**Chapter 21 Ethics**

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**21.1 Does Darwinism signal the end of ethics?**

**21.1.1 The challenge of evolution**

To many religious fundamentalists and even secular dualists (that is, those who think that humans are composed of body and mind and that these are different entities - see Figure 21.1), Darwinism is to be distrusted because it is thought to undermine the basis for moral belief. The argument runs that since Darwinism relocates humanity in the natural world as just another species with no privileged status, then there is nothing outside ourselves on which to ground objective moral truths. In fact, looking to a nature ‘red in tooth and claw’ (as Tennyson said), our quaint moral codes seem to be an aberration. This was the general moral alarm generated by evolutionary thinking in Darwin’s day and it still persists: Darwin, by placing humans in nature and denying final causes and teleology – the idea that nature proceeds according to some plan or purpose – has stripped humanity of its moral compass and cast us adrift.

When such fears, historical and contemporary, are analysed, they can usually be seen to be based on a series of readings of the implications of Darwinism for the moral life. We can grade these in order of increasing philosophical sophistication roughly as follows:

1. Darwinism erodes belief in the existence of God and since God is needed as a basis for standards of right and wrong, so the absence of God implies no common standards.

2. By supplying a completely naturalistic account of the mind, cognition, emotion and so on, Darwinism completes the materialist paradigm and so destroys the idea that humans have a free will. Without a free will, humans cannot choose morally correct or incorrect behaviour; furthermore, we have thereby lost the ground for praising the good and punishing the bad, since people who commit such behaviour have no choice.

3. By showing that traditional moral virtues such as altruism may be a product of kin selection or habitual game theory strategies, their status as morally praiseworthy actions is compromised. After Darwin, altruism becomes enlightened genetic self-interest and morality therefore collapses into a series of fitness-enhancing rules. In such a world, genuine moral behaviour is impossible. The worry here is that empiricism will simply chart our preferences but not be able to provide a basis for choosing among them. Moreover, as part of the scientific destruction of metaphysics, Darwinism makes the search for objective moral truths futile. What were once taken to be eternal verities are merely subjective, or at best species-typical, codes and feelings. The consequence of this is, that without an external authority, anything goes and we slide into moral relativism.

4. Darwinism, as a science, is only able to provide facts about the world not values to adhere to. Because of the ought/is dichotomy, we cannot derive prescriptive statements from descriptive ones. However compelling a picture of the human condition Darwinism supplies, we cannot derive statements about how we ought to behave because ‘oughts’ belong to the realm of values, and values cannot be inferred from facts.

So, after Darwin, is humanity left without a moral compass? We will tackle each of these concerns below.

**21.1.2 Existence of God and a basis for objective moral standards**

Whether or not you believe in a god may be linked to your views about Darwin, but that is not our primary concern here. For many, Darwinism did indeed sweep away the last vestiges of a theocentric world view. Others, however, have managed to reconcile their religious feelings with the acceptance of organic evolution. Given that the focus here is on morality, it is more productive to examine the idea that a belief in a god is necessary for a belief in objective moral standards.

This question has a long history and was addressed in classical times by Socrates in the dialogue written by Plato called The Euthyphro (c.350 bc). In this work, Socrates asks his pupil Euthyphro: ‘Is something right because God commands it or does God command it because it is right?’ The latter view, that by definition what God commands is good, is sometimes called the ‘divine command theory of ethics’ or ‘voluntarism’. It is this view that would seem to be threatened by Darwin, since if Darwinism challenges a belief in God and if goodness is that which God commands, then we have lost our source of goodness and our grounds for good and evil have disappeared.

The Euthyphro question has been the subject of philosophical enquiry ever since it was raised. If we accept the divine command theory (a position taken by Descartes, Calvin and Luther), it would follow that if we were to discover that God actually commanded what we now and mistakenly believe to be cruel and unjust, such as genocide on the basis of ethnicity, then we would be forced to adjust our moral sentiments and accept this as good. The consistent voluntarist would have to reply ‘so be it’. Most people, however, would feel deeply concerned about this and think that some mistake must have been made. It will not do for the voluntarist, however, to simply say that God would never command such things because He is good. If God is good, then goodness is an attribute we can attach to him; an attribute that can be expressed as God does good things, that He recognises the good and puts it into practice. If this is the case, then the voluntarist must give up his position that whatever God wills is good simply because God wills it.

If we respond to the Euthyphro question, as Plato does, by accepting the first alternative, that God commands things that are right in themselves, then we have tacitly accepted that goodness is a property we can ascribe to God but also to other things. Thus God would forbid the torture of innocent children for pleasure because it is wrong, He recognises it is wrong and exhorts us not to do it. It is not wrong simply because He forbids it, otherwise we have the problem with the divine command theory outlined above. In this scenario, if goodness can be separated from God and exists independently of Him, then any doubts about the existence of God brought about by Darwinism, or any other branch of science, are not really relevant to the question of objective moral standards.

Few theologians and philosophers now accept the divine command view of ethics. If we follow their lead and reject it, then believers and non-believers alike have no grounds to fear that Darwinism will destroy any concept of goodness.

**21.1.3 Freedom of the will**

The traditional moralist might have two related concerns here. One is that Darwinism, as part of the materialist paradigm, forms part of a completely naturalistic explanation of human actions and such an explanation, de facto, allows no room for choice or free will. Since morality is intimately linked to the capacity to make choices (we do not, for example, impute moral intentions to earthworms), then a world where choice is unavailable has no moral dimension. The second related concern is that if humans are not responsible for their actions, then praise and chastisement – the carrot and stick of moral systems – are deprived of their authority except as positive and negative stimuli for learning.

These concerns are fairly easily dismissed (Richards, 2000). The first error is the idea that we are genetically programmed. Genes, in concert with environmental influences, build bodies and neural circuits that dispose people to behave in certain ways. We are not, however, constrained to behave only in those ways. Complex organisms such as humans are capable of decision-making, taking into account a whole range of sometime competing emotions and factors. Evolutionary psychology tells us about the functional origin of emotions, drives and decision-making algorithms but not how compelling any of them are.

Linked with this whole approach is the worry that by explaining the basis of what we have labelled ‘moral action’ in terms of natural processes, we have somehow destroyed the moral component. The problem of altruism (taken here to mean occasions when individuals sacrifice their own interests to advance those of others) is a case in point. The first problem posed by altruism is the fact that it undeniably does exist: people do the most self-sacrificing things that are difficult to explain in terms of kin selection, mutualism or reciprocal altruism. Yet at the genetic level, it is probably true to say that altruistic genes cannot survive for very long, for this would require the existence of genes that increase the frequency in the gene pool of other genes while decreasing their own frequency. The appearance of such genes would be a short-lived phenomenon at best. The way through the conundrum is that there is no simple one-to-one correspondence between genes and behaviour. Genes can only serve their purposes by building cells, organs and bodies. In the case of humans, they built complex organisms with an emotional-cognition system that, on average, in the past did a good job in ensuring the survival of the genes responsible. It is true that many of the dispositions we have are towards kin or in the expectation that favours will be returned, but natural selection also delivered up genuine emotions such as sympathy and concern for others that had the effect of promoting the general welfare of the group as it also advanced out own welfare. In the end, this proved a good breeding ground for these genes and was better than a social world limited to dog eat dog and the incessant competitive pursuit of self-interest. The outcome of mutualism and reciprocity meant that lots of gains were made through cooperative interactions and the feelings that motivated them. The crucial point is that just because such emotions did serve the interests of the genes that lay behind them, this in no way invalidates the existence of the emotion and the action. Explaining the origin of a phenomenon still leaves the phenomenon intact (Keats’ complaint that Newtonian optics had spoilt the beauty of the rainbow by explaining its origin in refraction was a foolish romantic posture; see Cartwright and Baker, 2005). Furthermore, the fact that such dispositions evolved to increase the frequency of the genes responsible does not mean that this is what the dispositions will always do.

The essential point here is that there is not a simple correspondence between the objectives of our multiplying genes and our own welfare as we now experience it. The realisation that pain was designed as a way of protecting genes from destruction does little (even for the most enthusiastic Darwinian) to lessen its unpleasantness. Similarly, altruism, compassion, sympathy, gratitude, trust and concern for others are real emotions directed away from the self and serve the common good in ways that we can label as morally approvable, even though they were brought into being by selfish replicators. To suppose that an explanation of something destroys its status is the fallacy of ‘nothing but ism’. The Elgin Marbles (sculptures from the Parthenon Frieze in the British Museum) may be made of calcium carbonate but they are still outstanding works of art. As Richards (2000, p. 178) notes:

An explanation of what something is in other terms is not enough to show that it is not a real case of that something.

In general terms, we could say that while a reductionist explanation may be a necessary condition to undermine the status of the thing it explains, it is not a sufficient one. Newtonian optics can account for the formation and position of the rainbow but rainbows remain, apparently hanging there in the sky (although since Newton we have grown more sceptical about their divine origins). Similarly, Darwinian reasoning helps us to understand the origins of altruism, but does not cause it to vanish.

Those who subscribe to this worry have more disciplines to fear than just evolutionary psychology, for if the concern is that revealing the causes of behaviour patterns places them beyond personal control, then this same concern also applies to environmentalism. Furthermore, it is not at all obvious that behaviours that unfold as a partial consequence of some genetic programme are harder to modify than those induced by environmental conditioning. Hence the cogency of the phrase coined by the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier (1506–52): ‘give me a child until he is seven and I will give you the man’. It follows that those who are worried about the genetic determinant of behaviour as subversive to the notion of conscious self-control and moral responsibility are really worried about determinism as a whole, be it genetic, environmental or some combination. Clearly, the issue resolves to the more general one of free will, determinism and responsibility.

It is usually thought that free will is incompatible with materialism: if the universe is made up of matter and energy obeying fixed laws, then it is both deterministic and determined and so free choice is an impossibility. This is a huge philosophical question and will only be explored briefly here, but deep enough I hope to allay the fears outlined above. It is instructive to compare this supposed denial of free will within scientific naturalism or materialism (of which Darwinism is an essential part) with what might be expected from an alternative paradigm such as that of **dualism**. The long tradition of dualism from Plato, through Christianity and Descartes still bears heavily upon thought. Most people find it natural to think of themselves as a physical shell (the body) containing something (soul, mind, psyche, spirit) that is non-physical. This view is sometimes called the ‘ghost in the machine’ – the idea that an immaterial agency haunts a physical shell. It is a view that is deeply misleading and at odds with the life sciences, but it is the philosophical implications that reward exploring. Figure 21.1 shows how the various interpretations of Darwin stand in relation to the idea of mind–body duality.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| ***Humans as Special Case*** | | | ***Humans as a biological and cultural species*** | | |
| Anti-Darwinian Fundamentalists | Dualist Darwinians | The Standard Social Science Model. | Human evolutionary psychology EP or HEP. | Human Behavioural Ecology. HBE | Dual inheritance type theories |
| Initial reaction of clergy in UK  Reaction of Creationists I USA  Rejection of Darwinism  Rejection of Materialism  Rejection of Darwinist explanations of human nature | Ghost in machine  Cartesian Dualism  Position of co-founder of natural selection Alfred Russel Wallace  Acceptance of some versions of Darwinism | Darwinists of the body, environmentalists of the mind  Accept materialistic explanations to all phenomena | The mind as a series of modular adaptations to times past**.**  Professional Disputes  Accept of Darwinist explanations of human nature | View of human behaviour as product of past selective forces but also as outcome of flexible strategies to pursue fitness. | The study of two systems of inheritance –biological and cultural- and their interaction |
| Darwinian Boundary  Naturalism /  Materialism  Boundary  Darwinian Psychology Boundary | | | | |  |

**Figure 21.1 A spectrum of responses to Darwin expressed as a series of boundaries.** Left of the Darwinian boundary are those who reject Darwin outright; to the right, stand those who accept some version of Darwinism. Left of the naturalism–materialism boundary stand those who reject the application of materialism to all phenomena; to the right, stand those who accept a materialist explanation for all phenomena. Left of the Darwinian psychology boundary stand those who think Darwinism has little to say about human nature; to the right are those who (in one of at least two disciplines) accept Darwinian explanations for the human mind and behaviour.

Source: Developed from an idea inRichards, J. R. (2000) *Human Nature after Darwin*. London, Routledge, p. 54.

Let us suppose that the dualistic world described above (the ghosts in the machine argument) is non-deterministic. If it were, then we are back to the earlier objection that free choice is impossible. Janet Richards (2000) explores this scenario with her telling example of a man facing the temptation of adultery. In a predetermined world, he is unworthy of praise for resisting or condemnation for succumbing since he had no choice – his decision was made for him by whatever circuitry he carried in his brain. How does the potential philanderer fare in a dualistic world? If we accept that not all things are determined, then things can just happen without a cause. Now, the decision of the man was either predetermined by the laws of nature or it suddenly took place without cause. In the former, the man is not responsible, for reasons already discussed. But in the latter case (indeterminacy), if his decision or behaviour appeared spontaneously, then he is equally incapable or merits blame or praise since ‘he’ did not cause it. As Richards (2000, p. 140) says:

The trouble with trying to bring non-determinism into all this is that uncaused events are, by definition, things for which nobody and nothing can be responsible.

If free will has thereby been demonstrated to be incompatible with determinism and indeterminism, it seems that we have ruled it out of existence altogether or that we have an imperfect conception of what ‘free will’ actually means. A long philosophical digression on this would be out of place here but it is worth considering Richards’ suggestion that we need to distinguish between two types of responsibility. One is ‘ordinary’ responsibility, which means being of sound mind and not under the influence of drugs or disturbed in some way; the other is ‘ultimate’ responsibility, which is something to do with a chain of causation. As our understanding of genetics, development and enculturation becomes more sophisticated, so we will achieve a better understanding of the forces that make us what we are. It does not follow, however, that praise and blame for moral and immoral acts respectively become unnecessary. Instead, they both serve as essential ingredients to inject into the decision-making of all of us. They become ‘instrumentally necessary for the maintenance of social order’ (Richards, 2000, p. 151).

**21.1.4 Transcendentalism, empiricism and the slide to relativism**

The origin and authority of our moral standards lies at the heart of perhaps the two most essential questions in metaethics: ‘If ethical norms lie outside the natural world, where are they and how can we recognise them?’; and ‘If they are just products of our biology, what authority should they have and why should we trust them?’

Wilson (1998, p. 238) summed up the vast literature on this topic as follows:

*Centuries of debate on the origin of ethics come down to this: Either ethical precepts such as justice and human rights are independent of human experience or else they are human inventions.*

In other words, one is either a transcendentalist or an empiricist. By 1998, Wilson was arguing even more passionately that a transcendental approach to ethics must give way:

The choice between **transcendentalism** and empiricism will be the coming century’s version of the struggle for men’s souls. Moral reasoning will either remain centred in idioms of theology and philosophy, where it is now, or will shift towards science-based material analysis. (Wilson, 1998, p. 240)

A Darwinist will, of course, take the empiricist’s route, but it is sometimes feared that this will only end in moral **relativism** (‘anything goes and all systems are equal’). The argument usually goes something like this: Darwinism destroys our belief in objective moral standards (since evolution has no direction and there is no external authority) and since there are no objective standards, we should respect all conventions equally and allow cultures to follow their norms. A hint of this line of reasoning (although not its conclusion) was given by Darwin himself when he wrote that if human society were like that of bees then:

There can hardly be any doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering. (Darwin [1871] 1981, p. 73)

A Darwinian might respond to the accusation of moral relativism in a number of ways. The first is to point out that the absence of objective standards outside our species-typical inclinations does not mean there are no standards. We might wish simply to emphasise the original source of our moral convictions: the evolved moral decision making circuitry and emotional centres of the brain where our moral passions are to be found. In other words, accept that morality is a facet of our nature and since there is a universal human nature (laid out for our inspection by Darwinism), so there are universal canons of morality that apply to our species (accepting that evolution may have made us prone to some cross-cultural and intersexual variation).

Another response might be to recognise that there are perfectly valid refutations of relativism and that consequently no philosophically minded Darwinian would wish to advocate this position. One argument is that it is self-contradictory: if there are no absolute standards, then the idea that we ‘should’ respect all standards is fallacious, since ‘should’ is an exhortation made impossible by the original premise of no objective standards. Any relativist (on the grounds that all systems are equal) criticising one system for attacking another is surreptitiously privileging its own position (that is, relativism). This is known as ‘pragmatic self-refutation’. Relativism is also incoherent in practice. If we take the case of a culture adopting a relativist stance to values within it, then relativist law makers would have to allow laws respecting pro-abortionists and anti-abortionists. Yet they are contradictory – one cannot have both.

**21.1.5 The fact–value dichotomy**

This is perhaps the most general and telling complaint against a Darwinian approach to ethics. The essence of the objection is the view that whereas Darwinism probably has a great deal to say about how we derived those emotional and intellectual convictions that form the basis of moral thinking and sentiment (a valuable exercise in its own right), it can never tell us what is the correct course of action or whether our intuitively guided behaviour is ‘really right’. We may be able to show that moral values are indeed the goals of our adaptations, but how do we tell if such values really are morally correct?

Shortly after the emergence of sociobiology, Kitcher (1985, p. 434) dismissed it as inadequate for this task:

*With its emphasis on the dictates of neural systems that have allegedly been fashioned to maximize the inclusive fitness of individuals who possess them, pop sociobiological ethics lacks any theory of the resolution of conflicts.*

Recently, the philosopher Janet Richards (2000, p. 252) restated this inevitable separation of facts and values:

Darwinian understanding of evolved characteristics cannot on its own offer any guide to what one ought to be doing. It can give us the information that may be relevant to the achieving of our ends, whatever they are, but it cannot specify the ends … In a Darwinian world values remain obdurately separate from the facts.

It is easy to see that there must be some sort of separation between facts and values, between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’, but how these two should be divided is still the subject of much dispute. An example from one unfortunate episode in mixing evolutionary facts and social values will illustrate the perils of mixing these two domains.

In the 19th century, a movement began called **social Darwinism**. Put very simply, social Darwinists tried to read off from the operation of the natural world a moral and political message about how societies should be structured and what were the obligations of the state to the needy. The conclusions reached from this dubious process were usually that since nature had progressed and evolved without any intervention, so the obligations of the state towards the weak were minimal: schemes to help the poor and feeble would only make matters worse by enabling them to breed and weaken the race.

Nowadays, the term ‘social Darwinist’ is one of abuse. Denouncing someone as a social Darwinist is often thought to be a sufficiently crushing argument in itself. But why exactly is social Darwinism an untenable exercise? Spencer’s phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ has become a catch phrase for those who advocate the virtues of free competition. There may indeed be virtues, but Darwinism, to the disappointment of any contemporary would-be social Darwinists, must remain silent on the issue. At one level, it is not at all clear that nature runs strictly along ‘red in tooth and claw’ lines anyway: animal groups show plenty of signs of cooperation, and even vampire bats share a meal with their needy brethren. If we look at some taxa, such as the ants, competition between individuals seems entirely suspended in favour of caring and sharing for the common good. If we wish to model human society on the natural world, it is difficult to know which group of organisms we should consider: the message from, for example, ants, bats and dandelions will be entirely different.

We could acknowledge the fact that nature (as far as we can tell) is not regulated by some external conscious agency and that indeed the purposeless process of natural and sexual selection has led to such complex organisms as ourselves. But does it follow that society should also be left to the unregulated outcome of the effects of individuals all pursuing their selfish ends? The answer is no. To believe otherwise is to make a huge and invalid leap of logic. The way in which humans want their social world to operate is part of the realm of values, the way the world actually seems to work belongs to the realm of facts, and there is no easy route from one realm to the other. The suggestion that one can simply infer values from descriptive facts is now known as the ‘naturalistic fallacy’, and it is often claimed that it was David Hume in his *Treatise of Human Nature* ([1739] 1964) who exposed this fallacy – although, as we shall see, Hume had his sights on a different goal.

Returning to the logic of social Darwinism, we can show that the reasoning is fallacious, but we need to do better than simply to evoke Hume. What the social Darwinist does is to confuse the consequences of natural processes with their value. If fierce unbridled competition got us to our present state, there is no obvious reason why it should still serve our ends. There is also a more profound issue at stake. Social Darwinism, like some forms of natural law thinking, assumes that nature is good. Yet in a Darwinian world stripped of all teleology we have no reason to assume this.

The social Darwinist is thus guilty of smuggling teleology in through the back door. Social Darwinism should be really called social Spencerism, in that it was Herbert Spencer rather than Darwin who kept the ideas of progression in his system of thought. The abyss into which Darwin stared was always too much for Spencer, who clung to a belief in steady evolution towards perfection. The essential point here is that it is the very purposelessness of the natural world that makes it a doubly unreliable guide. Natural selection does not make organisms better in any absolute way: it merely rewards reproductive success. There is no progress measured on an absolute scale but merely change. The whole thing is not going anywhere.

The invocation of Hume’s law – the impossibility of deriving the ‘ought’ from the ‘is’ – is often thought to be sufficient to deal the death blow to ethical reasoning that seeks a basis in the natural order. But we should be careful before abandoning a possibly fruitful line of enquiry. At some stage, the determined Darwinian will want to give a naturalistic account of value and morality and this, in the absence of any transcendental notions of goodness, will presumably have to be based on a factual account of the natural world.

The term ‘naturalistic fallacy’ is not to be found in Hume’s works but was coined by the British philosopher G. E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica* of 1903. Although Moore’s reasoning and the fallacy itself are often linked with Hume, Moore does not refer to Hume at all. Moore was keen to insist that moral value or ‘goodness’ was not a quality that can be read off from external objects. In his view, goodness was like ‘yellowness’, a subjective experience that was not reducible to anything else. To say, for example, that pleasure was good (as the utilitarians were forced to do) only made sense if goodness was a separate quality. Moore wanted to show that goodness was a non-natural property – a ‘simple, indefinable, unanalysable object of thought’ (quoted in Curry, 2005, p. 161). Moore is generally credited with derailing the project to link evolution and ethics because of his successful attack on Spencer’s attempt to view evolution as progressive, tending towards good ends. Moore’s attack on social Darwinism was correct, in that we cannot simply say that what is natural is good: within the whole project of naturalism, everything is natural and if this implied that everything is good, then the very meaning of good (together with moral problems) would disappear. But Moore’s debunking of social Darwinism does not damage the central plank of the Darwinian approach, which is that the passions are natural and some natural passions are moral in that they promote the common good.

Alex Walter is keen to challenge the shadow cast by the putative naturalistic fallacy over this area and suggests that we should also be wary of the ‘anti-naturalistic fallacy’. He defines this as follows:

*We must recognize that while not all natural facts are relevant to ethical or moral discourse, all facts that are relevant to ethical and moral discourse will nonetheless be natural facts*. (Walter, 2006, p. 35)

This is a statement of belief with which the Darwinist can concur: ethical reasoning must somehow take into account the natural facts of the world (and, by implication, human nature) because there are no other facts to be had. At some level, values and facts must be related. It is, for example, the factual nature of the human condition that enables us to express what human wants are and what are good things for humans. We value a society that allows couples to have children, for example, because this is allowing freedom of expression to our biological nature. This is the approach adopted by Wilson, who thinks crying ‘naturalistic fallacy’ in such debates is an invalid objection:

*The posing of the naturalistic fallacy is itself a fallacy. For if ought is not is, what is? To translate is into ought makes sense if we attend to the objective meaning of ethical precepts. They are very unlikely to be ethereal messages outside humanity awaiting revelation*. (Wilson, 1998, p. 250)

For Wilson, ‘the ought’ is sought not in the transcendental realm but by looking at the public will:

*Ought is just shorthand for one kind of factual statement, a word that denotes what society first chose (or was coerced) to do, and then codifies … Ought is the product of material process. The solution points the way to an objective grasp of the origin of ethics*. (Wilson, 1998, p. 251)

The problem here is that this explains the origins of the compulsion to behave (that is, the experience of ‘ought’) but does not help in formulating a new code or answering moral questions, for example, ‘Ought we ban human cloning?’

**21.2 David Hume (1711–76)**

Hume’s views on the nature of emotions and human morality have much in common with contemporary evolutionary psychologists. The central feature of Hume’s philosophy is the demonstration that factual knowledge must be based on sensory experiences that are processes and understood by inferences and habits of the mind. To the 21st-century reader, this will seem uncontroversial enough, but at the time, it ran counter to a strong tradition in Western thought that knowledge could be obtained through the exercise of reason and faith alone. He applied this perspective to morality and concluded that morality is not something that could be derived from the exercise of reason alone. If we witness an immoral act, we do not ‘see’ the immorality out there as we see objects. Rather, we find it immoral because of a ‘sentiment of disapprobation’ that arises in us. One might possibly object that we feel the disapproval because the action we witnessed broke some rationally derived ‘rule of right’ or moral code that we have previously established, but here Hume demonstrates that we tend to justify rules by reference to our moral sense and not the other way round. The fundamental point about Hume’s approach is that he argues that morality arises from the sentiments, passions and feelings that all humans share.

Hume anticipated some of the thinking later to be found in evolutionary psychology. He thought affection for children to be natural and that affection for relatives lessened as the relatedness decreased. He also wrote on the inequalities in parental certainty and thought this could explain why chastity was valued by men as a virtue in women. On the topic of more general reciprocity between non-kin, however, he thought this was not a natural moral sentiment and had to be enforced by artificial devices such as promises.

**21.3 Another trolley scenario**

Further support for the idea that the two classic trolley scenarios invoke differ types of decision-making processes comes from the work of Lanteri et al (2008). This group examined the reactions of 62 undergraduates in Italy to both the standard trolley problem and its footbridge variant. Unlike previous studies they asked participants whether it is a) morally obligatory and b) morally acceptable to pull the level or push the stranger onto the track. As expected from previous work, pushing the stranger was felt to be less obligatory and less acceptable than pulling the lever. The interest in this study comes from the fact that the researchers presented the two scenarios in two different sequences to the volunteers: the lever problem presented first followed by pushing the man problem; then pushing the man problem first followed by pulling the lever. As shown in Table 22.1 it appears that reversing the order has a significant effect on the acceptability of the action.

**Table 22.1 Expression of judgement that it is morally obligatory or acceptable to pull lever or push man in the two classic trolley scenarios in relation to order of presentation**. Data taken from Lanteri et al (2008) Figures 1,2,&3 pp796-797.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Sequence of presentation of scenario** | **Scenario** | **Morally Obligatory**  **(% answering yes)** | **Morally Acceptable**  **(% answering yes)** |
| Standard sequence | Pull Lever | 34.3 | 94.3 |
| Push man | 2.9 | 45.7 |
|  |  |  |  |
| Reversed sequence | Push man | 7.4 | 48.1 |
| Pull lever | 11.1 | 77.8 |

Presenting the emotionally charged “push the man” scenario first (in a reversal of the usual order of these experiments) is followed by a reduced expression of the moral rightness of pulling the lever (the obligatory percentage falls from 34% to 11% and the acceptability percentage falls from 94% to 77.8%). The authors of the study suggest, in line with previous interpretations, that the “pushing the man” action elicits a strong emotional moral response and that in this case it is quite robust and not sensitive to the order which the problem is presented (it is not especially subject to framing effects). On the other hand, the processes of moral reasoning elicited by the “pull the lever” problem are more labile and sensitive to context: if moral emotions are first aroused by the pushing the man problem then the supposedly rational process of utilitarian reasoning which is assuming to occur in the lever problem is affected.

This study used a fairly small sample size and certainly needs to be replicated with a larger and more varied sample. But it is valuable in pointing to the possibility that moral reasoning is sensitive to the way questions are framed and what emotions may have been previously aroused in the presentation of the problem. It also shows that a simple and easily replicated procedure is capable of yielding new insights, showing that there is still some life left in “trolleyology. For a review of the philosophical interpretations of trolley dilemmas in terms of traditional ethical theories see Bruers and Braeckman (2014).

**22.4 Moral development**

Theories of developmental stages

Jean Piaget (1896-1980) is often regarded as one of the chief founders of the psychological analysis of morality. From the 1930s onwards Piaget pioneered a cognitive-developmental approach to explain the moral development of children. In keeping with his ideas about cognition, Piaget thought that children went through a series of discrete moral stages as they matured. Children were propelled along through these stages by interacting with the world, with others, and as a result of an inner drive to form consistent beliefs. In simple terms Piaget envisaged three stages: a pre-moral stage (0-5 years), when children were egocentric and had little understanding of moral rules; a stage of “heteronomous” morality (5-10 years) characterised by beliefs that rules were absolute, binding and imposed by important external authorities; and, finally, a stage of moral relativism or “autononmous “ morality (10 years upwards) when children consider rules critically, realise that sometimes it is necessary to break them, and appreciate that people may have different rules and values. Piaget’s ideas were subsequently criticised on various fronts but the central idea of discrete development stages retained a strong hold on the mind set of many psychologists.

The most influential development and modification of Piaget’s framework came from Lawrence Kohlberg (1927-1987). Kohlberg’s method was typically to present young people with scenarios that posed moral dilemmas and then ask through an interview how the subject would respond. He drew several conclusions form his work:

* As people develop they more through increasingly sophisticated levels of moral reasoning. Six stages can be identified (two at each level) (Table 22.2)
* The acquisition of a higher stage of moral reasoning supersedes and displaces those below
* The higher the stage reached the more likely the subject is to behave according to this level.

Kohlberg’s work and that of his followers has generated a vast literature well outside the scope of this work to assess. In brief, however, a few criticisms (see Krebs, 2000) commonly levelled are:

* It is a rationalistic approach to morality that assumes people use reason (and not say intuition) to solve moral problems. Even if rational solutions can be provided it may be that this is post hoc rationalisation after the moral “passions” have done their work in pointing to an answer.
* It is androcentric and does not reflect the responses and feelings of women. Weight is lent to this criticism by the fact that Kohlberg’s initial work was done on young men.
* There are differences between the way people actually behave and the way they suggest answers to hypothetical problems.
* The structural framework is employed by people more flexibly in practice than Kohlberg supposed and people in real life situations often operate at different levels according to context.

Despite these criticisms, the theory has remained influential. James Rest, for example, devised a “Defining Issues Test” based on Kohlberg’s ideas that enables a score to be awarded to people supposedly indicating the sophistication of their moral reasoning in terms of the hierarchy Kohlberg outlined (see Rest, 1975).

Table 22.2 shows the series of six stages that humans are supposed to ascend as they become more sophisticated in their outlook and reasoning. Much work remains to be done in this area. We need to ascertain whether people actually do progress through the stages Kohlberg proposed or whether these are post hoc rationalisations that can be given by subjects once their moral intuitions have given them a solution. Kohlberg’s cognitive approach to morality chimed in well with the cognitive revolution in psychology in the 1960s and 1970s and the move away from behaviourist and psychoanalytical approaches to development. But more recent developments in the neurosciences, primatology and evolutionary psychology have all pointed to the deep seated and often unconscious nature of moral decision making. As Haidt has aptly noted “suddenly Kohlbergian moral psychology seemed to be studying the wagging tail rather than the dog” (Haidt, 2007)

**Table 22.2 Kohlberg’s stages of moral development**

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| **Kohlbergs’s levels and stages** |
| ***Level 1 Pre-conventional (What’s in it for me)*** |
| Stage 1. Obedience to authority; avoiding punishment |
| Stage 2. Self-interest; return favours, getting even, simple exchanges |
| Level 2: Conventional morality |
| Stage 3 Conforming to what is expected; maintaining reputation; caring for others; exercising the virtues of trust, loyalty and gratitude. |
| Stage 4 Maintaining social systems, obeying social laws, contributing to the moral order in society |
| Level 3 Post-conventional (principled conscience) |
| Stage 5 Fulfilling social obligations, pursuing the greatest good for the greatest number; concern with the welfare of all |
| Stage 6 Treating people as ends in themselves; respect for the equality of human rights; following “universal principles of justice” |

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