Ruse and Wilson

Is ethics independent of humans or has human evolution shaped human behavior and beliefs about right and wrong?

Hume's Is/Ought Problem

- "In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remark'd, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, and establishes the being of a God or makes observations concerning human affairs; when of a sudden I am surpriz'd to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*. This change is imperceptible; but is, however, of the last consequence." -Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*
  - Is: concerned with what is the case; a descriptive claim
  - Ought: concerned with what out to be the case; a normative claim
  - Hume's point: If empirical facts really are devoid of normativity, then one cannot conclude from descriptions of what is the case that something ought to be the case

Naturalistic Fallacy

- G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*
- Naturalistic fallacy: the fallacy of identifying an ethical concept with a natural concept or deriving what is good or bad from natural properties or a description of natural things
- Problem is in the attempt to define "good" in terms of more basic properties
- "Good" itself is a simple property and cannot be defined in terms of simpler, empirical properties

Moral Philosophy as Applied Science

- "Beliefs in extrasomatic moral truths and in an absolute is/ought barrier are wrong. Moral premises relate only to our physical nature and are the result of an idiosyncratic genetic history–a history which is nevertheless powerful and general enough within the human species to form working codes." (421)
- R&W hope to argue for a naturalistic ethics based on evidence from evolution
  - In other words, R&W think Hume and Moore are wrong

Materialist Presupposition

- Everything has a material base, including the body, mind, and culture
- Materialism: view that the world is entirely composed of matter
- Biology provides an explanation of the workings of the human species
- R&W: "the human condition can eventually be understood to its foundations, including the sources of moral reasoning" (422)

Origins of Morality

- The foundation or origin of morality is the human being and facts arising from the species' evolutionary history
- Moral principles are not universal
- Moral principles depend on nothing other than the human species, there is no divine revelation

Evolution

- R&W: "All populations of organisms evolve through a law-bound causal process"
  - Evolution is a universal process
  - Evolution moves from simplicity to complexity
  - Natural selection is the driving force: individuals with certain combinations of traits survive to reproduce and thus increase the frequency of those traits in the future population
  - Molecular biology and genetics can, in principle, explain the patterns of change

Genes and Behavior

- Genes influence physical traits
- Likewise, genes can influence behavior
- Assumes that many behaviors, like many physical traits, will have their origins in genetics
- Just as genetic analysis explains differences in physical traits, so too genetic analysis will provide an explanation of behavior
- Can all behavior be explained by genetics?

Limitations on Genetic Analysis

- R&W: "Hence classical genetic analysis cannot by itself explain all of the underpinnings of human behavior, especially those that involve complex forms of cognition and decision making." (425)
  - Suggestion is that many simple behaviors can likely be explained by genetics (perhaps, reflex responses, flee or fight responses, protection of self and others, etc.)
  - But, much of human behavior is tied to complex social interaction, so environmental influences need to be understood
    - Problem: If environment plays too central a role, then the genetic thesis is threatened.

Moral Behavior (cooperation) a Result of Causal Mechanisms

- Two causal mechanisms can produce cooperation, associated with moral behavior, among members of a species
  - Kin Selection: an individual should sacrifice oneself if there is a reproductive benefit in the altruistic act
    - suggests that one's sacrificing oneself to save two siblings (share 50% of genes), four nephews (share 25%), or eight cousins (share 12.5%) is a fair trade in evolutionary terms
  - Reciprocal Altruism: one individual provides a benefit to another non-related individual in expectation of mutual benefit
    - mutual assistance can be given to an entire group from which benefits are received

Altruism and Evolution

- Altruism: (biological definition) behavior by an individual that increases the fitness of another while decreasing the actor's fitness
- Empirical evidence suggests that human cooperation could have arisen from kin selection and reciprocal altruism
- Thus, this evolutionary sense of "right" and "wrong" arises from biological processes and not the result of extrasomatic forces

Genetic Deception

- R&W: "Human beings function better if they are deceived by their genes into thinking that there is a disinterested objective morality binding upon them, which all should obey. We help others because it is "right" to help them and because we know that they are inwardly compelled to reciprocate in equal measure." (425-6)
- Why do humans think morally? What constrains moral thought and behavior?

Epigenetic Rules

- Epigenetic Rules: "genetically based processes of development that predispose the individual to adopt one or a few forms of behaviors as opposed to others"
- Epigenetic rules predispose us to view some actions as right, others as wrong
- Moral thinking and behavior results from these epigenetic rules

Epigenetic Rules and Humans

- Evidence for epigenetic rules in human behavior and cognition includes:
  - Color vision and color vocabulary
  - Facial expressions and emotion detection
  - Language acquisition
  - Predication in logic
  - Phobias and threats to human survival

Origin of Morality

- Ensembles of genes evolved
- These ensembles of genes lead to mental development in accordance with epigenetic rules
- These epigenetic rules are peculiar to the species in which they developed
- These epigenetic rules constrain human behaviors within a group and culture
- Constrained human behaviors are reinforced through contractual social agreements
- Moral reasoning is "molded and constrained by epigenetic rules"

Case of Incest

- Incest results in greater childhood mortality and crippling birth defects for offspring of incestuous relationships
- What causes the avoidance of incestuous relationships is not knowledge of the biological/genetic basis
- What causes avoidance is early childhood inhibition to create sexual bonds with whom one is living in close proximity
  - lowered genetic fitness of incestuous practices led to evolution of early childhood inhibitions
- Inhibition to engage in incest during sexual maturity led to common feeling that incest was inappropriate
  - formal incest prohibitions reflect the cultural reinforcement of these automatic biological inhibitions

Argument for Evolutionary Ethics

1. Everything has a material base
2. All populations evolve through a law-bound causal process
3. Evolutionary biology can explain the transmission and presence of physical traits by appeal to natural selection
4. Genes influence both physical traits and behavioral traits
5. Epigenetic rules are adaptive rules which constrain thought and behavior (into right and wrong)
6. Epigenetic rules are the foundation of altruistic and moral behavior
7. Altruism is a result of causal processes and evolutionary biology can explain altruistic behavior

---

8. Thus, to the extent evolutionary biology can explain determined, causal processes it can explain the foundations of moral behavior

Ramifications for Morality

- Ethical premises are products of genetic history
- Ethical premises are adaptive for the species that possess them
- Morality is rooted in human nature
  - Ethical laws are mutable
  - Ethical laws are not universal, but relative to the species
- Nonetheles, humans can't help but think of ethical truths as objective

Relativist Threat to Evolutionary Ethics

- Threat: If ethical premises are not independent of humans, then the individual is free to adopt any ethical code, regardless of its consequences
-
- R&W Response: Humans beings share similar genetic history
  1. Similar genetic history generates similar epigenetic rules
  2. Similar epigenetic rules place similar moral constraints on humans

---

  3. So, humans have similar moral codes

Religious Threat to Evolutionary Ethics

- Threat: Religion advocates the non-empirical study of moral behavior
- R&W Response: Against the non-empirical study of moral behavior
  - The non-empirical study of moral behavior leads to bigotry (i.e., the characteristic of being obstinately or intolerably devoted to one's own opinions and prejudices)
  - But, in a naturalistic study of morality bigotry declines because no one is part of a privileged group or the bearer of "revealed" truth
    - We are all human with shared epigenetic rules

No Absolute Distinction Between Is and Ought

- There exists a naturalistic explanation for altruistic behavior
- This naturalistic explanation stresses the adaptive benefits of altruistic behavior for a species
- This *is* statement forms the basis for explaining how humans *ought* to act, the basis for moral codes

Limits of Altruism

- R&W suggest that altruistic behavior begins at home with one's relatives and closest community members
- Basic altruistic principles are evolutionarily determined
- We can choose to not obey the moral norms we are predisposed to follow
- One's behaviors and actions are not completely determined

Evolutionary Ethic's Moral Rules

- If R&W are correct that humans cannot help but think of ethical truths as objective, then many of the proposed standards of ethical conduct would be consistent with evolutionary ethics
- The issue is what grounds these ethical systems
  - Is there a problem with saying that ethical truths are grounded in the survival of a species?
  - Is there a problem with saying that "good" actions are those that benefit the survival of the species?

Challenges

- Could humans have developed beyond rudimentary evolutionary codes and now need to formulate more sophisticated principles, like beauty, truth, the good? What do these ideals have to do with survival?
- How does evolutionary ethics deal with universal moral claims?
  - Evolutionary ethics implies that we have an obligation to our family members and close community members. However, the prohibition against murdering applies not just to members of one's family but also to strangers
- Have R&W really escaped the is/ought gap? Can one really move so easily from findings in the natural sciences to claims about moral behavior?