



## **Evolutionary Ethics: A Crack in the Foundation of Ethics?**

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**ABSTRACT:** Michael Ruse has argued that evolutionary ethics discredits the objectivity and foundations of ethics. Ruse must employ dubitable assumptions, however, to reach his conclusion. We can trace these assumptions to G. E. Moore. Also, part of Ruse's case against the foundations of ethics can support the objectivity and foundations of ethics. Cooperative activity geared toward human flourishing helps point the way to a naturalistic moral realism and not exclusively to ethical skepticism as Ruse supposes.

### **Introduction: Ruse's Metaethical Assumptions**

Michael Ruse has argued that evolutionary ethics discredits the objectivity and foundations of ethics (Ruse 1991, Ruse 1993). Ruse must employ dubitable assumptions, however, to reach his conclusion. Also, parts of Ruse's case against the foundations of ethics can support the objectivity and foundations of ethics.

Ruse's narrow construal of 'the foundations of ethics' plays an important role in his arguments against the foundations of ethics. He considers only 3 possible contenders that could serve as foundations for ethics: 1) Moorean non-naturalism, 2) Platonic Forms, and 3) the Divine Command Theory (Ruse 1993: 157). For Ruse, each of the three contenders explains how morality can refer to something "out there" (Ruse 1993: 153, 158). Notice that for Ruse one can only maintain the position of moral realism—the view that at least some moral issues are objective and obtain independently of our moral beliefs—non-naturalistically. His reasoning for this is clear. He points out that Moore's arguments against the evolutionary ethics of Herbert Spencer turned on the is/ought distinction. According to this distinction, we cannot logically ground ethical statements naturalistically, for one cannot derive 'ought' from 'is'. Moore's arguments against ethical naturalism—the view that moral claims/facts/judgments are nothing but a special class of natural claims/facts/judgments—help make Moore's case in favor of non-naturalism. Plato's non-natural Forms and the commands of a non-natural divinity would also avoid the difficult task of deriving values from natural, physical facts that ethical naturalism faces.

Philosophers (not least of all Ruse) commonly proclaim that Moore's application of the naturalistic fallacy hinges on the is/ought distinction. For Moore, we cannot derive moral statements from non-moral statements because "'good' is indefinable, or, as Prof. Sidgwick says, an 'unanalysable notion'" (Moore 1903: 17). This would imply of course that any attempt whatsoever to define or analyze a moral term such as 'good' in other terms is

fallacious. Moore concedes that we can analyze moral words in terms of each other but all reductions of moral terms will ultimately reduce to 'good' and 'bad'. According to Moore, attempts to render the moral term into natural, i.e. non-moral, terminology suffers from the 'naturalistic fallacy'.

Upon closer analysis of Moore's views on the is/ought distinction and the naturalistic fallacy, many authors have revealed that the standards Moore sees as necessary for deriving moral terms from non-moral terms would require analytic relationships between the two. To satisfy Moore's open-question criterion, then, we need to have tautologous terms. These days, the new 'synthetic' ethical naturalism has eclipsed the traditional 'analytic' ethical naturalism of which Moore was the most vociferous opponent. As Horgan and Timmons put it, the "synonymy criterion of property identity was thought to undergird legitimate reductions of one property to another" and many thought that analytic meaning connections were the only available option but now the synthetic turn has dismantled these weapons against ethical naturalism (Horgan and Timmons 1991: 450).

Nicholas Sturgeon, who embraces the new naturalism, says "the problem ... as Hilary Putnam for one has noted, is that if Moore's argument succeeds then a precisely parallel argument will show that "temperature" does not refer to a natural property, either" (Sturgeon 1985: 25). Sturgeon further points out that "it is by now widely acknowledged that reductive property-identities (such as "temperature = mean molecular kinetic energy") can be true without being analytic" (Sturgeon 1984: 242).

This critique of Moore's formulation of the is/ought distinction calls into question Ruse's assumption that we can only support a foundation of ethics non-naturalistically. In picturing an objective ethics through the prism of Moorean metaethics, Ruse limits himself only to a consideration of non-naturalism whereas a number of versions of ethical naturalism may support the foundations of ethics. Very broadly, one could develop either a reductive naturalism or a non-reductive naturalism. We can further splinter these two general categories with respect to truth conditions into subjective, intersubjective and objective versions of naturalism (Sayre-McCord 1986).

### **Arguments Against Objectivity and for 'Objectivity'**

The evolutionists argue against the foundations of ethics by saying that science now explains why humans act morally. The process of natural selection explains morality as simply an adaptation that promotes the survival of the species. By contrast to the metaethical views that Ruse considers, science thoroughly explains morality naturalistically. The 'new evolutionary ethics'—as opposed to traditional evolutionary ethics like Spencer's—uniquely explains the altruistic behavior of humans. The traditional application of evolutionary theory to ethics was beset by the seeming contradiction of selfish 'survival of the fittest' behavior with observed examples of altruism.

A scientific approach to ethics informs Ruse of two senses of objectivity: objectivity and 'objectivity'. As we have already seen, for Ruse, ethics could only maintain its genuine objectivity if it were grounded "out there". The 'objectivity' of ethics, by contrast, denotes that we think and feel that ethics is objective but "we are moral because our genes, as fashioned by natural selection, fill us full of thoughts about being moral" (Ruse 1993: 148).

### **Phenomenology and Ontology**

Ruse considers an objection from a moral realist. He says "there is an obvious objection which runs something like this: The fact that our ethical sense is a product of evolutionary processes in no way denies the reality of its referent" (Ruse 1993: 154). Ruse unsuccessfully answers this objection because he mixes together phenomenology, i.e. the

‘objectivity’ of ethics, with ontology. His answer to his hypothetical objection runs as follows:

the existence of the objective ethics (sic.) is in no way necessary for a derivation of our belief in an objective ethics from an evolutionary perspective. So, at the very least, what we can say is that an objective ethics is redundant to the evolutionist’s case (Ruse 1993: 156, emphasis added).

A similarly structured argument would be:

1. The existence of high unemployment is not necessary for our belief in high unemployment. so,
2. High unemployment is redundant to our inquiry.

We can readily imagine the truth of premise 1 because erroneous beliefs pervade the lives of many people; that feature of human existence admits of no mystery. But 2) does not follow from 1). ‘Our inquiry’ from 2) would denote an attempt to get to the bottom of things just as the evolutionist tries to get to the bottom of the nature and point of ethics. So my phenomenological feel of ethics may lead me to an ill-founded belief in the foundations of ethics, but because this may be the case does not mean that it is the case and it certainly doesn’t make it redundant to our inquiry. When inquiring into the nature of ethics we must take our moral phenomenology into account as simply one piece of data . I grant that the phenomenology of ethics alone cannot establish the foundations of ethics but neither can the potential and occasional misleading quality of our phenomenology establish the "nonfoundations" of ethics (Ruse 1993: 155). Or, put in another way, phenomenological considerations alone cannot establish ontological considerations, one way or another.

The redundancy of the objectivity of ethics does not follow from Ruse’s argument. The argument simply shows that we cannot answer this question solely by examining our present belief system. Ruse’s critique implicitly assumes that all attempts at objectivity would depend on conceptual analysis or phenomenology because of his confidence in Moore’s is/ought distinction. One might say that addressing strawmen enables Ruse to knock down the objectivity of ethics rather than the ‘objectivity’ of ethics. He doesn’t consider, though, that we can accommodate ‘objectivity’ into a moral realism cum ethical naturalism.

A naturalistic foundation for ethics serves well as a contender that can satisfy the phenomenological and ontological criteria of being anchored "out there". Peter Railton, for example, offers one of the clearest presentations of naturalistic objectivity (Railton 1986). And, as I will now argue, parts of Ruse’s case against the foundations of ethics actually support the objectivity and foundations of ethics.

### **The (Non) Foundations of Ethics**

As Ruse reports that altruism is best understood from an evolutionary perspective as simply a human adaptation, he stresses the non-speculative, empirically true nature of evolutionary explanations. To support this he remarks that "there is evidence from human studies pointing to uniformities of moral beliefs beneath all the cultural variations and that these uniformities are innate rather than learned" (Ruse 1993: 148). This may sound odd because this kind of information usually serves to support the foundations of ethics.

Ruse doesn’t see it as support for his opposition because uniform regularities of human behavior are only adaptations that could have differed. He asserts that humans are preprogrammed to behave cooperatively but "there was absolutely no guarantee that evolution would have led us to the point that it has. Perhaps, to make us cooperators,

evolution might have filled us with other sentiments entirely opposite from those about the worth of altruism and so on and so forth" (Ruse 1993: 156). This argument says that since we could have been something different, our present foundations of ethics are less real. But maybe humans could not have survived this long unless they possessed the same moral sentiments, etc. as they presently possess. If this were the case then the naturalistic foundations would be strong indeed. The cultural studies that Ruse enters as evidence uphold this reading because they imply that without these moral capacities humankind would already be extinct.

Ruse also attempts to undercut the foundations of ethics by characterizing human evolution as meaningless or nondirected. He says that many previous evolutionary ethicists have supposed that evolution leads to higher and higher forms of life and concluded with human beings as the pinnacle of the natural world. He frowns on this smuggling of values into purely biological facts of evolution. Although "the traditional evolutionary ethicist argues that the process of evolution is not meaningless," "to the [contemporary] evolutionary ethicist, whose initial premise is the nondirectedness of evolution, " the meaninglessness is indisputable (Ruse 1993: 139, 158 ).

Many other comments Ruse makes, however, underscore the directedness of evolution. For example, how shall we understand cooperation as a "good biological strategy," a maximization of "one's units of heredity (the genes) in the next generation," or "by working together humans succeeded"? (Ruse 1993: 144, 146). 'Good', 'maximization' and 'success' in these statements only make sense with reference to some end—the end is, of course, survival. Also, Ruse says, "Of course, our ability to cooperate and our need to cooperate did not just come about by chance. There was a feedback process in evolution, as so frequently occurs"(Ruse 1993: 145). If such skills did not come about strictly through chance but through some feedback process, then we could say that the feedback process helped guide humanity to the goal of survival. Marking a distinction between nondirectedness and chance is the only way for Ruse to avoid the contradiction of saying that evolution is nondirected but at the same time not driven by chance!

With ethics, human well-being and human flourishing—as the evolutionist even admits is tied to a feedback mechanism which implies that our morality which seeks to maximize genetic material does not merely arise through a chance mutation. Construing morality as a chance mutation that is ultimately nondirected would feed into an ethical relativism. But Ruse clearly denies such a construal. "Although ethics here on earth," he says "may not be relative (in fact the evolutionary ethicist strongly denies relativity because then the universality of cooperating would break down), across galaxies other evolutionary paths may have been followed" (Ruse 1993: 158). Of course ethical naturalists discourse about ethics on earth and if Ruse is right about the universality of cooperation then he supports the objectivity and foundations of ethics.

### **Taking Stock**

Contrary to Ruse's elegy on the foundations of ethics, evolutionary ethics has helped in showing that certain determinate features of ethics are independent of whether we think they exist or not. We interact with an independent naturalistic (ethical) reality and this interaction constrains us as we develop evolutionarily through a feedback mechanism.

Evolutionary ethics, as Ruse has painted it, would support the notion that well-being is the proper object of our striving because we are preprogrammed as cooperative in order to maximize our hereditary units. So, if evolutionary ethics combined with metaethical non-naturalism leads to ethical skepticism, then evolutionary ethics combined with metaethical naturalism leads to moral realism. In other words, when considering the opposing theories about the foundation and nature of ethics, we should ask ourselves which view best

captures the experience and knowledge we have of human life on this earth, i.e., how we have evolved not how we could have evolved. The 'new evolutionary ethics', in my estimation, points toward realism not skepticism.

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