

## DARWINIAN ETHICS AND MORAL REALISM

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**ABSTRACT:** Is taking the moral stance an adaptation? Can we explain being moral biologically or evolutionarily? Some say no. Others say yes, believing that only an evolutionary perspective can ground moral judgments. And still others (Ruse) believe that taking the evolutionary perspective undermines objective foundations for moral realism. Mizzoni defends the view that an evolutionary perspective on morality does not undermine moral realism. Mizzoni looks at arguments to the contrary by Michael Ruse and defends, against Ruse, the view that objective moral truths are compatible with a contingent human evolved nature in which those truths are based. Not unlike a linguist who argues for a shared, innate grammar, Mizzoni argues for a shared universal human nature in which could be grounded a deep structure to morality.

### I. INTRODUCTION

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ith the human genome project compelling us to come to grips with our biology, the attempt to explain the nature of morality in biological terms becomes all the more tempting. Nowadays there are many moral theorists who are thinking about the relationships between the nature and origin of ethics and human biological evolution. In the light of human biological evolution what (if anything) can we say about the ultimate nature of ethics?

When we ask this kind of question concerning foundations and ultimates we are venturing into metaethics: the branch of ethics that directly addresses ultimate questions about the nature, origins, and foundations of ethics. Although my focus

in this paper will be on metaethical issues, one could explore the relationship of human evolution to normative ethics: the branch of ethics that centers on questions concerning what we ought to do or what kind of persons we ought to become.

There are some moral philosophers (e.g., Thomas Nagel) who believe that evolutionary considerations are irrelevant to a full understanding of the foundations of ethics.<sup>1</sup> Other moral philosophers (e.g., J. L. Mackie) tell quite a different story.<sup>2</sup> They hold that the admission of the evolutionary origins of human beings compels us to concede that there are no foundations for ethics. But the philosopher that I will focus on in this paper is Michael Ruse, whom Holmes Rolston III calls, “the most celebrated philosopher in the world for his untiring effort to join biology and ethics.”<sup>3</sup> Ruse has published widely on the topic of evolutionary ethics and what it entails about the foundations of ethics.<sup>4</sup>

According to Ruse, evolutionary ethics is “the project which argues that for a full understanding of the nature and grounds of morality one must turn to the process and theories of the evolutionist.”<sup>5</sup> It is Michael Ruse who has been especially active in promoting the abandonment of the traditional understanding of evolutionary ethics as a competitive ethic to evolutionary ethics as a cooperative ethic. To mark the distinction between these two approaches Ruse refers to the traditional account as “evolutionary ethics” and his newer account as “Darwinian ethics.”<sup>6</sup> He describes Darwinian ethics as one that is quite in keeping with a common-sense understanding of ethics.

I agree with Ruse that evolutionary considerations should be looked at when thinking about the nature and origin of morality. But I think Ruse goes awry with his account of Darwinian ethics when he alleges that an evolutionary understanding of ethics and morality discredits the objectivity and foundations of ethics. In metaethical terms, Ruse maintains that an evolutionary understanding of ethics leads us to metaethical skepticism and metaethical subjectivism. But I will argue that he has not successfully made his case that Darwinian ethics is most consistent with skepticism and subjectivism. I will argue that the Darwinian ethics that Ruse defines and argues for is in fact most consistent with a metaethical view known as moral realism, and further, that Ruse’s efforts to defend Darwinian ethics actually help to support and give empirical evidence for moral realism.

## II. MORAL REALISM

In this section I will need to unpack and spell out a host of basic, yet very key, metaethical distinctions to which I will continually refer in my analysis of Darwinian ethics. I will start with some definitions and general characterizations.

Moral realism is a metaethical theory that denies moral skepticism and moral subjectivism. Moral realists claim that, despite the appearances, we can have genuine moral knowledge, and moral claims can be objectively true. David O. Brink has offered a helpful characterization of moral realism. First, he defines realism as a view that holds “(a) there are facts of kind x, and (b) these facts are logically independent of our evidence, i.e. those beliefs which are our evidence, for them.”<sup>7</sup>

In my view, these two claims capture what realists have in mind. Take an example of scientific realism: there are facts concerning our genetic make-up, and these facts are logically independent of our evidence, opinions, and beliefs. A century ago we did not have knowledge of genes because we did not have enough evidence to posit the existence of genes. Yet there were still facts obtaining concerning our genes. They were still passing from one generation to the next even though we as human cognizers were not aware of their existence. As we have accumulated evidence concerning genes we have discovered facts about them.

To talk of moral realism is to say “(a) there are moral facts, and (b) these facts are logically independent of our evidence, i.e., those beliefs which are our evidence, for them.”<sup>8</sup> Just as we can accumulate evidence to make scientific discoveries, moral realists believe that we can accumulate evidence to make moral discoveries. The upshot of moral realism is that there are objective moral facts; as a metaethical theory it is the view that at bottom ethics is objective, factual, and discoverable. Moral realism is thus opposed to the view that ethics at bottom is subjective, conventional, illusory, affective, and constructed.

To say that ethics is ultimately subjective, illusory, and affective is to say that it is dependent upon individual subjects or agents. To say that ethics is ultimately conventional and constructed is to say that it is dependent upon social groups. Although moral realists can grant that ethics does contain a subjective, conventional, constructed, affective, and sometimes illusory character, yet they will assert that beneath all of the diversity surrounding human behavior there are moral facts and objectivities that are factual and discoverable. These moral facts and truths are ultimately independent of the subjective, conventional, affective, etc.; they are not ultimately dependent on the beliefs and opinions of subjects or social groups.

It is important to underscore the independence criterion of moral realism. There are potential confusions about what is implied by this notion. For example, in articulating moral realism Mark Platts refers to “an independently existing moral reality.”<sup>9</sup> This prompts Joseph Margolis to respond that “the moral world is the human world” and to conclude that Platts has mislocated “the space of moral realism.”<sup>10</sup> Although it is true that one may formulate moral realism in such a way as to define moral facts as non-natural or supernatural or Platonic universals, etc., and to therefore understand the discovery of these supernatural moral facts as something outside the methods of natural science, the view of moral realism I am sketching makes no such extravagant postulations. I am looking at the nature and origins of ethics naturalistically. I understand the independence criterion of moral realism to make a logical point concerning truth and justification, not a metaphysical point that morality is somehow independent or outside of the natural order of things. Moral facts are a subset of natural facts and moral facts are constituted of natural facts. We learn about them and discover them through the same methods: we look, listen, see, think, and feel.

Consider two views that oppose naturalistic moral realism. The first—metaethical subjectivism—is the view that ethics is ultimately dependent on the beliefs,

opinions, and feelings of individual subjects. The second—metaethical relativism—is the view that ethics is ultimately dependent on the beliefs, opinions, and feelings of groups of individuals. They are both metaethical views because they both describe the ultimate nature and origin of ethics. What they share in common is that they are both skeptical of the objectivity of ethics. With metaethical subjectivism there is no objectivity to ethics because why should we suppose that all subjects would agree in their beliefs, opinions, and feelings? With metaethical relativism there is no objectivity to ethics because why should we suppose that there will be inter-group agreement of beliefs and feelings? Simply because there is intra-group agreement? Because of their denial of the objectivity of ethics we refer to metaethical subjectivism and relativism as forms of metaethical skepticism.

### III. RUSE'S DARWINIAN METAETHICS, (CONTINGENT) HUMAN NATURE, AND RELATIVISM

As I said in my introduction, Michael Ruse develops what he calls a Darwinian account of the nature and origins of ethics, a Darwinian metaethics. He is convinced that biological evolution can shed light on the nature and origin of ethics. He even thinks that normative ethics such as utilitarianism and deontology are in broad agreement with Darwinian ethics. Rather than an evolutionary ethics that promotes an egoistic lifestyle, Ruse outlines a Darwinian account of ethics that describes ethics as primarily a cooperative strategy for survival that the human species has adapted through evolutionary time. He likes to emphasize that ethics is not something acquired from one's culture. Ethics is part of our human nature, says Ruse.

In the light of Darwinian evolutionary theory, the humans-as-beyond-biology thesis was never that plausible. Now, I suggest, is the time to leave it entirely. Human culture, meaning human thought and action, is informed and structured by biological factors. Natural selection and adaptive advantage reach through to the very core of our being.<sup>11</sup>

Morality is part of human nature, and (subject to reservations to be made later) an effective adaptation.<sup>12</sup>

Humans share a common moral understanding. This universality is guaranteed by the shared genetic background of every member of *Homo sapiens*. The differences between us are far outweighed by the similarities. . . . There is, therefore, absolutely nothing arbitrary about morality, considered from the human perspective.<sup>13</sup>

This notion that ethics is ultimately rooted in human nature is very old and quite traditional. One thinks immediately of Aristotle. When Aristotle was inquiring into the nature of the good he suggested that “we first find the function of a human being.”<sup>14</sup> The ultimate source of ethics and the moral virtues is human nature. If you want to know how we ought to act and what virtues we should develop, then you should look at what kind of beings we are. And even though Aquinas puts Aristotle's ethics in a religious framework (i.e., our human nature was intentionally created

and designed by God), Aquinas takes a similar metaethical approach when he says that “all the things to which man has a natural inclination are naturally apprehended by the reason as good and therefore objects to be pursued, and their opposites as evils to be avoided. Therefore the order of the precepts of the natural law follows the order of our natural inclinations.”<sup>15</sup> Basically Aquinas is saying that we need to look at human natural inclinations (human nature) to figure out what the natural law is and what the natural law requires us to do.

So, by Ruse emphasizing how morality is part of human nature he is in keeping with a long tradition in moral philosophy, yet he never seems to acknowledge this tradition. Ruse writes that “natural selection has made us in such a way that we enjoy things which are biologically good for us and dislike things which are biologically bad for us.”<sup>16</sup> Is Darwinian ethics so out of step with natural law ethics? Aristotle and Aquinas both hold (like Ruse) that ethics is rooted in human nature and (also like Ruse) they hold that human nature is universal. When Aristotle was talking about the function of a human being he meant human being *qua* human being, not human being *qua* Athenian or Macedonian or Greek human being. When Aquinas was writing about our natural inclinations to preserve life, to propagate, and to seek knowledge he was referring to every member of *Homo sapiens*. Because there is an objective human nature there can be objective moral facts. To claim there are objective moral facts and to claim that these facts obtain whether or not we believe them or currently have evidence for them is the view otherwise known as moral realism. Thus, given my descriptions of the metaethical theories of moral realism, subjectivism, and relativism, both Aristotle and Aquinas would be considered as proponents of moral realism. Ruse’s Darwinian ethics, then, would also qualify as moral realism. What Ruse adds to the traditional strategy of rooting ethics in human nature are the concepts of genes, epigenetic rules, innate dispositions, and capacities.

The Darwinian’s claim is that we have genetically based dispositions to approve of certain courses of action and to disapprove of other courses of action. But they are more than likes and dislikes.<sup>17</sup>

Human moral thought has constraints, as manifested through the epigenetic rules, and the application of these leads to moral codes, soaring from biology into culture.<sup>18</sup>

Once we grasp the full import of the epigenetic rules—innate constraints rooted in the genes and put in place by natural selection—powerful light is thrown on human knowledge and morality.<sup>19</sup>

Once it is granted that innate constraints rooted in human nature have been put in place by natural selection, an element of contingency is brought in. After all, morality is only an effective adaptation. The Darwinian . . . ties morality tightly to contingent human nature.<sup>20</sup>

Had evolution taken us down another path, we might well think moral that which we now find horrific, and conversely. This is not a conclusion acceptable to the traditional objectivist.<sup>21</sup>

Ruse seems to think that this admission of the contingency of human nature (thereby human morality) will strike traditional moral philosophers with horror. If we understand Aristotle and Aquinas as traditional objectivists (which I think we should), would they find the contingency of human nature and human morality horrific? I don't see why they would. Aristotle says to understand ethics as rooted in human nature; if human nature were different then the shape of Aristotle's virtue ethics would be different. And Aquinas makes no bones about saying that if our nature were different then our duties would be different. In order to hold moral realism (or objectivism as Ruse calls it) one need not assume that human nature necessarily had to be what it currently is. All that is required is that human nature is universal species-wide, and this is exactly what Ruse's Darwinian ethics provides for moral realists.

If human nature is universal, then there would presumably be moral facts about human nature, and with their research into innate moral dispositions and capacities Ruse and other Darwinians can help to fill out more precisely what those moral facts are. That moral facts are contingent because human nature is contingent is not at variance with moral realism. As David Brink succinctly puts it, "The truth of moral realism turns on the existence of moral facts, not their modal status."<sup>22</sup>

Ruse states clearly that the contingent status of human nature and morality does not consequently align Darwinian ethics with metaethical relativism.

...note that the Darwinian's position does not plunge him/her into wholesale ethical relativism...Against this, the Darwinian recognizes that there are indeed differences from society to society, and also within societies, particularly across time. However, these are readily (and surely properly) explained in the way that most moral theorists would explain them, as secondary, modified consequences of shared primary moral imperatives.<sup>23</sup>

The differences between us are far outweighed by the similarities...I did not choose my moral code. For the Darwinian, the very essence of morality is that it is shared and not relative. It does not work as a biological adaptation, unless we all join in.<sup>24</sup>

As I described in Part II above, metaethical relativists are skeptical of the objectivity of ethics. They maintain that ethics is ultimately dependent upon the beliefs, opinions, and feelings of groups of individuals, i.e., ethics is acquired from one's culture. Because Darwinian ethics denies that ethics is ultimately grounded in one's culture, Darwinian metaethics is not relativistic. Metaethically speaking, Darwinian ethics seems to be in keeping with moral realism.

#### IV. DARWINIAN METAETHICS AND MORAL REALISM

##### **Objectivity, Independence, and Redundancy**

Given the aspects of Ruse's Darwinian ethics that I have sketched (thus far) and given the basic competing metaethical theories of moral realism, subjectivism, and

relativism, it is clear why Ruse distances himself from, and objects to, relativism. And given what I have said about these competing metaethical theories one would think that Ruse would agree with moral realism and disagree with subjectivism. If subjectivists claim that ethics is ultimately dependent on the beliefs, opinions, and feelings of individual subjects, and Ruse argues that ethics is ultimately dependent on species-wide innate moral constraints then why (and how?) would Ruse claim that “we must conclude that not only is Darwinian ethics a subjectivist ethics, it is one which positively excludes the objectivist approach”?<sup>25</sup>

The answer lies in Ruse’s understanding of the objectivity of ethics. In Part II I mentioned how it is conceptually possible to formulate moral realism non-naturalistically. The objective moral facts that a moral realist countenances could be regarded as grounded in God’s will, Platonic Forms, non-natural properties, etc. Not only would non-naturalistic moral realism admit objective moral facts but it would also meet the independence criterion of moral realism: the objective moral facts would be regarded as obtaining whether individuals believe in them, or have evidence for them, or not.

Take the example of the Platonic Form of Justice. From a Platonist’s perspective it is an objective fact about reality that there is a Form of Justice. And if there are individuals who are skeptical of such a universal, who do not believe there is evidence for the postulation of such an entity, this does not undermine the fact that the Form of Justice persists: its existence is logically independent of the beliefs for its existence. This is the heart of realism.

In his discussion of metaethics Ruse makes two related assumptions. He assumes that anyone who claims that ethics is objective and anyone who maintains moral realism is (i) thereby committed to non-naturalism, and (ii) thereby committed to viewing ethics as fixed and eternal. But both assumptions are unwarranted. Again, we can think of the example of Aristotelian ethics. It makes perfect sense to say that Aristotle approached ethics naturalistically but also that Aristotle recognized objective moral facts. As Ruse himself admits, morality is grounded in human nature, and so, if there are objective facts about human nature, then presumably there are objective facts about morality. Also, as I sketched in part III above, Aristotle looks at ethics as grounded in human nature. If human nature is contingent, i.e., could have been different, then ethics is contingent, i.e., could have been different. The upshot is that moral realism is workable as a naturalistic metaethic and that moral realism is sanguine about moral contingency. Here is how Ruse sees things, however:

We must ask whether, to the Darwinian, morality is—because of the science, must be taken as—something objective, in the sense of having an authority and existence of its own, independent of human beings? Or whether morality is—because of the science, must be taken as—subjective, being a function of human nature, and reducing ultimately to feelings and sentiments—feelings and sentiments of a type different from wishes and desires, but ultimately emotions of some kind?<sup>26</sup>

Notice how he assumes that something objective is something that exists independent of human beings and something that is subjective is a function of human nature. Here are more instances of the same assumption.

Nor can one readily see how the objectivist might patch up the situation, making his/her position compatible with evolutionism. At least, this seems impossible, so long as one locates the foundation of morality in some sort of extra-human existence, like God's will or non-natural properties.<sup>27</sup>

But what this all means is that there is not and cannot be any objective, extra-human morality.<sup>28</sup>

The other unwarranted metaethical assumption Ruse makes is the supposition that those who maintain an objective ethic thereby maintain that ethics is eternal, cosmically fixed, necessary, and non-contingent. He alleges that "the 'objectivist' tends to think of such [moral] norms as fixed and eternal," as "eternal verities perceptible thought intuition" and "morality as a set of objective, eternal verities."<sup>29</sup> If the moral realist is concurring with Ruse that ethics is grounded in human nature, then a moral realist does not need to make such extravagant assumptions. Again, we should be reminded of Aquinas who said that if our natures were different then our duties would be different. There is no reason to assume that belief in the objectivity of ethics and belief in objective moral facts grounded in human nature entails non-naturalism or eternal moral norms. To build these elements into moral realism and then to knock it down because of these elements amounts to attacking a straw man.

Ruse's two unwarranted assumptions about moral objectivity are also apparent in the one main argument that Ruse makes against the moral realist (whom he calls the objectivist). Michael Bradie calls it the "redundancy argument against objective values."<sup>30</sup> Here is Ruse's first formulation of the argument:

At the least, the objectivist must agree that his/her ultimate principles are (given Darwinism) redundant. You would believe what you do about right and wrong, irrespective of whether or not a "true" right and wrong existed! The Darwinian claims that his/her theory gives an entire analysis of our moral sentiments. Nothing more is needed. Given two worlds, identical except that one has an objective morality and the other does not, the humans therein would think and act in exactly the same ways. Hence the objective foundation for morality is redundant.<sup>31</sup>

This formulation of the redundancy argument makes the assumption that objectivists must construe ethics as non-natural or extra-human. From the perspective of someone who holds that objective morality is grounded in objective human nature this argument misses its mark. From a naturalistic perspective, what could it possibly mean to have two worlds that are identical, yet one has an objective morality and the other does not?

An objective morality understood naturalistically is one that is rooted in human nature. Would the two worlds have identical human natures? If they do have identical human natures, then on this naturalistic account it is impossible for one world



to have an objective morality and the other world not to. On the other hand, if the two worlds have two different human natures then the two worlds are not identical! In neither case is objective morality shown to be redundant, it is always rooted to the human nature contingently obtaining in the world in which it is found.

The redundancy argument only works and makes clear sense if you construe objective morality as hovering outside the natural order of things like a third wheel just waiting for Ockham's razor to come along. Ruse is basically proffering Aristotle's argument against Plato's Forms. Aristotle (the naturalist) takes issue with Plato (the non-naturalist) because Plato refers to Forms or Ideas and Aristotle finds such references to be useless because they are irrelevant and redundant.

One might be puzzled about what [the believers in Ideas] really mean in speaking of The So-and-So Itself, since Man Itself and man have one and the same account of man.<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, it is a puzzle to know what the weaver or carpenter will gain for his own craft from knowing this Good Itself, or how anyone will be better at medicine or generalship from having gazed on the Idea Itself.<sup>33</sup>

The trouble that Ruse is having in fairly characterizing and fairly critiquing moral objectivity stems from a mistaken assumption concerning the independence criterion of objectivism. Think of the objection to moral realism that says moral realism mislocates the space of morality. When a Platonic moral realist says that moral facts are independent from human beliefs and evidence, this is (on a traditional reading of Plato) a metaphysical claim. But when a naturalistic moral realist says that moral facts are independent from human beliefs and evidence, this is only a logical claim. This distinction should not be foreign or unfamiliar to Ruse. Look at how he uses the independence criterion when he describes the common (modern) way of distinguishing facts and values, and simultaneously reveals his commitment to a scientific realism:

Facts are statements about the way things are: they are objective, independent of human experience. Science aims to be about facts: descriptions and understandings. This applies to Darwinian evolutionary theory. Values are about the way things ought to be: they are more subjective, they refer to human feelings and senses of obligation or judgment.<sup>34</sup>

When he says that scientific facts are "objective, independent of human experience" does he mean extra-human in the sense that these facts are non-natural entities hovering outside the natural realm independently existing apart from human experience? No, not at all. He means that scientific facts obtain whether individuals believe in them or not. He himself in this context understands the independence criterion as making a logical distinction between what exists and our beliefs about what exists.

Ruse is trying to use Ockham's razor to cut out objective values, but with a naturalistic objective morality there's nothing for him to cut out. The only thing that he could cut out is his contention that there are "innate constraints rooted in the genes and put in place by natural selection."<sup>35</sup> No doubt there are theorists who are

skeptical about these innate moral constraints, but Ruse and E. O. Wilson believe that there is growing empirical evidence for these genetically based dispositions and constraints on morality.

Before I leave the redundancy argument I would like to consider a different and more colorful version of it, one that works against objectivism if and only if we accept Ruse's unwarranted supposition that objectivists comprehend ethics as a set of eternal, non-contingent, fixed verities.

Suppose we had evolved in a rather different way. Suppose, to take an extreme example, we had evolved from termite-like creatures, rather than from savanna-dwelling primates. Termites need to eat each others' faeces, in order to regain certain parasites used in digestion, which are lost during the termites' periodic moults. With such a background as this, our highest ethical imperatives might be very strange indeed. We would live our lives in blissful ignorance of what God or objective morality truly willed.<sup>36</sup>

This is a version of the redundancy argument because he is claiming that if we had evolved differently then it is possible that our morality would now be different and hence appeals to an "objective morality" would be beside the point, i.e., redundant. But if we purge the assumption of eternal, non-contingent, fixed verities from our understanding of objectivism, and interpret objective ethics as simply ethics as rooted in universal human nature, here is what we are left with: Under Ruse's hypothetical scenario our human nature would be different, so our morality would be different.

It does not at all follow that we would live in ignorance of what objective morality required. Our objective morality, i.e., morality grounded in our universal human nature, would involve those behaviors that would contribute to our well-being as termite-like beings. There is no redundancy of objective morality if we understand objective morality as referring to and rooted in our contingent, yet innate, dispositions and capacities. Once we purge objectivism of metaphysical extravagances then the redundancy argument turns out to be attacking a straw man.

## V. OBJECTIVITY, ERROR, AND ILLUSION

There is one other key element of Ruse's Darwinian ethics. Ruse believes that it is acceptable to talk about morality as if it is objective and he acknowledges that moral discourse has an objective feel to it. Yet he cannot accept that morality is indeed objective because in his mind that would commit him to a non-naturalistic and non-contingent account of ethics. Ruse thus feels compelled to reject objectivism in favor of (not relativism of course, but) subjectivism.

If subjectivism is true, however, then how could the Darwinian explain the surface appearance of objectivity? Following J. L. Mackie, Ruse adopts what is called in metaethics, an error theory. Yes, morality seems to be about objective moral facts and truths, but the objectivity and truth in morality is illusory, it is an error to take the prescriptive, categorical, and objective feel of morality as face value reflections of what morality actually is. According to Ruse,

The Darwinian argues that morality simply does not work (from a biological perspective), unless we believe that it is objective. Darwinian theory shows that, in fact, morality is a function of (subjective) feelings; but it shows also that we have (and must have) the illusion of objectivity.<sup>37</sup>

We may have choice about whether to do right or wrong, but we have no choice about right and wrong themselves. If morality did not have this air of externality or objectivity, it would not be morality and (from a biological perspective) would fail to do what it is intended to do. . . . In a sense, therefore, morality is a collective illusion foisted upon us by our genes.<sup>38</sup>

The way that Ruse (following Mackie) maintains that ethics is full of error and illusion and yet still manages to take ethics seriously is to distinguish metaethics from substantive (normative) ethics. They allege that one can hold a metaethical skepticism while accepting a normative approach such as utilitarianism or deontology. I have two points that I want to make about this proposal.

First, given what Ruse has said about innate moral dispositions hard-wired into human nature, I do not think it is fitting for him to call himself a metaethical subjectivist or a metaethical skeptic. As in the quotation above, an error theorist must hold that morality merely has an “air of objectivity” while deep down it is illusory or subjective. With Ruse’s insistence that morality is grounded in human genetic nature one must strain to imagine why he would regard morality as having merely an air of objectivity—he says morality is rooted in the genes of all human beings, how much more objective do we have to get?

To understand where Ruse is coming from we need to remember that Ruse’s definition of “objective” is idiosyncratically and narrowly defined as extra-human, non-natural, or “extrasomatic.”<sup>39</sup> As a naturalist he hastens to deny such extravagant metaphysics. My claim is that he has thrown out the baby with the bath. He forsakes the objectivity of ethics and is left with an error theory. He refuses to acknowledge that objectivity can refer to human objectivity instead of referring to extrahuman objectivity. Recall how he sets up the (false) dichotomy between objective/extrahuman and subjective/human.

We must ask whether, to the Darwinian, morality is—because of the science, must be taken as—something objective, in the sense of having an authority and existence of its own, independent of human beings? Or whether morality is—because of the science, must be taken as—subjective, being a function of human nature, and reducing ultimately to feelings and sentiments—feelings and sentiments of a type different from wishes and desires, but ultimately emotions of some kind?<sup>40</sup>

Second, if we take error theory seriously and concede that morality is indeed a “collective illusion,” could we consistently accept the prescriptive, categorical, and objective demands of ethics? Ruse says that we should not forgo morality because of its objective illusion, for he says “Morality is part of human nature, and an effective adaptation. . . . Why should we forego morality any more than we should put out our eyes?”<sup>41</sup> I do not think that this is a satisfactory response, however, because the hard

question is not about what we *should* do but whether we *could* consistently accept the objective demands of ethics knowing full well that they are not *really* binding but only apparently so. It may be instructive here to think of Kant's application of the categorical imperative: the question is not merely "should you make a lying promise?" but "could you consistently will your maxim of making a lying promise to become a universal?"<sup>42</sup> Stephen Darwall critiques metaethical error theory by arguing that one cannot rationally believe what one knows to be false. Darwall writes:

It seems to follow, therefore, that one cannot rationally believe the error theory and continue to hold ethical convictions as well...one can no more continue to *believe* that anything has value or disvalue, or is right or wrong, and believe also that these beliefs are false, than one can coherently think that the bentness of the stick is only an illusion and continue to believe that the stick is really bent.<sup>43</sup>

Whether error theory is internally consistent is indeed questionable. But, from the perspective of moral realism that I have been urging throughout this paper, the most important point about error theory was my first one, that error theory is not a necessary feature of Darwinian ethics as long as we are working with a naturalistic account of objectivity.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Darwinian ethics emphasizes that ethics is a cooperative strategy that is deeply rooted in the contingent nature of the human species. Darwinian ethics vindicates common sense morality by saying it is rooted in our genes, innate dispositions and capacities, and that there are innate constraints on our human behavior. Darwinian ethics is fully naturalistic and incompatible with relativism. When taken together, these features of Darwinian ethics do not comport with error theory, subjectivism, or relativism. These elements comport most agreeably with a naturalistic moral realism. Ruse and Wilson are doing important work by bringing empirical findings to light that are relevant to moral philosophy. I just wish that they would realize that in so doing, they are advancing the position of naturalistic moral realism not metaethical skepticism. When I reflect on their work in developing a Darwinian perspective on ethics and their insistence that "the differences between us are far outweighed by the similarities,"<sup>44</sup> I do not have reason to be skeptical about the ultimate foundations of morality. On the contrary, I have reason to be optimistic that there is indeed a shared universal human nature and, therefore, a shared deep structure to morality.<sup>45</sup>

## ENDNOTES

1. T. Nagel, "Ethics Without Biology," in *Mortal Questions* pp. 142–146. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
2. J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin Books, 1977).

3. H. Rolston, III (ed.), *Biology, Ethics, and the Origins of Life*, p. 90. (Boston: Jones and Bartlett, 1995).
4. M. Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously: A Naturalistic Approach to Philosophy* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986) and reprinted (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998); "Evolutionary Ethics: A Phoenix Arisen," *Zygon* 21, (1986), pp. 95–112; "The Significance of Evolution," in P. Singer (ed.) *A Companion to Ethics* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 500–510; "The New Evolutionary Ethics," in M. H. Nitecki and D. V. Nitecki (eds.) *Evolutionary Ethics* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1993), pp. 133–162; "Evolutionary Ethics: A Defense," in Rolston (ed.) *Biology, Ethics, and the Origins of Life*, pp. 89–112; M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," *Philosophy* 61, (1986), pp. 173–192.
5. "The New Evolutionary Ethics," p. 133.
6. It is a "Darwinian" ethic because Darwin himself "was quite adamant that conventional morality can be given a selectionist backing." M. Ruse, "Is Rape Wrong on Andromeda? An Introduction to Extraterrestrial Evolution, Science, and Morality," in E. Regis (ed.) *Extraterrestrials: Science and Alien Intelligence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) reprinted in M. Ruse, *The Darwinian Paradigm: Essays on its History, Philosophy, and Religious Implications*, p. 230. (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 209–246.
7. D. O. Brink, "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," p. 111. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 62, (1984), pp. 111–125; D. O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, pp. 16–17 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
8. *Ibid.*
9. M. Platts, "Moral Reality and the End of Desire," in M. Platts (ed.) *Reference, Truth and Reality: Essays on the Philosophy of Language*, p. 69. (Boston: Routledge, 1980), pp. 69–82.
10. J. Margolis, "Moral Realism and the Meaning of Life," p. 21. *Philosophical Forum* 22, (1990), pp. 19–48.
11. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 147; see also M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," p. 185.
12. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 253.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 255.
14. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097b25, p. 15. trans. and ed. T. Irwin (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985).
15. T. Aquinas, *The Summa of Theology* I–II, q.94, p. 49. In P. E. Sigmund trans. and ed., *St. Thomas Aquinas on Politics and Ethics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1988).
16. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 236.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 223.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 273; see also M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," p. 183.
20. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, 263; see also M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," p. 186.
21. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 254.

22. "Moral Realism and the Sceptical Arguments from Disagreement and Queerness," p. 116.
23. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 255. See also M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," p. 188.
24. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 255.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 252.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 254.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 267; see also M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," pp. 174, 186.
29. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 214; see also M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," pp. 178, 186.
30. M. Bradie, "What Does Evolutionary Biology Tell Us About Philosophy and Religion?" *Zygon* 29, (1994), pp. 45–53 at 47.
31. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 254; see also M. Ruse and E.O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," p. 187.
32. *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1096a35–1096b, p. 10.
33. *Ibid.*, 1097a10, pp. 12–13.
34. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 290.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 273; see also M. Ruse and E.O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," p. 183.
36. "Evolutionary Theory and Christian Ethics: Are They in Harmony?" p. 270. In *The Darwinian Paradigm*, pp. 251–272; reprinted in *Zygon* 29, (1994), pp. 5–24, at 21; see also *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 263.
37. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 253.
38. *Ibid.*; see also *Taking Darwin Seriously*, pp. 255, 257; and M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," pp. 179–180.
39. M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," pp. 173, 174, 186.
40. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 252.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
42. See I. Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981), sec. 422, p. 31.
43. S. Darwall, *Philosophical Ethics*, (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), p. 64.
44. *Taking Darwin Seriously*, p. 255; see also M. Ruse and E. O. Wilson, "Moral Philosophy as Applied Science," p. 190.
45. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut at the July 2001 Meeting of the International Society for the History, Philosophy, and Social Studies of Biology and at the University of Delaware's APA-sponsored Ethics for the 21st Century conference held on October 27, 2001.