CHARLES DARWIN AND MODERN MORAL PHILOSOPHY

FRANZ M. WUKETITS

ABSTRACT. Charles Darwin can be regarded as one of the most prominent advocates of an evolutionary approach to ethics or moral philosophy in the nineteenth century and a forerunner of modern evolutionary ethics. Unlike many evolutionists of his days he consequently expanded the theory of evolution by natural selection to moral phenomena. He argued that such phenomena are deeply rooted in human nature and that humans are endowed with "social instincts." Also, he maintained that with the aid of our intellect we can strengthen and refine our natural sympathy for others. Darwin believed in moral progress, defended the ideas of justice and solidarity and gave substantial support to an evolutionary humanism. His views on morality are still refreshing and deserve full attention of moral philosophers.

KEY WORDS. Darwin, evolution, natural selection, human evolution, morality, social instincts, sympathy, progress, evolutionary ethics, evolutionary humanism.

> There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers ...; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.
>
> (Charles Darwin)

> He who understands baboon would do more about metaphysics than Locke.
>
> (Charles Darwin)

> Thanks to Darwin [man] now knows that he is not an isolated phenomenon, cut off from the rest of nature by his uniqueness.
>
> (Julian Huxley)

In the concluding chapter of Darwin's *Origin of Species* we find the frequently quoted short—and somewhat cryptic—sentence: "Much light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history" (Darwin 1859 [1958, p. 449]). However, it took Darwin twelve more years to publish his *Descent of Man* (1871), a work that in fact threw much light on humans and their evolutionary history. In these years some other naturalists—most prominently among them Thomas H. Huxley in England and Ernst Haeckel in

Faculty of Philosophy (Philosophy of Science), University of Vienna, Austria / franz.wuketits@univie.ac.at

Germany—substantiated the idea that humans (like all other species) are results of evolution and came up from ape-like creatures. Darwin was cautious and hesitant, but there is no doubt that he had speculated on the origin of humans long before the publication of *Descent of Man*. His *Beagle Diary* (Darwin Keynes 1988) includes many observations of the behavior and customs of people in different places of the earth, particularly South America (see also Richards 1987), and we can be sure that when he said "much light will be thrown" he already knew pretty well what he was announcing.

Descent of Man is a brilliant exposition of Darwin's conclusions regarding the origin and evolution of humans. But this book does not just offer evidence for human biological evolution. It includes full-length chapters on human psychic, mental, social, and moral capacities and their evolutionary origins, and thus offers the fundamental principles of an evolutionary theory of cognition and knowledge (evolutionary epistemology) as well as an evolutionary theory of morality (evolutionary ethics) (see, e. g., Wuketits 1990). In this paper I concentrate on the latter. The paper aims at giving a brief account of Darwin's (evolutionary) views of (human) moral behavior and their relevance to contemporary discussions in moral philosophy. I argue that Darwin believed in moral progress and that this belief was based on his ideas of progressive evolution in general. Darwin was anything else but a Social Darwinist. He was rather a social romantic in the spirit of Enlightenment (see Wuketits 2009a), a humanist inspired by the prospective moral improvement of humankind; he was against slavery and discrimination of women (see Willmann 2009) and thus an early defender of human rights.

SOCIAL INSTINCTS AND MORAL SENSE

Once Darwin had arrived at the conclusion that our species descended from some lower creatures, he tried to find a "moral argument". This is to say that while he had all the necessary evidence for our descent, he needed arguments for our ascent. Dobzhansky (1969, p. 3) complained that "it is unfortunate that Darwin has entitled one of his two greatest books the 'Descent', rather than the 'Ascent' of man." Anyway, Darwin found indications of (human) ascent in the perspective of a more or less inevitable improvement of the moral sense. The key notion in this context is "social instinct": The moral sense is based upon social instincts that, however, are not peculiar to humans but are characteristic for any social animal species. According to Darwin, social instincts lead (social) animals to enjoy the company of other individuals living in their group (herd, flock) and to develop a bond of "sympathy." Hence, he analyzed morality in a strict

biological manner, "reducing" it to particular behavioral traits of animals (Pennock 1995). He argued that the development of social instincts

> may be attributed in part to habit, but chiefly to natural selection. With those animals that were benefited by living in close association, the individuals which took the greatest pleasure in society would best escape various dangers, whilst those that cared least for their comrades, and lived solitary, would perish in great numbers (Darwin 1871 [1989, p. 105]).

Hence, one can say that—and this is meanwhile a truism—sociality has a considerable evolutionary advantage; at the individual's level the costs of social life (the necessity to take care of others and to help them) are rewarded by some security and pleasure.

We can, by the way, notice a remarkable similarity between Darwin and David Hume. The Scottish empiricist had already made morality a function of nature (Hume 1975), and his assumption of general feeling or sentiment—to which he attributed our ability to co-operate— resembles Darwin's "social instincts". Here I cannot go into details on this issue (but see Ruse 1986).

Yet Darwin would not claim that social instincts inherent in animals living together in a flock are to be equated with morality. The moral sense is rather an emergent property, "expressed once a threshold level of intelligence is reached" (Pennock 1995, p. 293). This means, in his own words,

> that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as in man (Darwin 1871 [1989, p. 98]).

Humans *are* endowed with intellectual power and thus, clearly, they possess a moral sense that is part and parcel of their very nature and—under particular circumstances—finds its expression quite early in their individual development. In his "Biographical sketch of an infant" (1877), Darwin reported on one of his own sons ("Doddy") and stated that "the first sign of moral sense was noticed at the age of nearly thirteen months" (Barrett 1977, p. 197). Moreover, he was aware of the role of education and concluded: "As this child was educated solely by working on his good feelings, he soon became as truthful, open, and tender, as anyone could desire" (Barrett 1977, p. 198).

More than most of his fellow combatants for evolutionary thinking, Darwin applied the idea of evolution by natural selection to all phenomena of human life. Thomas H. Huxley, an ardent defender of Darwin's ideas —and himself an eminent scientist and prolific author—had no doubts

about the relationship of humans with "lower" animals, but at the same time he nevertheless seemed to defend the special status of humans in nature, for he wrote that "[man] stands ... as on a mountain top, far above the level of his humble fellows, and transfigured from his grosser nature by reflecting, here and there, a ray from the infinite source of truth" (Huxley 1863 [2001, p. 114]). Moreover, Huxley—maybe mainly because he was much engaged in a struggle against Social Darwinism—took a position against nature and maintained that ethics has to work against natural principles (see Ruse 1986; Williams 1988). Like Darwin, Huxley saw our psychic and mental capacities as results of evolution, but while Darwin believed that these capacities will help improving our moral sense, Huxley could think of an advance in morality only if we combat nature.

(MORAL) PROGRESS

To understand Darwin's belief in a moral improvement of humankind, one must take into account his view of evolutionary progress. Darwin's conception of evolution was a gradualist one, i.e., he conceived of evolution as a step-by-step process and saw natural selection operating at a rather slow pace towards perfection. Quite illuminating is the following statement in *On the Origin of Species*:

> As natural selection acts solely by accumulating slight, successive, favourable variations, it can produce no great or sudden modifications; it can act only by short and slow steps. Hence, the canon of "*Natura non facit saltum*," which every fresh addition to our knowledge tends to confirm, is on this theory intelligible. We can see why throughout nature the same general end is gained by an almost infinite diversity of means, for every peculiarity when once acquired is long inherited, and structures already modified in many different ways have to be adapted for the same general purpose (Darwin 1959 [1958, p. 435]).

These lines show that Darwin put strong emphasis on adaptation and tended to believe that adaptation leads to improvement. When he concluded that natural selection operates on random variations, he—of course—abandoned any idea of plan and purpose in nature, but continued to think that progress was rather inevitable (see also Ospovat 1981).

This is not the place to give details on the somehow intricate and adventurous history of the idea of progress and progressive evolution. Also, I do not want to discuss here all the arguments *against* evolutionary progress (but see, e.g., Flew 1984; Gould 1996; Wuketits 1997, 2009b). Certainly, Simpson (1951, p. 107) was right when he stated "that it is impossible to think in terms of history without thinking of progress." In a way, this applies also to natural history, and the belief in progress—improvement, betterment—seems to be deeply rooted in human psycho-

logy. We humans are inspired by the wish (hope) that things may change for the better—and, of course, not for the worse. Turning again to Darwin, we can say that in his faith in evolutionary progress he was also driven by psychological motives. But there is, of course, another component that influenced his thinking. The *zeitgeist* of the nineteenth century was instilled by progressive ideas, especially the perspective of an improvement of the *conditio humana*—a heritage from the eighteenth century and the philosophers of the Enlightenment. And we should of course never forget the Victorian age as Darwin's political, social, and intellectual background.

Ruse (1988, p. 104) states that Darwin "by the time he had come to the *Descent of Man* (1871) ... had absorbed all the Victorian ideals with respect to the virtues of white, Anglo-Saxon, capitalist, Protestant males". However, I am afraid that Ruse, in this aspect, does not fully make justice to Darwin. Sure, Darwin was a Victorian, but some of his ideas—and ideals—did not match with the spirit of the Victorian age. We have to think here, above all, about his attitude towards slavery which he, as he noticed in the *Autobiography*, "abominated" (Darwin 1958, p. 74). I would argue that Darwin was driven to bring the "progress" of his century further. He was influenced by the "progressive" thoughts of the nineteenth century that, however, included many "conservative" elements. So he tried to overcome the conservatism of his age and hoped for moral progress. As Manier (1978) remarks, at least the young Darwin did not take politics seriously, but his moral sensibility could be aroused by issues like slavery and war. Moral progress for Darwin (also in his later years), then, meant to overcome slavery, war, and discrimination, and his ideal was a humanity without barriers between races and nations (Darwin 1871; see also Oeser 2009). The very progress in the development of the moral sense saw Darwin in the continuous extension of our social instincts. His ideal was, as it seems, a kind of universal ethos, and he anticipated an evolutionary humanism as it was later advocated by Julian Huxley, one of Thomas H. Huxley's grandsons (see Huxley 1964).

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Darwin's views on morality have their place, clearly, in evolutionary ethics. This type of ethics is not a monolith, it appeared—and still appears—in different versions, but what they all have in common is the assumption that moral behavior is, like any other behavioral trait in humans, a result of evolution by natural selection (see, e. g., Ayala 1987; Cela-Conde 1987; Leyhausen 1974; Mohr 1987; Ruse 1986; Wuketits 1993, 1995; and many others). From my point of view, the following ideas seem to be preponderantly important as a fundament for evolutionary ethics:

1. There is no gap between human nature and human social (including moral) behavior; sociality is rather part of our nature.
2. The evolution of social (including moral) systems is but one—albeit very important—aspect of human evolution.
3. Morality is nothing unnatural; it follows from specific requirements in human life and can be regarded as a sophistication of phyolgenetically old "altruistic programs."
4. Moral behavior is constrained by the requirements of our lives as a species, whose members—like the members of all other species—have a particular interest in their survival, i.e., successive reproduction.
5. Evolution has favored those strategies (be they egoistic or altruistic) that help their carriers to survive.
6. Humans have invented "good" and "evil;" by following, one way or another, what we call "good" in a moral sense, we follow mainly altruistic principles.
7. We cannot hope that evolution itself will automatically bring forth the morally good; we are responsible for setting the standards and finding ways for achieving what we want as moral beings.

Would Darwin agree to these ideas? Or, to put it the other way round, could these ideas be drawn from his own reflections on morality?

I think that what I have laid down in the items 1 to 6 is basically compatible with Darwin's views. What about the last item? Since Darwin believed in progress in evolution, he would have said that we can indeed hope that evolution will bring forth the morally good. Still, he would not disagree that it is on us to set moral standards. He was aware that the moral principles vary from one culture to another, which means that the particular conditions of human life constrain moral behavior. Yet Darwin hoped for a general improvement of moral conduct. He referred to Immanuel Kant, in particular to the German philosopher's hymn to duty (see Oeser 2009; Richards 1987). However, unlike Kant he tackled the problem as a naturalist and was right to state that "no one has approached it exclusively from the side of natural history" (Darwin 1871 [1989, p. 71]). And this is what has to be considered most important. Darwin paved the way to a genuine naturalist approach to ethics, based on his theory of evolution by natural selection. Hence, he overcomes the idealist stance in ethics, and his view of morality has at least two crucial implications:

1. Norms and values are not given by any supernatural power (God). They have evolved alongside the needs of humans as a social species endowed with reason (which, again, is just a product of evolution).
2. Norms and values are therefore nothing absolute. They develop—and change—according to the necessities of human social life.

So, we can state that Darwin's ideas of the origin and nature of morality helped establishing a realistic perspective in moral philosophy which does not rely on abstract principles.

Finally, we should appreciate Darwin's merits in a comparatively new field of moral philosophy, namely animal ethics. In this context, his *Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) is to be mentioned a seminal work in the history of behavior sciences and a fundamental approach to evolutionary psychology. Darwin describes and explains in this book a wide range of emotional states in animals and humans—pain, joy, anger, fear, terror, laughter, curiosity, etc.—from an evolutionary point of view. It "was the first attempt to treat the subject from a purely naturalistic and evolutionary angle" (Huxley and Kettlewell 1965, p. 108). Why is it important for animal ethics? Remember that in the Cartesian tradition animals appeared as machines; for Darwin, however at least some species of birds and many mammalian species are to be characterized as emotional beings. Consequently, they should no longer be treated as soulless creatures, and we have to extend our sympathies to them. Historically and systematically, Darwin's evolutionary naturalism includes fundamental aspects of modern animal ethics (see Lengauer 2009).

PERSPECTIVES FOR A DARWINIAN ETHICS

For now, Darwin has not received too much attention by moral philosophers. However, this brief account of his reflections on morality could show the relevance of his work—particularly his *Descent of Man*— to contemporary ethical issues. In an earlier paper (Wuketits 1993) I argued that our moral systems should be constructed in such a way that they permit a pleasant life, simply because happy people will be probably better prepared to take care of others, to help and to support others—and to expand their sympathies. I think that Darwin would basically agree. But, once again, how realistic is the belief in moral progress, i.e., the belief that we humans will improve our social instincts and to expand our sympathies to all members of our own species and even members of other, non-human animals?

One can hardly believe that humans will be able to embrace each other in an overpopulated world, in which the struggle for existence becomes more and more severe. Humans have never been angels, have never lived in Paradise. But the rapid development of our civilization during the last decades has made the situation even more dramatic. The gap between the poor and the rich nations is becoming wider, and the resources are distributed in such a way that the poor get—almost inevitably—poorer and poorer. The question arises as to whether we can—under these particular circumstances—strengthen the "good sides" of our nature, i.e.,

the disposition to co-operate and to feel sympathy for others. I do not see much hope. On the other hand, it seems evident that Darwin's "expanding circle of sympathy" is the only gleam of hope if, in our further development, we want to achieve the stage of truly humane human beings. In any case, Darwin showed that in our ethical reflections we have to take evolution seriously. If they are not just going to build castles in the air, moral philosophers can no longer ignore the evolutionary approach, which means the fact that we humans came up from apes and carry our "lower ancestry" in us. It may even be that the belief in morality is an illusion, after all, foisted upon us by evolution (Joyce 2000). But what can be said against illusions as long as they help us as orientations in our lives? Thus, Darwin's social romanticism may help—if we only believe in it. Pennock (1995, p. 304) might be right that moral Darwinism has "no longer ... a place as a necessary premise in the evidential argument for the descent of human beings," but it has its place in the belief in human beings and their ability to improve their moral sense. Their is grandeur in this view...

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