

# **A neglected difficulty with Social Darwinism**

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For the purposes of this paper, Darwinism will be taken to refer to the scientific research programme initiated by Charles Darwin especially in his 1859 *The Origin of Species*. The core principles are two: (1) all species are descended from one progenitor; and (2) the mechanism how this descent occurs is natural selection. This mechanism occurs when three conditions are satisfied, namely when a trait of an organism is variable, when it is hereditary, and when it is relevant for survival. Darwin's two explanatory principles have been challenged on various fronts, but have withstood criticism very well, even though experts in evolutionary biology today still leave it as an open question whether one should assume just one progenitor or perhaps a very small number, and whether or not natural selection is the only mechanism involved. Biologists nowadays often talk of the Modern Synthesis, which roughly means the combination of these Darwinian insights together with Mendelian Genetics and molecular genetics. For the philosopher, one of the crucial questions in this development concerns the applicability of this kind of explanation to areas that lie beyond the horizon of strict empirical study, to areas, that is, that lie within the realm of ethics, religion and the human sciences. Darwin himself kept human beings always in view. He eventually worked out theories of the evolution of cognitive dispositions or habits, of ethics, and even of religious behaviour. For instance, in his 1871 study, entitled *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, he asked: are high moral standards advantageous? His answer, put simply, was No as regards the

individual; Yes as regards the community. The logic here is not difficult to follow. He observed that a tribe with self-sacrificing individuals would have survival advantage over another tribe without such individuals. In the long run, this results in natural selection. And hence, standards of morality tend to rise, in the sense that tribes with individuals open for the possibility of self-sacrifice tend to outlive other kinds of tribes.<sup>1</sup>

From these brief remarks, it can be seen that Darwin's attitude was in line with those who think that successful scientific explanations are to be extrapolated beyond the sciences. This point touches the delicate question of the status of philosophy vis-à-vis natural science. Since Darwin's times, there seem to have emerged a clear dichotomy between those who insist that philosophy and natural science don't mix, and those who insist that they do indeed mix, in the sense that philosophical problems have been, and are being, resolved by the steady progress of natural science. At one extreme, we find philosophers saying that natural selection in the evolution of hominids is completely irrelevant for the resolution of problems in ethics, for problems in the philosophy of mind, and for social and political debates. At the other extreme, we have biologists like E.O. Wilson who in 1975 solemnly announced that moral philosophy has shifted from the philosophers' lecture room to the biologists' laboratory. This latter attitude gave rise to social Darwinism or, as Wilson preferred to call it, sociobiology.

In this paper, I will be examining a neglected aspect of evolutionary explanation as it is applied beyond its normal habitat.<sup>2</sup> I will first say something more about Social Darwinism as a philosophical position, and then list some arguments for and against it; I will, of course, be concentrating on arguments that are philosophical rather than scientific. In the final section, I consider whether evolutionary explanation can be said to do a partial job, explaining some aspects of moral reasoning and not others.

## **1. Social Darwinism**

There is a slight difference between Social Darwinism and sociobiology. The former expression usually refers to the application of Darwinian principles specifically to the understanding of society and politics. Humans, like other animals, compete for existence and this fundamental feature allegedly explains all social and

political reality. The term ‘sociobiology’ usually refers to a more radical position. It is of more recent coinage. This position involves the idea of reduction. It attempts to show how the non-empirical disciplines like ethics, psychology, social and political theory are allegedly branches of biology. Herbert Spencer is the one most readily associated with Social Darwinism. He took Darwin’s tentative moves beyond biology and transformed them into a robust philosophy, coining the expression ‘survival of the fittest’. His version of Social Darwinism quickly became the subject of controversy, not only because of its links to the eugenic movements in the USA and in Nazi Germany (a subject I’m not considering in this paper), but also because of the nature-nurture debate. On the one hand, anthropological studies in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. those carried out by Margaret Mead, indicated that most of what humans do is a result of environmental conditioning and not of genetic constitution. These studies therefore tended to undermine Social Darwinism. On the other hand, more recent studies in molecular genetics, like those of W.D. Hamilton in 1964, and Wilson in 1975, started supplying empirical evidence of how a specific genetic constitution indeed determines, to some extent at least, what humans do.<sup>3</sup>

What is the philosophical core of the position referred to by the term ‘social Darwinism’? Before answering this question, one needs to recall of course that the extension of evolutionary explanation to ethical, social and religious behaviour falls under the broad category of naturalism. Naturalism is often described with respect to physics: physics is taken to be the core, or the only, discipline that matters in all philosophical topics. Here we have naturalism related to biology. Applying the biological explanatory model to society means taking society to be like flora or fauna. Society is assumed explainable at various levels of organisation, and explainable in terms of evolution propagated by blind variation and natural selection alone. There is the additional issue of purposes, goals and functions. In biology, the organic world is very often explained in terms of purposes, goals, and functions of systems situated within larger systems. For instance, we say that kidneys exist in order to purify the blood within an organism.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Arguments in favour**

Consider. In the book *Taking Darwin Seriously* (1988), Michael Ruse, the most famous defender of sociobiology in recent years, starts off from the fact that

altruistic behaviour in animals can be successfully explained by kin selection and reciprocal altruism. Put simply, this means that one can show how a group of organisms that includes self-sacrificing individuals has a higher chance of survival than a group that doesn't. Altruistic behaviour results when two principles are at work. It happens when the individual is more likely to help close kin rather than distant ones, and when the individual helps another with the expectation of having the favour returned. Ruse then argues that since humans are animals it is very probable that their behaviour, to some extent, is explainable in the same way. This approach, of course, is cautious. One cannot accuse Ruse here of radical determinism as regards human culture. What he is talking about are constraints that our evolutionary past has established. He writes: 'The question is not whether every last act of Western man or woman is governed by kin selection or reciprocal altruism or some such thing. I am sure it is not' (p.230). Although his cautious attitude makes him remain at the level of broad, general principles, he proposes his thesis as relevant in both the meta-ethical debate and in the normative debate. In other words, for him, a Darwinian explanation is relevant both as regards questions of the kind 'Why do humans consider action *A* good, and action *B* bad?' and as regards questions of the kind 'What should I do when faced with situation *S*?'

The overall thrust of this line of reasoning comes from the idea that a kind of explanation that worked well in one area of our intellectual inquiry should be considered a good candidate for other areas of our intellectual inquiry. Explanation in terms of blind variation and natural selection has delivered excellently in the area of biology. This fact justifies its application to other areas. Moreover, any preliminary problems should not cause concern. What evolutionary biologists cannot explain today, they will probably be able to explain tomorrow. This optimism should be given pride of place both as regards biology and as regards ethics and society.

The force of these various arguments is considered ample justification for social Darwinism as an acceptable discipline.

### **3. Arguments against**

There have been various arguments advanced against sociobiology.<sup>5</sup> There is no question here of addressing them all here. I will concentrate on one major issue only, one which has been somewhat neglected. This concerns the very nature of

intentional states. My contention is that the application of evolutionary explanation to ethics and to society tends to work with a view of intentional states that is to some extent distorted. Because of this, it ends up leaving some essential properties of human society out of consideration.

Let me unpack this argument. The basic issue concerns the non-scientific character of intentionality: this point, in fact, applies to all kinds of naturalism. For natural scientists, laws of nature are relations between some variables, and these variables are chosen in a specific way. They must, first of all of course, be useful in describing the phenomenon under study. They must also, however, be independent from each other; they must be both logically independent, in the sense that their meaning is accessible independently, and also methodologically independent, in the sense that they should be measurable separately. When this basic strategy is applied to ethics and social science, naturalists assume the existence of laws that link desires, beliefs and actions, and maybe some other elements of our normal way of behaviour. These entities constitute the set of variables for this kind of inquiry. A typical law would be: for any human individual  $x$ , if  $x$  desires  $q$ , and  $x$  believes that doing action  $A$  is the best means of attaining  $q$ , then  $x$  does  $A$ . This is practically saying that the relations between intentional states and actions are assumed to be explainable on the model of causation in physics.

Is this viable? The major problem lies with the underlying assumption. When we assume that what works for science must work also for ethics and society, we are assuming that intentional states are independent variables, while in fact they are not. They are logically inter-dependent because of their intentional content. To determine the content of a belief or a desire, you need to ask the person who has them what he or she really believes or desires. Likewise, to determine an action, the bodily movement is not enough. As philosophers of mind will recognise, the position I'm adopting here is dependent on Davidson's interpretationist view on belief. Like him, I'm assuming that, when discussing beliefs, desires and actions, the main emphasis should be neither on internal structures, nor on the external object that forms the main entity dominating the content of my belief, desire or action. The main emphasis should be rather on patterns of behaviour, linguistic or other, that constitute the very meaning of the words I use to express what I believe, what I desire, and what I'm doing.<sup>6</sup>

One may object here. One may say: 'You've placed physics and biology in the same basket. What your argument undermines is the application of physics to the

realm of ethics and society. It doesn't undermine the application of biology, because evolutionary biology is not in the business of seeking laws relating particular variables. Evolutionary biology has a completely different strategy; it doesn't arrive at laws of nature but at an account of how certain traits have developed and are maintained.'

My reply to this objection starts by expressing some agreement. It is true that evolutionary biology, unlike physics, is basically a historical discipline. Alex Rosenberg (2000) has argued convincingly that biology cannot arrive at any laws of nature because of the very way of individuating its units; unlike physics, it does so functionally rather than structurally. Moreover, its interests go beyond the individual. Biology is interested not in the relation between variables associated with a particular individual agent, but in what happens in a group. For instance, in an evolutionary account of altruism, researchers who apply the theory of games are not discussing the individual's deliberation when faced with a specific choice of action. They are dealing, on the contrary, with trends that are discernible in large groups of individuals faced with an action-type, as opposed to a token.<sup>7</sup> So biology is indeed different from physics. This point, however, is not the only point that is being urged by the objector. The objection is carrying also the added claim that because of the move from individual to group, the problematic mutual dependence between specific beliefs, desires and actions allegedly vanishes as we zoom out, as it were, from the scenario involving the individual. The objection is assuming that, when we sit back and consider groups, the individual intentional states vanish.

However, no such vanishing act, I claim, really occurs. The problematic mutual dependence between beliefs, desires and actions resurfaces at all levels. At the level of the individual, this dependence is clear, as mentioned above. At the group level, mutual dependence between belief, desire and action takes the form of reflexivity, a term is used by critical theorists who insist that what we call knowledge and truth in the social sense is dependent on human interests. For my purposes here, we can take the term reflexivity to refer to the fact that, in the human sciences, the objects of study are not left undisturbed by the theories proposed about them. The objects of study, in other words human agents, are affected by the very theories proposed to describe them. In concrete terms, this means that when a group is told about a theory proposed to explain its behaviour patterns, the group is not only capable of shifting its behaviour away from what is predictable, but very often does

precisely that. The history of humanity gives ample evidence of this kind of reaction. Further analysis here would need to bring in the idea of group belief, group desire, and group action. Let me mention here the interesting results of Margaret Gilbert in her book *Social Facts*. For her, a group  $G$  believes that  $p$  if and only if the members of  $G$  have openly and intentionally expressed their willingness to accept that  $p$  together with the other members of  $G$  as a body (she calls this joint acceptance).<sup>8</sup> This definition brings out the fact that members of a group are fully aware of the beliefs they adopt as a group. This awareness is the source of reflexivity.

The foregoing arguments, I believe, show that Social Darwinism cannot hide behind its strategy of zooming out of the scale of the individual. We are dealing with a genuine problem at all levels.

#### **4. The middle-ground?**

Is it possible to hold the middle-ground? Is it possible, in other words, to claim that social Darwinism is good for *some* aspects, but not for *all* aspects of moral and social behaviour? Philip Kitcher answers 'Yes'. In a paper entitled 'Giving Darwin his due' (2003), he defends a position that corresponds very well, I think, to what most people take for granted. His main point is that Darwinism, as an explanatory tool, has to be used with caution. When people appeal to the action of natural selection in order to draw conclusions about psychological faculties and moral or social dispositions, their argument is always vulnerable. It is always open to the challenge that alternative explanations in these areas are possible. At best, a Darwinian explanation supplies us with an explanation not of how human morality and human social dispositions evolved but of how they might have evolved. Towards the end of his paper, Kitcher explains his overall position in these words:

Darwin's great achievement doesn't make all other considerations and disciplines irrelevant, and, in particular, it shouldn't lead us to dismiss the potential insights of pre-Darwinian philosophizing. My recommendations for applying evolutionary ideas within philosophy are, I trust, obvious from my illustrative examples, and their prevailing character is one of cautious exploration. Darwin deserves his due, neither more nor less.

Kitcher seems to be suggesting, deep down, that intentionality can be divided into two layers, as it were. The lower layer corresponds to instinctive behaviour, where beliefs, desires and actions are so simple that they are indeed independent variables. A

Skinner-type stimulus-response scenario involves a person with a simple desire-belief-action sequence, such as when someone acts ‘mechanically’, as we often say. Are there real desires, beliefs, and actions in these scenarios? Many of us would say yes. They are genuine desires, beliefs and actions but they are not the object of our attention. They are not the object of attention either because the individual is alienated with something else, or because the individual is being carried along by the crowd. When, as it were, I don’t look straight at my desires, beliefs or actions, I live in the mechanical mode. At any moment, however, I can stop and attend to them. When I do so, these intentional states become the object of my self-reflection. Up to now, I’ve been discussing the individual. But the argument applies also to a group. A group, or even the species taken as a whole, has beliefs, desires and is engaged in action. It is fully conscious of some of these beliefs, desires and actions. It may however be unaware of others. Hence, just as we had in the individual’s case, the group can stop and attend to itself, in a moment of group self-reflection. In this way, its hitherto mechanical beliefs, desires and actions start becoming interdependent. It is therefore, by attending to them, that I will detach myself from the picture supplied by the Darwinist account of social and ethical reality. Here we have the second layer of intentionality.

This compromise position is very attractive. It seems acceptable to both sides of the debate. I have to admit, however, that I have some serious doubts whether we can, in all honesty, accept it. The clear boundary between intentional states in the mechanical mode and intentional states in the non-mechanical, or free, mode looks too good to be true. I fear that the world is often messier than we wish it to be. If we follow the route of Aristotle, as reworked recently by Davidson and McDowell, we’ll end up denying any clear distinction between empirical content and conceptual scheme. This essentially means that what I have been calling mechanical beliefs, desires or actions are in fact not beliefs, desires or actions at all. Once humans become aware of anything, of cognitive dispositions, of basic wants or urges, or of possible control of bodily movement, their rationality is engaged – whether they like it or not. A mechanical action, after all, is, in so far as it is deprived of intention, not ethical. The upshot is that, if we take this route, which I consider the right one to take, we’ll be obliged to say that Darwinism as an explanation of ethics or society is impotent at all levels. This looks very much like an impasse, and more work is needed to see whether it’s a genuine one. The least that can be said here is that a consideration of



intentional content presents evolutionary ethics with fundamental problems, problems that need to be resolved before any further progress is possible.

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<sup>1</sup> As regard religious behaviour, he argued in roughly the same way. He himself lost his Christian religious faith of his youth, but was never actively anti-religious. In 1879, he wrote to this friend Asa Gray: 'I have never been an Atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God [...] I think that

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- generally (and more and more as I grow older), but not always, that an Agnostic would be a more correct description of my state of mind.’ (Darwin 1887, Vol. I, p. 304).
- <sup>2</sup> In this paper, various applications of Darwinian explanation are being bypassed. These include, for instance, (1) the relatively new area of teleosemantics, where philosophers like Millikan 1984 and Papineau 1987 have been trying to develop an evolutionary explanation of meaning and intentionality; (2) the area of phylogenetic relationship. This latter area involves the search for a ‘family tree’. A great deal of work in evolutionary biology is devoted to determining what the family trees are for various taxonomic groups. The detailed working out of ancestry is a separate task from the identification of the adaptive significance, if any, of the traits that various species possess. To see how elements of culture, or how existing languages, or how various manuscripts (like the four Gospels), are sometimes related to each other genealogically is a question in which insights from evolutionary biology can play an important role.
- <sup>3</sup> Hamilton’s original paper is found in Axelrod (1984).
- <sup>4</sup> Biologists, however, are divided on the question whether evolutionary biology justifies or negates functional explanation. They split into two groups. The application to social and ethical issues shows the same split. There are those who conclude that the biological model illustrates how purpose and function is irrelevant within a society. And there are those who conclude that the biological model illustrate the opposite.
- <sup>5</sup> The major ones are: Nagel 1980, where sociobiology is deemed useless because moral philosophy is an autonomous discipline; Flanagan 1981, where moral beliefs are shown to be too complex for sociobiology to handle; Kitcher 1985, where sociobiology is accused of taking humans for fundamentally selfish organisms; Flew 1994, where sociobiology is shown to entail genetic determinism that is incompatible with human freedom. For a reaction to these, see Rosenberg 1988; Lemos 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> I’m trying to avoid a circularity that infests some views on belief. For instance Philip Pettit (1993, chapter 1) tries to anchor his idea of belief to the world. He defines a belief in terms of a naturalistic state of the believer. For him, a subject believes that *p* if and only if there is a context-free naturalistic state in that subject. This state is such that (1) it ensures that the subject displays belief-that-*p* behaviour; (2) it is embedded in the actual world, specifically in a history of suitable interaction with any items to which ‘*p*’ directly refers. My view is different. I am highlighting the fact that a belief does need, for its instantiation, a naturalistic state of the believer but it is not equivalent to that state. The fault with Pettit’s view lies in the circularity evident in his point (1). He defines a belief in terms of belief-that-*p* behaviour. If he thinks the individuation of the belief is the task of the naturalistic state, he doesn’t need the behaviour clause. If on the other hand the individuation is the task of the behaviour-display, he will never succeed, because to know that the subject’s element of behaviour is in fact a belief-that-*p* behaviour, one needs to ask the one having the belief what he or she believes. Functionalists in the philosophers of mind would add here that what Pettit is calling a naturalistic state is better described as a realizer state. It plays a causal role in the producing the required behaviour. They highlight, however, the fact that for a given belief, more than one realizer state can do the same job. My position can be seen as functionalism in the broadest possible sense. Normally, functionalism is called broad in the sense that a broad condition needs to be satisfied for a person to have a belief that *p*. A condition is broad when it covers the state not only of the person, his or her biological make-up, but also of the world. Hence, on this account, ‘I believe that the snow is white’ if and only if I am in a certain state (i.e. my neurons X, Y and Z are activated, say), and also if and only if the world is in a certain state (i.e. that snow is really white). For obvious reasons, this position is also called externalist. My set of conditions includes not only the object but the form of life as well.
- <sup>7</sup> Perhaps some more comments are in order here regarding the so-called evolutionary games-theory approach to ethics. This approach goes beyond the mere application of games-theory to ethics. It goes beyond the idea of regarding morality as the intended result of a kind of conscious bargaining process between fully informed and fully rational agents. On the contrary, it tries to explain morality as an unintended side-effect of a large number of interactions between agents in the course of history. On this view, morality is not the solving of one particular problem, but the solving of a kind of problem, instances of which occur and reoccur in the history of the humanity. As in other cases of evolutionary explanation, here we have, at best, an explanation of the emergence and maintenance of existing moral norms. We have no tools with which to criticise, challenge or justify the content of existing norms.
- <sup>8</sup> p. 306. See also Gilbert 1987; I expand this view in Caruana (2000) chapter 3.