

Evolutionary Morality: A Dialectic

John: Well, Ray, what did you think of the class? Professor Alfred Theodore Chism really is good, isn't he?

Ray: Oh, yeah! He's the best teacher I've had so far. It's hard to keep student interest up in lecture hall, so I'm really impressed. I hate that he had to go out of his way to claim there is no God, though. It detracted from an otherwise excellent lecture.

John: Well, come on now. You can believe in God if you like, but you gotta admit that it's pretty silly. Sure, it's helpful to teach churn how to grow up and be alright, but we're adults now. It's not like there is any evidence that God exists.

Ray: I disagree that no evidence exists, but I got a feeling that evidence for God is not what's on your mind. May I ask what made you think about evidence and God?

John: Hmm. I don't know. I suppose Professor Chism's talk on morality, and how evolution tells us how humans evolved into our moral behaviors. Evolution has evidence; religion does not.

Ray: I see. And what evidence exists that morality did evolve?

John: Well, we have it, other animals do not.

Ray: So, you are saying that because humans have morality, we must have received it through evolution?

John: Yes, of course.

Ray: So, are you saying that evolution is the one and only possible answer for morality?

John: What else is there?

Ray: How about God?

John: Remember what Professor Chism said? We only accept theories that have evidence to support it. We can look at nature and see that animals do everything humans do, and we can see how certain actions they perform are comparable to what we call ethical behavior, and we can see this behavior manifests itself mostly in the more advanced species. It's reasonable to assume that ethical behavior can evolve, and that since humans are the most advanced species, we have the most advanced ethics.

Ray: I agree completely with almost all that you said, but I believe God is still an acceptable alternative. But for now, I want to make sure I understand your beliefs correctly. Did not Professor Chism teach us that we must discard a theory if evidence exists that is contrary to the theory?

John: I think "discarding" a theory is a bit strong, but we certainly have to work on it, and we ought not to place too much faith in it until the apparent contradiction is either reconciled or marginalized.

Ray: Fair enough, but you do agree that any theory with a major contradiction ought not be taken seriously, at least not until an answer to the dilemma can be found?

John: Yes, of course.

Ray: Would you also agree that if a fundamental premise of a theory is not met, then the theory would also be suspect unless it can be reconciled as well?

John: Yes, but you are speaking in riddles. What is it you are getting at?

Ray: Sorry, but I'm just trying to make sure I understand you correctly. One last question. That was you I saw at the "End World Hunger" booth all day at orientation, wasn't it?

John: Yes, it was. But what has that got to do with anything?

Ray: It just seems to me that ending world hunger is violating the primary evolutionary premise, that's all.

John: What do you mean, "violating the primary evolutionary premise?" I'm not sure what you think you learned with Professor Chism. Evolution is simple, it is to promote the survival of the fittest. All we were trying to do is feed innocent children in third world countries! These are two totally different things. You're wasting my time.

Ray: I'm sorry I got you upset. I agree that the fundamental premise of evolution is "promoting the survival of the fittest." To violate this fundamental premise would be to promote survival of the non-fittest, right?

John: Yeah, so?

Ray: It just seems to me that feeding those so wretched that they can't meet their own basic needs is promoting survival of the non-fittest. Am I missing something?

John: . . . They are innocent children. How can you be so cruel?

Ray: Evolutionary morality in lieu of God is your argument, not mine. And I've made it a point to not bring God into this conversation, even though I could have at least twice already. I'm just trying to understand what morality without Jehovah looks like. If you want to feed third world children, yet you believe in evolutionary morality, then you need to either show me how such an act is ethical, or admit you are behaving in an evil manner. And it's not just you, you were encouraging others to do so as well at your booth. Is what you are doing, and asking others to do, moral or immoral?

John: Well, if we help those who are starving, maybe someday those we help will be able to help us back. It's reasonable to help someone out knowing they can one day help you later. You just don't know what the future brings, and having them around may be helpful. Somewhere in our past, our species figured that out, and this is one example of how we were able to become the superior species on the planet.

Ray: I can see that line of thought working if I were to extend such assistance to my friends, my family, my neighbor and my classmates. I also see this working with those in authority, and maybe

even extending it to the people within my community. I might be persuaded to accept this in regards to the homeless in this town's streets. But to ask me to believe a child thousands of miles away and in a community too poor to help themselves can one day come here and somehow repay the favor is too much for me to accept, at least not without a *very* strong argument to support it.

John: You don't know that it can never come back to you, who knows how our actions may affect us in the future.

Ray: "You don't know that it can never come back to you?" So, you are suggesting I have to take it on *faith* that your views are correct? Or do you have evidence to support this?

John: Well, no. I don't have any evidence. We are talking about the future, it may or may not happen.

Ray: I thought your whole argument to reject the God Theory is because you believe I can't provide evidence? Again, I deny that there is no evidence, but I did agree with you that belief without evidence is foolish. Unless and until you can provide evidence that helping third world children will help me or my community, or that *not* helping them will somehow hurt me, by your own criteria it seems immoral for me to help them.

John: What was it that Professor Chism said? Oh yeah! That when we act charitable, the serotonin in our bodies makes us feel good. We support End World Hunger and similar programs because the serotonin makes us feel good. That's how evolution made us more moral than other animals! We can conceptualize different ways to be charitable, and so helping out the unfortunate in the world really helps us because we feel better to do so.

Ray: I agree that you presented a legitimate theory, and I don't doubt that some evidence could be presented from some study somewhere. But it's only one theory of several, so why should I believe that one over others, especially since that theory is so vague?

John: What do you mean by vague? It seems pretty specific to me.

Ray: Does feeling good always give us an advantage in survival? Never mind that, how about these questions? Is serotonin the one and only factor in making us feel good? Is being charitable the one and only way to get serotonin to make us feel good? Does being charitable to people thousands of miles away give us a bigger serotonin "high" than giving a scholarship to a talented but poor student in our own hometown? Is the serotonin high we get by giving money to the poor of the world greater than the negative feelings that come with having a hard time to pay our own bills?

John: I don't know the answers to any of those questions.

Ray: Is there any reasonable expectation that *any* of these answers is "yes?"

John: Well, now that you mention it, I doubt it. But who knows, they may all be "yes" after all. Again, we just don't know.

Ray: And again, you are asking me to believe in something you can't support with facts. But I think you would still have a problem even if these answers were "yes."

John: How's that?

Ray: The whole idea that promoting survival of the non-fittest is violating evolutionary principles. Is not the fact that we are sending money, time, talent, technology and other resources to the poorest of the poor evidence that we are promoting survival of the non-fittest? Are we not evolutionary aberrations to do so? Does not evolutionary theory say we will become extinct for engaging in such behavior?

John: Hold on! I think you went a bit too far this time, and on at least two accounts!

Ray: I probably did get more emotional than I wanted, and I apologize for doing so. I don't really like supporting the idea that it is wrong to help the poor, but I see no other alternative if God isn't present. If I'm wrong, I really want to know why. So, where did I go wrong?

John: First, that it doesn't matter if they are the poorest of the poor, they are still of our species. But more importantly, we, the United States and the rest of the Western World, have indeed reached a point where our evolution has specialized to where it is potentially dangerous for us, we are way too dependent on technology while they are not so evolved. They will be able to react better as world wide conditions change.

Ray: Which position are you taking?

John: Huh?

Ray: Which position are you taking? Is the poorest of the poor merely equal to us, or are they evolutionarily superior to us? I'm sorry to say this, but you appear to have contradicted yourself.

John: Not necessarily. They are no better or worse than us, but they are in a much better position to evolve than we are.

Ray: I won't disagree with your observation that, in an evolutionary sense, they are in a better position than we are. At least culture wise. But does this not make them more fit to survive than we are?

John: Well, if you put it that way, yes.

Ray: Did I put it that way, or did you?

John: I guess I did. But what does it matter? If they are the fittest, then we have an obligation to promote them. Therefore, ending world hunger is evolutionarily moral.

Ray: How so? You are claiming that they are fit because they are starving and suffering from exposure to diseases while we have an abundance of food and means to stop disease. When we help them, when we send food and medicine, when we teach them better methods of healthcare, when we build water purification and sewage treatment plants, when we send doctors and nurses to treat them, are we not short circuiting the very process that makes them more fit than us? It seems to me that we are now substituting promoting survival of the fittest with hindering survival of the fittest.

John: Sigh. Yes, I guess we are.

Ray: So, helping the poorest of the poor is still a morally abhorrent thing to do evolutionary wise,

assuming they are the fittest members of humanity.

John: I can't see a way around your conclusion here, but we still have my other piece of evidence -- that helping them helps our species as a whole, and so it is evolutionary for the species to help them.

Ray: On what grounds do you have to suggest that helping them will help the species? Is there any other species that does the same? It seems to me all Professor Chism had to show us is how weak members of a species are left to die for the sake of the strong. Actually, in most species, the weak are actively killed so they won't take resources away from the others. I hope I don't have to go through the entire animal kingdom species by species here, but for the most part mammals and avians are the only species that protect their young, and this is not always the case either. And this protection is almost always for members within their community. In the few cases where aid is given to the young of another community, the young are invariably adopted into the group helping them. Man is the only animal that will adopt from a different species (we call them "pets"), and the only animal that will adopt from a non-neighboring community.

John: But you see, that's the evidence that evolutionary morality *can* extend beyond one's immediate community. The only difference is that, since man has access to the whole world, the whole world is his neighboring community. It is therefore a reasonable and rational assumption that ending world hunger is an evolutionary step in morality.

Ray: Well, I can certainly agree that, for man, the world has shrunk and we are all more closely connected with other groups of our species than any other animal. But I think my point is being missed. Which seems to benefit more from these adoptions in certain species of the animal kingdom, the community that did the adopting, or the species as a whole?

John: I would say they are interconnected. The adoption helps the gaining group to be larger, healthier and stronger. This, in turn, benefits the species as a whole. This adoption is a win-win situation for evolutionary morality.

Ray: I think you are correct, but I think there is more to this story.

John: And what would that be?

Ray: If one group gained by the adoption, what do you think happens to the other group, the one that lost the child?

John: Oh, I didn't think about that! I guess they would be weaker for it.

Ray: That's what I think as well. And if by one group becoming healthier, the species becomes stronger, then what happens to the species if another group becomes weaker?

John: It would weaken the species, and if one group were to weaken the species too much, then that group should be eliminated for the good of the species. But! We are not weakening the poor by donating, we are making them stronger through our help.

Ray: You really have given up on the idea that they are stronger than us simply because of their suffering, haven't you? Yes, I agree that we make them stronger, but now what happens to us?

John: What do you mean?

Ray: The money we send them is money we no longer have. The medicine we send them is medicine we can't use for our own sick. Our doctors and nurses that go there are not here to help us. I could go on and on with infrastructure building and education, but I hope my point has been made.

John: Yes, I get it. We are making ourselves weaker while they become stronger. And so doing this means we are again finding ourselves promoting survival of the non-fittest and hindering survival of the fittest. Unless ...

Ray: Unless what?

John: What if we are the non-fittest and they really are the fittest after all? In that case, our aid would be promoting survival of the fittest.

Ray: Back to that idea again? I thought we agreed that if they are the fittest and we are the non-fittest, why are they so dependent on our help?

John: I just had a couple of new thoughts. After all, they don't really need our help as a group, it doesn't look like extinction for them, after all. Just a lot of suffering. And I also thought about the world population. It is reaching critical levels, and this all started when the Western World became industrial giants. Western countries are destroying the land while the growing world population is exhausting what resources remain. And this is obviously contrary to evolutionary premises. As it turns out, we are harmful to our species, and therefore we are not fit to survive!

Ray: Believe it or not, I agree with your observations and conclusions, but I think you have again failed to look at all the evidence. I also believe if you had considered all the evidence, then you would draw a different lesson from your conclusions.

John: You are talking in riddles again! Stop trying to be so polite, and just tell me what you got to say!

Ray: Okay. Well, for starters, industrialized nations, through contraception, abortions and assisted suicides, are experiencing negative population growth among nationalized citizens. We grow more food on less land, we neutralize most of our waste products before putting them back into nature, and we are building bigger and bigger skyscrapers to house more and more people on smaller tracts of land. Furthermore, the only reason our populations are going up is because of immigration. So, if overpopulation is happening in this world, where is the actual growth coming from?

John: Sigh. Third world countries.

Ray: And if overpopulation is causing destruction of land because of farmland exhaustion and the need for housing, then who is the bigger risk to survival of our species?

John: I get it, I get it. We again see that the poorest of the poor are a threat to our species survival, and so any effort we make to support them is a serious violation of the premise of evolution. That is what you meant by me being correct in my conclusions, but that I was drawing the wrong lesson from it. Funny, I've always known that evolution built on the death of the non-fittest, but it never really registered exactly what this fact meant in reality. In evolution, the most pitiful are sacrificed to the

most ruthless.

Ray: Yes, evolutionists are like magicians. They draw your attention to the hand holding promises of an ever stronger species, while the other hand stealthily brings death and destruction to make the trick work.

John: But still, what if our evolutionary step does reverse this pattern, what if what makes our species stronger is its desire to bring up the poor?

Ray: Again, we can hypothesize all day, but for our morality to be a brand new evolutionary step in evolution, then by definition no previous case can be used for evidence. We need a way to quantitatively measure the difference, and rule out any other possible cause for the change. Until we do that, we come again to that sore spot of making an argument with no evidence.

John: So, you're saying keeping people from suffering horrible lives and painful deaths by starvation is immoral?

Ray: I'm not; evolution is. All I'm doing is helping you understand your moral code better by challenging you to explain it to me. I believe efforts that stop suffering are good and moral, even a moral imperative. But this belief needs to come from someplace other than evolution.

John: Must be nice to do whatever you want to do.

Ray: Come on, is that fair? Do you really believe I can do whatever I feel like doing? Do you think it is possible for any moral system worthy of the name can exist so you can do whatever you want?

John: No, a morality that let you do whatever you wanted to would not be morality at all. Morality is about what one *should* do, not what one *can* do. Sorry, I'm frustrated because my entire world view has been turned upside down. Stopping world hunger means a lot to me, I feel like it is a good thing to do.

Ray: Ha! Are you having a serotonin withdrawal?

John: No, you were right. Now that I think about it, the feeling I got was not a drug addiction. It didn't affect me like when I don't get my daily dose of black coffee. It's more like a beckoning, a quiet but steady voice that won't be silenced. It's like I'm being asked to do this, not compelled.

Ray: I see. And who do you think might be asking you?

John: Who do you think it is?

Ray: You know what I think. Even if you didn't, my opinion means nothing. All that matters is what you think it is. So think about it, and we can discuss it later. For now, I'm going to the Newman Center. You can join me if you like.

John: Thanks, but not now. I've got some thinking to do. This is a lot to take in. I'll see you tomorrow after class.