



Why Morality is Inexplicable in Naturalism - the Particular Case of Michael Ruse

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Review of Michael Ruse's book, "Taking Darwin Seriously."

Evolutionists have, for some time, attempted to wrap morality around their Darwinian finger so they can provide a complete perspective on every facet of reality. But, as Michael Ruse shows, doing so is extremely doubtful.

One important subset of philosophy that is of most concern to us is ethics and morality. World views influence the bedrock assumptions by which we derive our ethical principles and values and they determine our laws. Therefore it is of great importance that we study these background assumptions and their results to ascertain their truthfulness.

There are, I believe, two primary ethical theories: naturalistic (no god) and god-centered morality (hereafter "GCM"). The naturalistic theory of morality proposes that no divine being can control our actions and no divine being sets the standards of morality by which we might be judged. Rather, the social demand for moral codes creates them and their usefulness judges how well they should be adopted by society. GCM, however, suggests that God, by his creative ability, imprints some moral knowledge, in our brain, of the actions he wants from us. This roughly agrees with the kind of behavior we find useful to create a good society. GCM does not propose some type of hellish punishment for those who disobey and neither does it propose any time frame for earthly punishment. It only supposes some type of punishment, whether immediate or future.

Finding Darwin's Ethics

Michael Ruse is the author of *Taking Darwin Seriously*, an attempt to ground ethics on naturalistic evolutionist bedrock. Ruse is quite correct when he declares that what makes moral claims different than other factual claims is their universality. For instance, the moral claim that one ought not to rape little girls is not just a statement that one person ought not to do this but that everyone should not do it. Ruse states that morality "is about desired or permitted or required behavior, or about unwanted or forbidden behavior." Morality and ethics are about obligations and his theories, to be true, must suggest what agent we are obligated to obey. However, Ruse does not take that path.

Ruse says there are three aspects of evolution: the path, the fact, and the mechanism. The fact and path of evolution yield very little to suggest what moral path we should take and Ruse asks the mechanism of evolution to fill the job. Evolution, he says, is still going on and we should, as moral beings, aid the process of evolution. Therefore, Ruse says,

it can be seen that in our aiding evolution we are contributing to the morally worthwhile, which is the accomplished evolution itself. The rules of conduct do not exist in splendid isolation, but are rooted in the very essence of living beings, just as the dictates of the Sermon on the Mount are rooted in the very essence of the living God.

Evolution can be seen as mere change, bad or good. This, however, strains at creating a moral obligation since change often creates chaos as well as order. Ruse does seem to believe that evolution overall produces betterment and hence we have a moral duty to continue evolution's climb toward prosperity. Yet it is not necessarily true that evolution proceeds this way. (Rampant poverty and extinctions show this.) Ruse tries to tie the general direction to the nature of evolution and dives into the writings of Herbert Spencer, William Graham Sumner, and Thomas Huxley.

Herbert Spencer believed that evolution proceeds toward greater complexity. We should foster competition and free enterprise so the most biologically fit survive. However, mankind is populated with "higher" animals that have learned to cooperate and hence this coexistence, not struggle, should be a way to achieve further evolution. Ruse, however, finds fault with Spencer when noting that even though Spencer might be correct about the path, fact, and cause of evolution, this would not justify the ethical claims it makes. It is simply not correct to suppose a complex state is more preferable than a simple one and, if you believed that the complex is preferable to the simple because mankind derives value from the complex, then you would not be getting your values from evolution. Instead, you would be getting your ethical values from your prior metaphysical assumptions that mankind is the culmination of increasingly complex evolution and hence of more worth than simple organisms.

His survey of Sumner and Huxley likewise yields little to ground ethics on evolution. Social Darwinists point out that in the struggle for existence, some humans will succeed and some will die out and it is good, from an evolutionist standpoint, that this should happen. However, it is not true that what is "natural" is always good. Death is also natural, but should we not aid those who are sick rather than let them waste away?

This cuts to the heart of Ruse's dilemma and contrasts sharply with what has been called "Christian charity." Ruse finds that "ignoring nature's unfortunates" strikes him as the reaction of the "callous oaf" - an act that might strike one as obviously immoral. Yet, he also finds that one's subjective emotional feeling that something is immoral can be a dangerous guide to determining objective ethical precepts. Evolution teaches us that life progresses toward death as well as life and if we are to glean moral obligations from evolution's path, then we are bound to find little to justify helping the unfortunate. Yet, if our god demands us be charitable toward others, we have an obligation to do so merely because He places high value on people, even unfortunate ones. Perhaps helping those most in need of help, as a good Samaritan would, is not just some evolution-inspired desire but a deeply rooted divine command.

Ruse's explorations lead him in his last chapter on ethics to indulge in utilitarianism and Kantian rule-based morality. Perhaps we are obligated to produce the most joy for the most people? Even here Ruse finds discovering a moral rule problematic. We know we should not harm children, and if we use the Greatest Happiness Principle of utilitarianism or the Categorical Imperative of Kant, we find justification for these feelings. However, Ruse asks why we should heed these supreme principles. The question is merely put back a notch. He finds that morality is an adaptation to help us survive and this is part of the evolutionary process. Here, to him, morality finds its objective root. But has it? Ruse summarizes:

The point about morality . . . is that it is an adaptation to get us to go beyond regular wishes, desires and fears, and to interact socially with people. How does it get us to do this? By filling us full of thoughts about obligations and duties, and so forth. . . . In a sense, therefore, morality is a collective illusion foisted upon us by our genes. Note, however, that the illusion lies not in the morality itself, but in its sense of objectivity. I am certainly not saying that morality is unreal. Of course it is not! What is unreal is the apparent objective reference to morality.

Three problems immediately present themselves. The first is that people will, if they are the least bit logical, refuse to follow a moral demand that has no objective moral reference. The second problem is what I call the "locality" problem. Our naturalistic adaptive morals are dictated by changes to the whole of society, yet we must ask if minor acts that do not change the structure of society that much are still immoral. Would it be immoral for me to cheat on my wife when the total net impact to life is negligible? Darwinists, I think,

must answer no while GCM advocates must answer in the affirmative. This is because GCM advocates believe God is concerned with every individual's sin, not just the ones that change society. Third, if moral feelings are illusory, why not other feelings of intuition that we take for granted?

GCM, of course, would say that these so-called feelings of moral obligations are not just illusory but part of a knowledge of absolute codes of conduct that have been imposed on us by our divine creator. This knowledge does not, of course, identify which creator, but it does lead us to at least acknowledge one's existence and seek him or it out.

Naturalistic ethics (including utilitarianism) have been criticized by other authors: Francis Beckwith, Gregory Koukl, Louis Pojman, Steve Wilkens, and J. Budziszewski. **1** I would suggest every philosopher and Christian explore as many of these authors to gain a valid critique of naturalism. Naturalism has its critics and, perhaps, GCM has as many flaws as naturalism. Or, perhaps, it has the better case to offer between these two options.

There is a lot to recommend GCM. As J. P. Moreland has pointed out, GCM makes sense of the feeling of moral shame one has in the absence of any individual that has been wronged. **2** It is also the default way of thinking about obligations by theists as well as atheists.

GCM is also a testable hypothesis. One should be able to find commonalities in various cultures that one can "map" to religions to see if the ethics the religions advocate agree with the dominant moral beliefs of the different cultures. The moral absolutism of GCM believes such commonalities will be found. These moral beliefs should also be good for the societies that encourage them. GCM also will propose that there will be a predisposition to rationalize immoral behavior as to escape the effect that our conscience has on us when we disobey the moral commands we know but wish to not know. This tendency is most obvious in the abortion debate.

GCM also explains the preoccupation, sometimes obsession, with personal autonomy that occurs in conservative and liberal political theories and, in the extreme, pro-choice politics. The pro-choice believe it is immoral for the pro-life to rob them of their choices (although they seldom say this thievery is "immoral"). Why do they think this way? Perhaps they believe there is some unwritten rule that transcends time that one is obligated to obey to allow people to do as they want with their body. Such an idea makes sense if there is some divine being that values us and wishes us to not be devalued by anyone, even to the point of imprinting this knowledge of the divine law on our hearts.

I find that GCM has more to offer than naturalistic atheistic ethics. The evolutionist ethic of Michael Ruse has its obvious problems because it is grounded on a meandering series of occurrences instead of a lawmaker. While no ethical theory is impervious to criticism, GCM at the very least offers us that intelligent agent our ethics demand while writers like Ruse can only fumble about in the dark trying to discover Darwin's basis for ethical claims. *LSI*

1. Louis Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, (Belmont: CA, Wadsworth, 1995); Steve Wilkens, *Beyond Bumper Sticker Ethics*, (Downer's Grove, InterVarsity, 1995); Francis Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*, (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1998)

2. J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City*, (Grand Rapids, Baker House, 1987)