men of all races, to the imbecile, maimed, and other useless members of society, and finally to the lower animals" [Ibid., (1871), p. 103]. Given his view of the close connection between ethics and sympathy his observation about changing sympathies amounts to an acknowledgment that differences in ethics emerge across time.

[9] Blackburn seeks to explain away the apparent disconnect between metaethical expressivism and commonsense morality with an explanatory program he calls *quasi-realism*. According to Blackburn, when the expressivist "adopts quasi-realism, he ends up friendly to moral predicates and moral truth" [Blackburn (1990), p. 206]. Quasi-realism sets out to explain how attitudes get formalized or concretized into indicative statements that then get used in valid forms of moral reasoning.

[10] It seems that the most obvious and direct fit with an evolutionary perspective would be with a naturalistic moral realism, a version of moral realism that views ethical facts, realities, and truths as a special subset of naturalistic facts, realities, and truths, such as Boyd's version of moral realism (1988) or Railton's (1986). Railton explains that: "moral values or imperatives might be objective without being cosmic. They need be grounded in nothing more transcendental than facts about man and his environment, facts about what sorts of things matter to us, and how the ways we live affect these things" [Railton (1986), p. 201]

[11] Another way to say it is that the form of the moral sense is sentiment, while the content is not.

[12] See my unpublished manuscript, "Darwin and Normative Ethics", portions of which, in addition to "'The Social Instincts Naturally lead to the Golden Rule': The Ethics of Charles Darwin," were presented at *Darwin's Reach: A Celebration of Darwin's Legacy Across Academic Disciplines*, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY, March 14, 2009.

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