IF OUR GENES ARE FOR US, WHO CAN BE AGAINST US? THOUGHTS OF A PRAGMATIST ON SCIENCE AND MORALITY

by J. Wesley Robbins

Abstract. The philosopher Michael Ruse accounts for the difference between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, and thus the origin of distinctively moral obligations like that of altruism, in genetic terms. This is part of an attempt to develop a philosophy that takes Darwin seriously by substituting respectable scientific entities, specifically those of evolutionary biology, for suspect theological or philosophical ones, like God or the transcendental ego, as a basis for addressing philosophical questions. Pragmatists take Darwin seriously, but in a very different way from that proposed by Ruse. Darwin introduced a "logic" into the study of living things—including human beings, the human mind, and culture—that leads philosophers to ask new and different questions about morality rather than trying to supply new answers to the same old questions. This essay contrasts these two different ways of taking Darwin seriously for purposes of philosophy and claims certain advantages for the pragmatist way over Ruse's.

Keywords: altruism; authorizing entities; logic of transition; Michael Ruse; moral obligation; pragmatism; sociobiology.

In the preface to his book *Taking Darwin Seriously,* Michael Ruse remarks that, although he had been a philosopher for twenty years, "I still had no settled thoughts on the foundations of knowledge or of morality" (Ruse 1989, xii). He goes on to say that he has come to see that our biological origins "can and should be a starting-point for philosophy today" (Ruse, 1989, xiii). So, he proposes bringing evolutionary biology into the forefront of philosophical discussions of the foundations of knowledge and morality in a philosophy that "takes Darwin seriously."

To that end, Ruse spells out a sociobiological theory according to

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which key elements of our scientific and moral practices, including the altruistic component of the latter, originate in epigenetic rules. These rules are functions of the operation of natural selection on spontaneous variations in the genetic materials of our ancestors. Thus, these aspects of our knowledge and morality are, according to Ruse, grounded in our biological nature as understood in Darwinian terms.

The thesis of this essay is that there are more ways than one to take Darwin seriously where philosophy is concerned. Ruse's way is to use Darwinian biology for the traditional philosophical purpose of establishing that certain of our practices are more than mere human inventions, but are grounded instead in the nature of things. Pragmatists from William James and John Dewey to Richard Rorty in the present day have taken Darwin seriously all along. But, our way of doing so is very different from that of Ruse. We see the advent of Darwinian biology as an opportunity to break away from traditional philosophical concerns about grounding our practices. In the aftermath of the Darwinian revolution in biology, pragmatists would have us stop trying to establish that any practice of ours enjoys an extrahuman authority.

Ruse's proposed way of taking Darwin seriously for philosophical purpose concedes too much to what John Dewey, in his seminal essay "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," called "the official and regnant philosophy of Europe for over two thousand years" (Dewey [1909] 1989, 169). The philosophy that Dewey referred to is Platonic-Christian philosophical theology. This tradition, as Dewey described it, took changeless formal entities (species) to be explanatory of life on earth. Plato called these entities *forms*. To the Platonist, form-governed life was key to understanding the world in its entirety.

This philosophy, centered as it was around the argument from design, maintained that Platonic forms governed the behavior of the world as a whole, and furthermore, that the forms were what made the world both intelligible and valuable. The forms were authorizing entities. They supposedly gave human practices appropriately connected to them greater legitimacy than that enjoyed by practices that were functions of the merely human powers of intelligence and ingenuity. They made the difference between values rooted in the nature of things and values of merely human origin. As Dewey described the function of these philosophical entities, "Science was underpinned and morals authorized by one and the same principle, and their mutual agreement was eternally guaranteed" (Dewey [1909] 1989, 169).

Ruse's sociobiological theory is a continuation of this philosophical

tradition by other, Darwinian, means. His epigenetic rules and their underlying genetic origin are replacements for a succession of formal entities in the history of Platonic-Christian philosophical theology, from God to innate ideas to the synthetic activities of the transcendental ego. Ruse's biological entities play a role similar to that played by those earlier authorizing entities. Like their philosophical predecessors, they are to underwrite our science and morals, guaranteeing that these are more than mere products of human creativity.

The sociobiological entities that Ruse postulates to back up our scientific and moral practices are changeable, unlike the eternal entities favored by traditional Platonic-Christian philosophy. Despite this difference, they are supposed to fill the void left by the realization that belief in an objectively authorized morality, whose requirements come to us from God, is a "collective illusion." In that respect, Ruse's theory is a kind of philosophy of subjectivity, in that it relocates the authorizing entities of traditional philosophy from the outside world to inside of us.

Whatever the case may be about God, according to Ruse it is not an illusion that our moral practices are more than mere human inventions. Their prescriptive force is now supposed to be a function of epigenetic rules that were put in place inside of us in the first instance by changes wrought over time in human genetic materials by natural selection. In Ruse's words, "Thanks to newly discovered models of social interaction, the human biologist can give backing to an ethics that is realistic, in the best sense of the term" (Ruse 1989, xiv). In other words, according to Ruse, even if our moral practices do lack the numinous authority of God, they at least have the backing of our genes. Our moral endeavors are undergirded, if not by the everlasting arms, at least by the genetic makeup shared by members of the species *Homo sapiens*. This is supposed to give at least some aspects of our standards of altruism a prescriptive force as inescapable (in its own way) as if they had in fact come to us from God.

When talking about how he plans to skirt the naturalistic fallacy in ethics, Ruse describes his project as one of causal explanation rather than of supplying "ultimate justifying reasons" (Ruse 1989, 257). This seems to mean, as one of the referees for this essay suggests, that Ruse's project is not the philosophical one of authorization that Dewey described and that I attribute to him. Following this line, one might say in Ruse's defense that genes are not authorizing entities in the sense of justifying anything. They only figure in a causal account of where our sense of various moral obligations comes from.

However, Ruse clearly intends his sociobiological theory to explain

three things concurrently: (1) the existence in us of tendencies to behave in, at least, reciprocally altruistic ways; (2) our sense that certain sorts of action carry with them a unique prescriptive force, namely, that of a moral imperative; and (3) an awareness on our part that when we fail to act on our inborn altruistic tendencies we violate a distinctly moral imperative (Ruse 1989, 217–35). Considering that, according to his account of the matter, both our tendencies toward reciprocally altruistic behavior and the sense that such behavior is morally obligatory for us are genetically based, it is evident that genes do function for Ruse as authorizing entities in my sense of the term. They are the originators of whatever moral authority altruism has for us. They issue the moral commandment for us to love one another. As such, they are Ruse's substitute for such entities as God, the rational self, or the transcendental ego.

Ruse takes for granted that moral obligations differ in kind from other sorts of obligations. He then takes it upon himself to explain this difference by tracing *moral* obligations to genetic sources in order to account for their unique inescapability and pervasiveness. For those of us—following William James, Willard van Orman Quine, and Richard Rorty—who hold to a "web" theory, beliefs are defined by their position in a network of beliefs, not by intrinsic characteristics that they possess independently of any such connections to other beliefs. Given this view of them, beliefs are not divisible into necessary and contingent ones that differ in kind with respect to their mode of truth-value. Beliefs differ from one another in this respect only in degree, and that difference is explainable, as Quine suggests, in behavioral terms as a function of the strength of speakers' tendencies to affirm or deny them.

By the same token, beliefs about values are not divisible into categorical and hypothetical ones that differ in kind with respect to their mode of prescriptive force. Such differences as there are in the prescriptive force of beliefs about traffic codes and rules of etiquette on the one hand, and beliefs about honesty on the other, are matters of degree. That difference also is explainable in behavioral terms, as a function of the strength of speakers' tendencies to affirm them in light, for example, of how crucial these various behaviors are to social life. There is no intrinsic difference in prescriptive force between moral beliefs and other beliefs about values.

Given such a web theory of beliefs, which pragmatists typically hold, there is no need for a theoretical explanation of the prescriptive force of moral injunctions that goes beyond the behavioral dispositions of human speakers. Moral injunctions do not differ in kind from

other beliefs about values in that respect, and thus they require no special explanation of their authority. Whether a web theory of beliefs is superior to other theories is the topic for another essay.

In any event, that is the issue between Ruse and pragmatists: whether there is any need for a philosophical account of moral injunctions that explains their authority for us by tracing their origin to entities above and beyond what humans say and do. The fact is that Ruse proposes to describe the "foundations" of morality and to provide "backing" for ethics in terms of genetics. This is the language of what Dewey called "the official and regnant philosophy of Europe." It carries with it all of the authorizing, validating, baggage that he described and hoped to unload with some help from Darwin.

Dewey's own view of the prospective influence of Darwin on philosophy was very different from Ruse's. There is no mention in his essay of using evolutionary theory to provide a biological foundation for either our science or our morals. Quite the contrary. Dewey saw Darwin's revolution in biology as just the latest stage in a historic transfer of human interest from the permanent to the changing. Once we bring our own mind into the orbit of "the principle of transition," it becomes readily apparent that the questions we ask and the problems we take seriously are subject to change over time. This transitoriness applies as much to philosophical matters as to any others.

Darwin's theory of evolution made it possible to carry out biological inquiry without needing to know whether the world in its entirety originated by design or chance. By the same token, philosophers can, and in Dewey's estimation should, think about the values embodied in human life on earth without regard to questions about the origin of their legitimacy in authorizing entities other than human intelligence and ingenuity.

For Dewey, the Darwin-inspired opening of the realm of mind and morals to the new logic of transition presents us with a choice about how we should think about values, given our philosophical past. We can continue to try to authorize them by tracing their origin to higher powers, whether those be the eternal entities of Platonism or the changeable entities and processes of modern science. Or we can settle for tracing their origin to what human beings have said and done, and let it go at that. If we choose the latter alternative, we can turn our energies to improving upon the values we have inherited from our predecessors rather than trying to show that their authority is more than human.

As Ruse tells the story, we have no choice in this matter. Continuation of the philosophical practice of grounding our practices in higher powers is biologically mandated. In order for morality to retain its adaptive value, the "collective illusion" that it has been imposed upon us has to be reinforced, preferably in a way that is scientifically respectable. Contemporary philosophers have no choice but to come up with a viable substitute for the higher authorizing entities of traditional Platonic-Christian philosophical theology—for the sense that morals are external and objective has been put in place by our genes.

> 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. . . .
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> 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. (Ruse 1989, 253)

This, from my Deweyan point of view, is a classic example of bad faith, masking what amounts to a practical choice as a matter of biological necessity. To suppose, as Ruse does, that he has no choice in this matter begs the question of the fixity of our mind, its interests and questions, in favor of the Platonic-Christian philosophical tradition. There is not a shred of evidence, nor does Ruse even purport to cite any, that people who believe higher powers impose their moral practices on them are better adapted than those who believe their morality is a cultural heritage, merely human in its origin and authority. Nor is there any evidence, apart from Ruse's own sociobiological theory, that the belief in higher authorizing entities has been put in place by biological rather than cultural mechanisms.

Described in terms of Deweyan pragmatism, the need to find a scientifically respectable substitute for the higher authorizing powers of the Platonic-Christian tradition is not biologically based at all. It is an artifact of our philosophical past, predicated on the notion that unless our moral practices originate in something other than merely human ingenuity and creativity, they are somehow lacking in legitimacy.

Looked at in this way, Ruse's opting for a sociobiological account of altruism represents a practical judgment on his part, not a biological necessity. He supposes that it is better to continue our philosophical/theological past, looking to higher powers to boost the legitimacy of our practices, than to become more self-reliant in that respect, looking to no powers beyond our own imagination and intelligence for the authority of our practices.

Another of my referees suggests that my supposedly Deweyan critique of Ruse's philosophical project is based on a Rortian reading of Dewey in which values are exclusively human creations. This, in turn, is supposed effectively to isolate humans, in an un-Deweyan manner, from the rest of the natural world. The consequence would be to ignore both the respects in which we are dependent in our moral endeavors on cooperation from the rest of nature and the "natural piety" that appreciates and celebrates this dependence.

However, my objection to Ruse's use of Darwin for the philosophical purposes I have described in no way denies our causal connections with the rest of the natural world in all aspects of our lives. Nor does it counsel us to neglect celebration of those connections in acts of natural piety. I am not, nor is Rorty, interested in placing humans in splendid existentialist isolation from the rest of the world. In my alternative appropriation of Darwin, as opposed to that of Ruse, I wish merely to reaffirm the central claim of *A Common Faith*, underlining the distinction that Dewey himself deploys there. We can and would be better off to pursue our ideal goals religiously without benefit of a religion that posits God or God-surrogates as the extrahuman origin of values such as altruism or of the prescriptive authority that such values have for us.

Dewey, after all, claimed that the extrahuman forces of nature are indifferent to values in a way that humans are not. "Nature produces whatever gives reinforcement and direction but also what occasions discord and confusion. The 'divine' is thus a term of human choice and aspiration" (Dewey [1934] 1962, 53–54). And further, as the title of the closing chapter of *A Common Faith* indicates, Dewey believed that the function of uniting ideals with actual conditions has a "human abode."

Deweyan pragmatism has its own ancestry. It goes back to William James's essay "Great Men and Their Environment" (James [1880] 1961). James's target in that essay was Herbert Spencer and his disciples. Their accounts attributed social and mental change to the operations of impersonal extrahuman powers of one sort or another. In that respect, at least, Ruse's sociobiological theory of morality bears a certain resemblance to the theories that James was criticizing. James argued in opposition to these that, if one were to apply Darwin's mode of explanation to social and mental change, the resulting account of how our practices have come to be the way they are would mention individual human beings as the bearers of dfferences in thinking and acting rather than impersonal forces. In contrast, the Spencerian theories, as James put it in his own inimitable way, attribute social and mental change "to everything,

in fact, except the Grants and the Bismarcks, the Joneses, and the Smiths" (James [1880] 1961, 167).

James proposed that cultural formations, including our scientific and moral practices, are analogous to biological species understood in Darwinian terms, produced by the same sort of nonteleological coincidence of spontaneous variations and selective pressures. According to Darwin, the origin of a contemporary biological species lies in selective pressures operating on mutations in the genetic makeup of its ancestors, not in a prior Platonic form. Given that origin, its biological value lies in its current fitness, not in its origin. Similarly, James suggested, the origin of our current scientific and moral practices lies in selective pressures operating on "mutations" in the way certain of our human forebears thought and behaved, not in a prior Platonic form. These practices, then, have no authoritative source other than the ingenuity and intelligence of those human beings. Given those humble beginnings, the cultural value and legitimacy of our practices lies in the results of thinking and behaving in these ways, not in any extrahuman authorizing agencies.

Thus, for Deweyan pragmatists, Darwinian biology does not provide a new and better way to ground our scientific and moral practices, basing them on scientifically respectable entities and processes. Instead, it exemplifies a "logic" that, when applied to epistemic and moral values, removes the onus of having to prove that they come to us from beyond the intellectual and imaginative powers of human beings in order to establish their authority. For Deweyans, then, suitable answers to questions about the authorization of our practices refer simply to what human beings have said and done in the past. As Richard Rorty says, we have the scientific and moral practices that we do, not because of the will of God or the biological nature of man, but "because certain poets and revolutionaries of the past spoke as they did" (Rorty 1989, 61).

If we apply Rorty's statement to the altruistic component of our morality, then we have the standards of altruism that we do because of things that such people as Moses, Jesus, Saint Paul, and Mother Teresa have said and done. That is all that needs saying about our practices so far as their authorization is concerned. The value of altruism and its hold on us lies in the benefits that accrue from our looking out for one another, not in its origin—theological, biological, or otherwise.

Four observations conclude this contrast of Ruse's philosophical use of Darwin and that of Deweyan pragmatist, antiphilosophical thinkers. First, as Stephen J. Gould has noted, in the case of human beings at least, adaptive behavior, including altruism, does not

automatically point to a genetic source as its only possible explanation. Given an alternative, cultural mechanism for originating and maintaining adaptive behavior, altruism may as well, as Gould says, "arise by trial and error in a few individuals that do not differ genetically from their groupmates, spread by learning and imitation, and stabilize across generations by value, custom and tradition" (Gould [1980] 1989, 259).

Given these two alternative explanations, cultural and biological, for the origin and maintenance of altruism, the Deweyan preference for the cultural explanation is not a judgment affirming its scientific superiority. It is the judgment that, when it comes to questions about the authorization of our practices, cultural explanations are enough: we need only concern ourselves with what human beings have said and done. So far as the value of altruism and its prescriptive force for us are concerned, the sociobiological theory is irrelevant.

Ruse does not propose his sociobiological theory simply as a matter of scientific interest. He proposes it for a specifically philosophical reason, as a theory better suited than Platonic-Christian philosophical theology to explain the authority of our values by grounding them in powers greater than our own. But we already know—quite apart from any sociobiological theory about the genetic origin of altruism—that the tendency to cooperate is beneficial. We know of its worth both in general and in great detail. Its genetic origin, if such there be, does not give it any more authority for us than it already has, whatever its origin. So far as legitimacy is concerned, we are just as well off with a cultural account of the origin and transmission of altruism as with a biological one. This observation effectively removes Ruse's philosophical rationale for proposing his theory: that it adds an authoritativeness to the altruistic component of our morality that it would otherwise lack.

Furthermore, Ruse's theory sets a lamentable tone of moral mediocrity. In his account of the matter, the sort of altruism that has the backing of science is a restricted, calculating, "reciprocal" altruism that serves the reproductive purposes of "selfish" genes. Any higher standard of altruism—selfless sacrificial love for example—gets written off as an excessive saintliness that has no scientific standing and therefore no hold upon us as a moral standard. Such behavior is viewed as a luxury at best and foolhardy at worst. J. L. Mackie, writing in a similar vein to Ruse, dismisses Christian saintliness as "an attractive topic for preaching, but with little practical persuasive force" (Mackie [1978] 1989, 312). Ruse himself is equally dismissive, describing the unrestricted altruism of what he calls "the stronger version of the love commandment" (e.g., the

Sermon on the Mount) as "obviously maladaptive behavior [that] could never have been produced and cherished by natural selection" (Ruse 1993, 266).

This invidious distinction, between altruism that is scientifically certifiable and altruism that is not, unfortunately reduces the morally exceptional among us to the status of oddities to be tolerated if we can afford to. There is no room to celebrate them as agents of moral change and, perhaps, improvement. There is no way to understand saints as innovators whose extraordinary sayings and doings initiate change in conventional morality. Instead, Ruse has to write off people such as Jesus and Gandhi, not to mention any future moral visionaries, as eccentrics whose ignorance of human biology leads them to advocate in their words and deeds moral standards that are unrealistic because they do not accurately represent our genetic makeup.

Third, the authorizing entities of traditional Platonic-Christian philosophy were supposed to epitomize characteristics that we humans would do well to exhibit ourselves, virtues like reasonableness and benevolence. Knowing and appreciating the character of these entities would contribute to the hold of those moral standards on us. This is not the case with Ruse's genetic entities. Genes, on Ruse's own account of them, do only one thing well—replicate. It is difficult to see what moral support we should find in, or what moral challenge we might gain from, the knowledge that these strands of protein are authors of our morality. Knowing that genes are causes of our morality has about as much moral import as knowing that the Big Bang is. Our genes are like the atoms in this respect. They are just there. These entities have no moral lessons to teach us in either instance, not about selfishness, or selflessness, or any other morally relevant characteristic for that matter. If one wants to portray standards of altruism and powerfully impress their hold on us, stories about the characteristic altruism of real or imagined people are a much better vehicle for doing so than scientific theories about "selfish" genes.

Fourth, and finally, Deweyan pragmatists view the sciences, including Darwinian biology, as products of the same human intelligence and creativity that produce our moral practices. As such, the sciences are neither more nor less authoritative than morality is. Consequently, they are no better suited to ground our moral practices than would be the case vice versa. We have both the science and the morality that we do because human beings in the past spoke and acted as they did. We need nothing more in the way of authorization in either instance.

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