RESPONSE TO WILLIAMS: SELFISHNESS IS NOT ENOUGH

by Michael Ruse

Abstract. I agree with George Williams's most significant point: both questions and answers about our moral natures lie in our biological origins. He fails, however, to show that nature is morally evil and that therefore we should vigilantly resist it. The products of evolution are morally neutral, but the human moral sense is arguably a positive good. Morality is functional. It does not require ultimate justification in the sense of correspondence with or attack upon reality "out there." It is an adaptation "intended" to make us social, and sociality—with its sense of right and wrong—makes us fitter than otherwise

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Well! George Williams's polemic certainly proves something. The question is: What exactly does it prove?

First, it certainly shows that anyone who holds some sentimental picture of nature, thinking all is sweetness and light, with organisms happily working for the benefit of all, especially their nearest fellow human being, is sadly (perhaps even perversely) deluded. The same holds true even more so for those who draw the familiar corollary, that whereas the rest of the animal world is cooperative and friendly, we humans uniquely have the biological mark of Cain (e.g., Lorenz 1966). It is simply not true that *Homo sapiens* alone has some primeval blood lust, driving us to frenzy against our conspecifics. The wonder is how peaceable we are.

Second, Williams shows how dangerous a support biology proves to the natural theologian who, Paley-like, would derive empirical conclusions about God's existence and nature. Indeed, it would seem to me that anyone who wanted to claim that, given our understanding of modern biology, the basic tenets of Christian faith simply have to be

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wrong, would have a very strong case. How could an all-loving, all-knowing, all-powerful God have created and set in motion a world which depends so entirely and so systematically on cruelty? The free-will defence is powerless here.

Third, Williams shows—hints at, certainly—that human social behavior, including that which we call *altruistic* or *moral*, almost certainly comes out of the evolutionary process, not despite it. Biologically speaking, one can often get more out of life by helping rather than by hurting.

Grant Williams this much—and it is to grant a great deal. Yet does he prove quite what he thinks he proves, namely an updated Huxleyism (T. H., not Julian)? Does he show that the world is morally evil and that, therefore, it is our obligation to fight it and its effects with every fibre of our being? I rather think not. I would *not* say that Williams fails to show that there are aspects of the organic world where, due to its unpleasantness, we have moral obligations. I think he does. However, I do not think he justifies, beyond Huxley, "an even more extreme condemnation of nature and an antithesis of the naturalistic fallacy" (Williams 1988, 383).

One obvious problem with Williams's position follows at once, if his main conclusion is well taken. Suppose that the organic world is evil. What then of the status of the human moral sense itself? What right do we have to say that this sense, apparently uniquely among organic attributes, is not truly (or "truly") immoral? What right have we to say that our feeling of good and evil is other than a selfish adaptation, which serves our ends no less than do the poison fangs of the snake? Certainly, the cynic might suggest that humans have done more harm in the name of morality than have any number of snakes, poisonous or otherwise.

However, if the moral sense is evil or selfish, then the whole thrust of Williams's argument is negated. There is really very little point in his urging on us various courses of action, for our motives (not to mention his!) are thoroughly suspect, which then presents us with a dilemma. Either we argue that our moral sense lies outside of the biological framework or we must allow that not everything evolution produces is morally worthless or worse, and that some things indeed are positively good.

Neither horn of this dilemma is very attractive, at least, not to one of Williams's ilk. To argue that the moral sense lies outside of biology goes flatly against the letter and spirit of much of Williams's article. It also raises awkward questions about the moral sense's true source. Is it supposed to come miraculously from God? To argue that the moral sense is both good and natural drives a very large hole right through Williams's general conclusion. If the human moral sense is good, what

about a host of other things? The fact that something is a causal result of "selfish genes" is apparently no bar whatsoever to its being of moral worth. So much then for one of the main premises of Williams's argument.

There is a problem here, and I think Williams himself puts his finger on it when he talks of justifying an "antithesis" of the naturalistic fallacy. Huxley wrote against people like Herbert Spencer, who wanted to show that evolution leads to and proves a foundation for right conduct and for the good. Huxley argued that this view is simply mistaken—a view likewise condemned and its central move formally christened the "naturalistic fallacy" by the philosopher G. E. Moore (1903). Williams's problem (a problem which I confess is sometimes shared by Huxley himself) is that he has gone too far, and slipped now into the converse of the fallacy, arguing that evolution leads to wrong and bad. Yet just as Moore argued that matters of fact like evolution cannot justify that which is right, so also it is the case that matters of fact like evolution cannot justify (or "justify") that which is wrong. The products of evolution are themselves morally neutral. This is why the following passage by Williams reads so oddly: "There is a morally important difference between being struck by lightning and being struck by a rattlesnake. Only the intellectually dead could fail to see that the snake has what are clearly weapons, precisely designed and used to produce a victim" (Williams 1988, 385). Apart from the fact that Williams is insensitive to the metaphorical use of such terms as *weapon* and *design*, if we grant that the snake is striking blindly, there really is no moral difference between it and the lightning. Otherwise, why do we grant such defenses as: "Not guilty by reason of mental incompetence"?

Of course it is incumbent upon a critic like myself not merely to condemn Williams but to show how one might do better. Although this is hardly the place for full treatment, I would begin by picking up on the qualification that I used just above: "*if* the snake is striking blindly." The point about morality is that it requires a conscious being, which makes judgments and intends certain consequences and not others. In other words, it requires a thinking, acting being—which I assume is what humans are, what the snake is probably not (certainly not in a particularly reflective sort of way), and what some other animals (the chimpanzees) probably are. Nature as such is neither right nor wrong. It becomes connected with right and wrong only in as much as judgments about proper or improper action are made on the basis of it.

Now, I grant (with Williams) that our moral sense is an adaptation, brought about by selfish genes (although, note the metaphor here—

genes are not literally selfish), intended (another metaphor!) to make us social. For beings like humans, sociality has a high reproductive pay-off. What I would argue is that morality is a kind of game that conscious, reflective beings play (that they are locked into playing by their genes), in order to achieve such relatively smooth sociality. Where the altruism of the human (or other thinking being) scores over the "altruism" of the ant (say), is in its being flexible and able to deal with unforseen circumstances. (Where it loses is in requiring a great deal more parental investment, in the form of education.)

If what I have just said about morality is correct, then the search for the foundations of morality (which bedevils both Spencer and Williams in their different ways) is unneeded. Morality as such is not something which requires or demands ultimate justification. At least, not in the sense of correspondence with reality "out there," whether this reality be God's will or the evolutionary process/product or whatever. Its only rationale is pragmatic or functional. Because we believe in right and wrong—a belief whose origin Williams correctly locates in the evolutionary process—we are (biologically) fitter than otherwise. This belief lays upon us obligations, some of which involve fighting the end products of evolution (like diseases). We do so, because not to do so harms others within the moral sphere or game. What is not the case is that we should fight these end products because they are innately evil. Such a notion is meaningless. (More on these points in Ruse 1986 a, b.)

Thus, ultimately, I find myself in opposition to Williams. And yet, let not such disagreement conceal how very great are our similarities and sympathies. We agree in being evolutionists, Darwinians, and—a point on which we part company from well over ninety percent of my fellow philosophers—that in our biological origins lie both the questions and answers about our moral natures. Ultimately, that is what is really important.

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