

Lecture 8: The Evolutionary Argument for Nihilism

I. Overview

Richard Joyce thinks that evolutionary considerations can offer support for moral nihilism:

“We have evolved to categorize aspects of the world using moral concepts. Natural selection has provided us with a tendency to invest the world with values that it does not contain, demands which it does not make” (p. 135).

His general argumentative strategy:

- i. Tell an evolutionary story about the origins of moral concepts, feelings, and judgments (§§6.0–6.1).
- ii. Argue that it follows from this evolutionary story that our moral judgments are unjustified (§6.4).
- iii. Argue that, together with some additional considerations, this implies that our moral judgments are probably false (§6.5).

II. Joyce’s Evolutionary Story (§§6.0–6.1)

Joyce thinks that the evolutionary history of our faculty for moral judgment falls into two distinct stages.

- *step 1*: We evolved to be disposed toward *kin-help* (i.e. helping behavior among family members).

Why was this selected for? *Hamilton’s rule*: if the benefit to recipient (B), discounted by the degree of relatedness to donor (*r*), is more than the cost to donor (C), then the act is evolutionarily favored.

$$r B > C$$

- *step 2*: We evolved to be disposed toward *reciprocal help* (i.e. helpful behavior to non-kin individuals on the expectation that they will reciprocate).

Why was this selected for? If there are stable cycles of reciprocity and cooperation, then such behavior will be evolutionarily favored.

This tendency toward reciprocal help must be accompanied by a sensitivity and hostility toward *exploiters* (i.e. those who reap the benefits of reciprocal help without repaying in kind).

What sorts of *psychological mechanisms* regulate and stabilize these behaviors?

- *possibility #1*: The individual is hardwired to explicitly think, “I want my genes to do well in subsequent generations, and helping this other person out is conducive to that end.”

problem: How would evolution provide us with knowledge of genes?

- *possibility #2*: The individual is hardwired to desire to help others.

problem: Desires are unreliable things; they can be overridden by contrary desires, and they can be under-appreciated due to distraction, weakness of will, exhaustion, etc.

- *possibility #3*: The individual is hardwired to believe that he/she is *categorically required* to help others.

The last of these is Joyce’s preferred hypothesis: he thinks natural selection has provided us with a hardwired disposition to believe that moral obligations exist (although it takes certain environmental cues to make this disposition become manifest).

In other words, Joyce thinks we have an innate *moral sense* or *conscience*.

III. Joyce's Argument that Our Moral Beliefs Are Unjustified (§6.4)

Here is one way of getting from Joyce's evolutionary story to the claim that our moral beliefs are unjustified:

bad evolutionary argument:

1. We have evolved to make moral judgments because judgments of that sort improved our ancestors' reproductive fitness. [*premise*]
2. So, we have evolved to make moral judgments irrespective of their truth. [*follows from 1*]
3. So, our moral judgments are unjustified. [*follows from 2*]

Why this is a bad argument: 2 doesn't follow from 1. Presumably we have evolved to make *mathematical judgments* because they improve reproductive fitness, but this doesn't mean that we have evolved to make mathematical judgments irrespective of their truth.

A better version of the evolutionary argument:

Joyce's evolutionary argument:

1. We have evolved to make moral judgments because judgments of that sort improved our ancestors' reproductive fitness. [*premise*]
2. It would have improved our ancestors' reproductive fitness to make moral judgments even if they were not true. [*premise*]
3. So, we would have evolved to make moral judgments even if they were not true. [*follows from 1, 2*]
4. So, we have evolved to make moral judgments irrespective of their truth. [*follows from 3*]
5. So, our moral judgments are unjustified. [*follows from 4*]

Why believe that 5 follows from 4? Joyce uses the following example to motivate the inference:

paranoid John: "John makes judgments that Sally is 'out to get him.' After talking to John's psychiatrist, we discover that John is neurotically paranoid about Sally, and would form these judgments about her regardless of what she did. If whatever evidence John is provided with concerning Sally's intentions, he will make exactly the same paranoid judgment, then there is absolutely no reason to think that his judgments are true" (p. 159).

Joyce interprets Nozick as making the following objection to premise 2 of the evolutionary argument:

objection #1 (the response from moral necessities): Since basic moral requirements are necessarily true, it doesn't make sense to consider the counterfactual in premise 2.

However, Joyce has misinterpreted Nozick; Nozick's actual objection is a bit more subtle:

objection #2 (the third-factor response): The very same sorts of features that make moral behavior increase reproductive fitness also make that behavior morally required, so premise 2 is false.

IV. Joyce's Argument That Our Moral Beliefs Are Probably False (§6.5)

If we know that (i) *John's judgment that Sally is out to get him was formed irrespective of its truth*, and we have independent knowledge that (ii) *it is unlikely that Sally is out to get John*, then we may conclude that (iii) *John's judgment is probably false*.

Similarly, Joyce thinks, if we know that (i*) *we have evolved to make our moral judgments irrespective of their truth*, and we have independent knowledge that (ii*) *it is unlikely that there are moral demands upon our actions*, then we may conclude that (iii*) *our moral judgments are probably false*.

Disappointingly, Joyce's argument for (ii*) ends up being a version of Harman's explanatory argument. But if Harman's argument can establish (ii*), then it can also establish nihilism without any need to appeal to (i*).