ETHICAL NATURALISM AND BIOCULTURAL EVOLUTION

by Charles Fay

If our aim is to integrate or at least reexamine the relevance of natural science to human value, a nonempirical concept of human value would not seem adequate. But any effort to develop an empirical concept of value is immediately challenged in the name of "Hume's law" which asserts an unbridgeable gulf between fact and value. The proper interpretation of Hume's ethics and a reconsideration of the naturalistic fallacy are occasioning second thoughts on the part of some ethicians at present. I find myself in essential agreement with MacIntyre's position that moral experience is unintelligible apart from notions such as desiring, needing, pleasure, happiness, and health—notions that transcend the dichotomies of analytic philosophers in regard to the descriptive and the normative. In MacIntyre's interpretation of Hume,[1] a transition from "is" to "ought" can be made by means of the notion of wanting. This bringing to bear of human wants and urges on human values is of special interest to those naturalists in ethics who seek a foundation for ethics in the sciences of man and is one way of accomplishing the end of this conference. For the natural and behavioral sciences sometimes concern themselves with what people want, and in considering what people want these sciences also concern themselves with particular instances of what is. The frequently complex, problematic connection between actual wants and what is desirable requires a great deal of practical reflection. However, it is reason, rooted in the actual experience of need, which makes the judgment that x is good, and a concept of value which is in this sense empirical can be related to the humanities and to the sciences. In the process, such a concept further extends its basis in human experience and acquires both general perspective and immediate application to contemporary moral and social problems.

Philosophical Failures because of Insufficient Evolutionary Theory

This paper in particular deals with the problem of situating a need

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theory of value in the context of contemporary evolutionary theory. Quite recently, Flew[2] and Quinton[3] have reconsidered the possibilities of an evolutionary ethics. These thinkers recognize that there is a logical distinction between judgments of value and the neutral, strictly theoretical statements of fact. Nevertheless, they agree with Julian Huxley's observation: "It makes a great difference whether we think of the history of mankind as something wholly apart from the history of the rest of life, or as a continuation of the general evolutionary process, though with special characteristics of its own."[4] Huxley's qualification, "though with special characteristics of its own," suggests that human evolution differs from organic evolution. Unfortunately, neither Flew nor Quinton seems to have pondered the differences when they take the position that ethics involves considerations that transcend genetics and natural selection as these processes ordinarily operate in evolutionary biology.

Quinton asserts that language may in fact relate to objects or states of affairs which occasion satisfaction or enjoyment and that at the same time this language can be established as true or false.[5] Concepts such as health and social welfare have cognitive significance in medicine or social work; yet they also refer to human needs, and they provide good and sufficient reasons for actions which are empirically verifiable. In an examination of the alleged autonomy of ethics, Emmett also questions whether a social fact such as parenthood can be understood apart from an appreciation of what is appropriate behavior for parents.

> The notion of *role,* therefore, I suggest provides a link between factual descriptions of social situations and moral pronouncement about what ought to be done in them. It has, so to speak, a foot in both camps, that of fact and of value; it refers to a relationship with a factual basis, and it has a norm of behavior built into it which is being explicitly or tacitly accepted if the role is cited as a reason.[6]

The facts of the behavioral sciences are ethically neutral only when considered in abstraction from their relationship to human needs; when seen in relationship to human passions and interests, these facts involve value. When we speak of interlocking roles which involve rights and duties, or of efficiency or of the economical, we are dealing with social, technological, and economic systems independently of the evolutionary process. What interests us especially is the relevance of evolutionary theory and data to morality. And for our purposes we welcome the suggestion of Quinton that we find in evolutionary biology concepts such as adaptation, progress, and genetic or biological efficiency which apply to all living beings, which are verifiable, and which pertain to goals that human beings generally desire.[7] Such values are subordinate and de-

feasible. However, the biological efficiency of some policy or institution certainly may provide a good and sufficient reason for choice, other things being equal, just as efficiency or economy or healthiness are. Quinton would argue, however, that ordinarily before arriving at an ethical conclusion in regard to any course of action, one would consider many other goods besides the biological; consequently, other facts besides evolution must be taken into account, with the result that evolutionary ethics is inadequate.

In my view, the major shortcoming of current reevaluations such as those of Flew and Quinton is the abstract and truncated view of evolution that figures in their arguments: that evolutionary considerations are irrelevant or subordinate to higher values. The nature of the evolutionary process as it is currently conceived by anthropologists and biologists is of crucial importance to any reevaluation of an evolutionary ethics by philosophers. What is called for is not a rehearsal of nineteenth-century theories but philosophic reflection on the current scientific doctrine that the evolutionary process, insofar as it pertains to the origin and continued evolution of man, is biocultural and not simply biological. According to Quinton, evolutionary theory consists fundamentally of genetic theories of inheritable characteristics and chance variations and the theory of natural selection.[8] Also for Flew, "the obvious and right place from which to begin a study of evolutionary ethics is Charles Darwin."[9] There is a tendency on the part of philosophers not only to distinguish organic evolution from cultural change but even to separate them. It is as though human beings somehow emerged as the result of a purely biological process, and when their nature was complete they then produced culture; ethics is restricted entirely to what man has produced since his evolution was completed.

Human Values in the Context of Biocultural Evolution

But the process of human evolution is biocultural. These two factors are indeed formally distinct, but they interact in human origins. The resulting holistic process must be analyzed in terms of concepts that cut across the organic and the cultural. In fact, the dominant factor in human origins is culture. Reflecting on the role of culture in the ecological situation of early man, Washburn contends that it is probably more accurate to think of much of our structure as the result of culture than it is to think of men anatomically like ourselves slowly developing culture.[10] When culture begins to operate in hominid evolution, we have to do with a rudimentary form of the social nature which is also an ethical nature. According to Goudge, it is precisely the point of the

theory of evolution that selection is an antichance factor that tends to produce systematic and orderly change in a population.[11] While the genetic changes operate in a random manner, the selective factors do not.

Certain anthropologists emphasize, and I believe rightly, the adaptive value of spontaneous cooperation and friendship in the course of human evolution.[12] These factors can be related to the same psychological and social nature that characterizes the primitive tool maker. White maintains that the *sui generis* character of culture is accounted for by man's symbolic mentality which transforms and elevates the tool use and social life of nonhuman primates.[13] The very act of communicating tool-making traditions involves initiative, shared experience, and cooperation. If this is the case, freedom and justice are "writ large" in the evolutionary process. And inasmuch as natural selection operates in a nonrandom fashion in hominid evolution, that is, inasmuch as an ecological situation endures which places a premium on these moral factors, they become better established in man's psychobiological nature. An evolutionary view of the human situation would indicate that man is as much committed to the values of freedom and justice as he is to an upright posture. The fact that he suffers from moral conflict and perplexity is analogous to the hazards of an incomplete adaptation to an upright posture, namely, backache, fallen arches, and sagging mesenteries. The moral nature in question is still inchoative, and this helps to explain the celebrated enigma stressed by deontologists in ethics: obligation sometimes seems to clash with our immediate desires. The fact that aggression and conflict also have adaptive value in various stages of hominid evolution further complicates the picture.

Now, inasmuch as culture and the needs of an ethical animal become essential to the evolutionary process, cultural and ethical factors are both emergent and yet intrinsically dependent on the organic processes of reproduction, growth, and evolution. That human culture is more than organic has been maintained by American anthropologists since Kroeber's article, "The Superorganic," appeared in 1917.[14] Biocultural evolution cannot be reduced to purely biological evolution, just as organic evolution cannot be reduced to chemical changes in nonliving materials. Biocultural evolution includes the "higher values," those relating to what Maslow has called self-actualization,[15] as well as the lower.

There is, however, some confusion in anthropological theory concerning the exact meaning of the superorganic character of culture. Sometimes it is merely a methodological convenience; that is, culture is

viewed as if it were something more than organic, but this is nothing more than a convenient fiction for many anthropologists. Others speak of the superorganic as something both superindividual and real, in a way reminiscent of Plato's world of ideas. However, there is no doubt that culture is real and not a Platonic idea. Psychotherapists have always been interested in the cultural dimension of human conflict and suffering. In many studies, culture and its value orientations are related to what existentialists and phenomenologists call man's subjectivity. By means of a theory of the self as social, it is possible, I believe, to show that all of culture, considered ontologically, is reducible without remainder to something manifest in the behavior and consciousness of individuals. George Herbert Mead provides some indication of how this reduction is achieved with his account of the social self and his theory of role and symbolic interaction.[16] If one understands the human individual properly, he is seen to be an individual whose normal maturation involves what the anthropologists call enculturation. This means not only becoming socialized but also acquiring all the outlooks and attitudes that the higher values imply. And if one understands culture ontologically, it is not something that exists apart from individuals. To be sure, the way people live can be considered in abstraction from individual humans and viewed as a functional system of interdependent customs and institutions. When so considered, concepts which apply to organic evolution also apply analogously to the culture system. Many definitions of culture emphasize adjustment or view it as a problem-solving device. The following definitions illustrate the adaptive function of culture in relation to basic needs of individuals.

> The culture of a people may be defined as the sum total of the material and intellectual equipment whereby they satisfy their biological and social needs and adapt themselves to their environment.[17]
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> The culture of a society may be said to consist of the characteristic ways in which basic needs of individuals are satisfied in that society.[18]

The concept of adaptation

> provides a unifying theme that makes it possible to bridge the seemingly disparate interests of anthropologists—from the emergence of *Homo sapiens* out of his nonhuman primate ancestry to the development of huge metropolitan areas in modern states. . . .
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> Among nonhuman animals, adaptation takes place principally by means of genetic mutation. In man, on the other hand, adaptation is accomplished by cultural means, principally through the harnessing of new sources of energy for productive ends and through the organizations of social relations that make it possible to use these energy systems effectively.[19]

However, to abstract a mode of life from the concrete human individuals who live it is not to deny the ontological dependence of the former on the latter. Let us recall that man's adjustment requires not only the harnessing of new sources of energy but, as Marx explains, in acquiring new productive forces men change all their social relations. Consequently, adaptation on the cultural level involves an ethical system by means of which the social relations are organized. Whether the cultural system is in a state of equilibrium or disequilibrium will be of utmost consequence for the moral and social problems of individual human beings. In short, given a proper understanding of the human individual on the one hand and of culture on the other, it should be evident that there can be nothing in the whole field of value, including what is most private and unique, which transcends a biocultural view of the evolution of man.

Evolutionary Progress through Suffering

We have already acknowledged that culture frustrates human needs as well as satisfies them. In a recent analysis of sociocultural systems, the anthropologist Freilich concludes that, even though these systems tend toward states of balance, they exist most frequently in states of imbalance.[20] The conflict that exists in the California educational system with its three-way split between a conservative governor and state legislature, a liberal faculty and administration, and an increasingly radicalized student body is merely illustrative of the sort of situation that obtains generally in human evolution. It is therefore incumbent on me to show how a functional and even progressive view of evolution can be maintained in spite of all the conflict and suffering, and it hardly seems enough to point out that there are overall trends toward equilibrium in social systems. I think I can show this by reflecting on a great cultural revolution in the past which was clearly progressive yet paradoxical in its effects upon individuals. Prior to the Neolithic, man's social life was integrated exclusively on the basis of kinship ties. There was accordingly no state, no market, no rationalizing man of classical economic theory. But after some hundreds of thousands of years of biological and cultural change, hunters and gatherers at least in some instances created sociocultural systems that not only tended toward balance but actually were balanced.

> The economic system of primitive peoples is identified largely with the kinship system and is therefore characterized by cooperation, mutual aid, and sharing. . . .
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> Private and personal property are institutions of primitive society as they

are of our own, but use is emphasized rather than ownership in the sense in which the latter term is used in our culture.[21]

The Agricultural Revolution transformed primitive society, based upon kinship, into civil society, founded upon property relations and territorial organization. Class structure and class division replace lineage and clan; competition and conflict take the place of mutual aid. From the standpoint of the needs and satisfactions of human beings, this transformation meant a great loss: the loss of kinship, which, as Tylor pointed out, means "kindliness" and mutual aid.[22]

In a sense, things have never been as good as they were in the Old Stone Age. Yet the average life expectancy was some twenty-two years; unless a human being was a relative he was a nonhuman being and therefore not a subject of rights. That moral as well as technological progress is accomplished in this great revolution is argued at some length by Redfield in *The Primitive World and Its Transformations.*[23] The emergence of the agricultural state involved a new mode of integration of economic and political activity which must be viewed as progressive. The result is an increase in social efficiency analogous to the increase of biological efficiency entailed by organic evolution. Aristotle's naturally political animal is the product of changes that took place for the most part from the Neolithic on.

The Industrial Revolution has been a continual source of upheaval and social dislocation, culminating in the economic and political structure described by Galbraith in *The New Industrial State.*[24] At present, a system of power and social control seems to have emerged in which anonymous bands of specialists determine the priority of questions of social policy and the best means of implementing policy. It is easy to understand the feeling of alienation on the part of humanists and the radical left. Nevertheless, the new industrial state, like the old agricultural state, has a functional and adaptive value for the reason that it makes possible the solution of problems that involve man's relation to his total environment, problems that can be solved in no other way. The nostalgic appeal of participatory democracy is regressive in the current redefinition of the locus of power and responsibility. If the great problems that concern the quality of human existence are ever to be dealt with, it will be through Galbraith's technostructure rather than by the contemporary Thoreaus who reject any system that curtails individualistic freedoms. In the Cenozoic, the thing to be was a mammal rather than a reptile. Today, freedom and responsibility are realized through the emergent organization, or not at all. New opportunities for creativity and responsibility exact a heavy toll in moral suffering and

frustration. And this is the sum and total of the consolation offered by the evolutionist in the face of the problem of evil.

Conclusion

An evolutionary ethics will provide some light by means of its functional and adaptive analysis of human value. Some of the arbitrariness that relativists and noncognitivists rest their case on will be diminished. However, to borrow an observation from Edel, "Some indeterminacy will always remain."[25] Complexity in an evolutionary ethics centers on the relationship between the needs of an individual and a biocultural system whose conflicting elements only approximate an equilibrium. Moral conflict is universal in human experience not because human nature has been corrupted by original sin but because it is unfinished. The "is" from which we argue in ethics is not a stable, universal, and necessary entity but something in process, in transition. An evolutionary view of the human situation both preserves the ambiguity of the practical life, which is the universal testimony of thoughtful persons, and further provides an explanation of this irreducible "irrationality." Such an ethics will not provide all the light we crave, but what it does make available is tied in with the evolution of human science, and this limited understanding is especially crucial in periods of cultural transition.

NOTES

1. A. C. MacIntyre, "Hume on 'Is' and 'Ought' " in *Hume, a Collection of Critical Essays,* ed. V. C. Chappell (New York: Doubleday & Co., Anchor Book Original, 1966), pp. 240–64; ref. to pp. 257–58.
2. A. G. N. Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (London: Macmillan Co., 1967).
3. Anthony Quinton, "Ethics and the Theory of Evolution," in *Biology and Personality,* ed. I. T. Ramsey (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), pp. 107–31.
4. Julian Huxley, *Evolution in Action* (New York: New American Library, Inc., Mentor Books, 1957), p. vi.
5. Quinton, p. 111.
6. Dorothy Emmett, *Rules, Roles and Relations* (London: Macmillan Co., 1966), p. 41.
7. Quinton, p. 113.
8. Ibid., p. 123.
9. Flew, p. 1.
10. Sherwood Washburn, "Tools and Human Evolution," *Scientific American* 203, no. 3 (September 1960).
11. T. A. Goudge, *The Ascent of Life* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961), pp. 109–13.
12. Marshall Sahlins, "The Origin of Society," *Scientific American* 203, no. 3 (September 1960); and Marshall Sahlins, "The Social Life of Monkeys, Apes and Primitive Man," in *The Evolution of Man's Capacity for Culture,* ed. J. N. Spuhler (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959), pp. 54–73; Leslie White, *The Evolution of Cul-*

ture (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1959), esp. chap. 4, "The Transition from Anthropoid Society to Human Society."

13. Leslie White, *The Science of Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cudahy, 1949), esp. chap. 2, "The Symbol: The Origin and Basis of Human Behavior," and chap. 3, "On the Use of Tools by Primates."

14. A. L. Kroeber, "The Superorganic," *American Anthropologist* 19 (April–June 1917): 163–213.

15. "Furthermore, *all* these basic needs may be considered simply steps along the time path to general self-actualization, under which all basic needs can be subsumed" (Abraham H. Maslow, "Psychological Data and Value Theory," in *New Knowledge in Human Values*, ed. Abraham H. Maslow (New York: Harper & Bros., 1959), p. 123; also see Abraham H. Maslow, *Motivation and Personality* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1954), esp. chap. 4, "The Instinctoid Nature of Basic Needs."

16. For an interesting comparison of Mead and Buber, see Paul E. Pfuetze, *Self, Society, Existence* (New York: Harper & Bros., Torchbooks, 1954), esp. chaps. 2 and 4. For our purposes, this study indicates how culture and its evolution could be related to what the existentialists call subjectivity. For Mead's concepts can serve as a connecting link between the so-called objective realm of biocultural evolution and the lived experience of existing in the world that is interpreted in contemporary existentialism and phenomenology.

17. A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, vol. 47, no. 1 (1952): 56.

18. Ibid.

19. Yehudi A. Coher, ed., *Man in Adaptation: The Biosocial Background* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1968), 1:3.

20. Morris Freilich, "The Natural Triad in Kinship and Complex Systems," *American Sociological Review* 29, no. 4 (August 1964): 529–40.

21. White, *The Evolution of Culture*, p. 260.

22. Ibid., p. 141.

23. Robert Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1953).

24. John Kenneth Galbraith, *The New Industrial State* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1967).

25. Abraham Edel, *Ethical Judgment* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955), p. 336.