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Bridging the Is/Ought Gap with Evolutionary Biology: Is This a Bridge Too Far?

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During the past ten or fifteen years, there has been a resurgence of interest in evolutionary ethics. In the recent literature, there have been three main approaches to evolutionary ethics presented. Each of these approaches agrees in the belief that sociobiologists can give adequate evolutionary biological explanations for the behaviors, attitudes, and dispositions found in human beings that we typically regard as moral. Where these approaches differ is in their attitudes towards the implications these sociobiological explanations have for the project of giving justification for normative claims. One approach represented by the work of Richard Alexander (1987) suggests that sociobiology neither undermines the project of justifying normative claims nor does it provide the foundations for a justified system of ethics. Rather, according to Alexander, the facts of sociobiology provide information that any adequate system of ethics needs to accommodate. Another approach represented by the work of Michael Ruse (1986) expresses the view that sociobiological explanations of morality actually undermine the project of justifying normative claims. The third approach, which has been most notably represented by Robert Richards (1987, 1986a, 1986b), expresses the view that sociobiology not only explains the existence of morality but it also holds the keys to giving a justification of normative ethics. This paper is chiefly devoted to a discussion of this third approach, though the conclusions drawn about this approach may well have implications for one or both of the others.

As noted Richards is perhaps the most well-known advocate of the third approach, but there have been other recent advocates of this approach (see Arnhart [1997], Campbell [1996], Collier and Stingl [1993], Rottschaefer [1991]). Each of these advocates of the third approach believes that if

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socio-biological explanations of human behavior, including moral behavior, are true, then these facts can be used to give a naturalistic justification of normative claims. They believe that the truths of sociobiology would enable rationally justified inferences from biological facts about human nature to moral facts about how we ought to live and act. In what follows, I will examine a number of these recent attempts at bridging the “Is/ Ought” gap, arguing that each of them commits some version of the naturalistic fallacy.

#### I. THE GOOD IS THE DESIRABLE: ARNHART'S DEFINITIONAL ATTEMPT AT BRIDGING THE “IS/OUGHT” GAP

In his recent book, *Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature*, Larry Arnhart argues that:

There are at least twenty natural desires that are manifested in diverse ways in all human societies throughout history: a complete life, parental care, sexual identity, sexual mating, familial bonding, friendship, social ranking, justice as reciprocity, political rule, war, health, beauty, wealth, speech, practical habituation, practical reasoning, practical arts, aesthetic pleasure, religious understanding, and intellectual understanding. (Arnhart 1997, 29)

He says that these are natural because they are so deeply rooted in human nature that they will manifest themselves in some manner across history in every human society. In the book he wants to show that:

The universality of these natural desires supports universal standards of moral judgment, so that we can judge societies as better or worse depending upon how well they satisfy those natural desires. (Arnhart 1997, 17)

Thus, Arnhart believes that the biological facts of human nature can be used in bridging the fact/value gap and in providing an adequate naturalistic justification of moral claims.

Arnhart believes that there is no gap between facts and values, because the good is the desirable and what is desirable is a matter of fact. Here he would have us understand that “the desirable” is not simply whatever can be desired. Rather, it is what is truly desired in the sense of promoting human flourishing, which Arnhart regards as promoting the fullest satisfaction of desires over a complete life (18). He also argues that his conception of the good is not culturally nor individually

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relative since our biological natures as human beings shape what is truly desirable for us.

Rather than simply asserting that there is no gap between facts and values and that the good is what promotes the fullest satisfaction of desires over a complete life, he defends this view by responding to G. E. Moore’s charge of “the naturalistic fallacy.” In doing so he points out that Moore would object to any

definition of the good as the desirable. Arnhart says that according to Moore something is good only if it is acceptable to desire it. Since some things that can be desired ought not to be desired, Moore believes the good cannot be defined as the desirable. Arnhart thinks his understanding of the desirable as that which promotes the fullest satisfaction of desires over a complete life allows him to escape this argument, since working with this conception of the desirable we no longer view just anything capable of being desired as good. According to Arnhart, desiring things incompatible with one's own achievement of the fullest satisfaction of desire over a complete life is not desiring what is truly desirable and so it is to desire something that is not good. For instance, sleeping with my students may in some sense be desirable but not truly desirable in the sense that interests Arnhart. I love my job and my wife and my children very much and sleeping with my students would then for obvious reasons jeopardize my chances at a fully satisfying complete life. Thus on Arnhart's view not just anything desirable, such as sleeping with my students, is truly desirable or, in other words, good.

Arnhart also argues that to insist on a logical gulf between facts and values as Moore and Immanuel Kant do "would render all normative judgments impotent, because we would have no factual reasons to obey them" (85). To illustrate this point, he considers the judgment that "we ought to be just." He says that unless we understand the good as the truly desirable, we will have no way of explaining why we ought to be just.

If "we ought to be just" is an example of a normative judgment, then we could ask, "Why ought we to be just?" If the answer is "because it is right for us to be just," this would still beg the question of why this is right for us. Eventually, we must answer that "we ought to be just because justice satisfies some of our deepest desires and thus contributes to our happiness." A Kantian separation between is and ought would render all normative judgments impotent, because we would have no factual reasons to obey them (Arnhart 1997, 82–83)

Again the idea here is that we must define the right or good in terms of the desirable if we are ever to explain to people why they should be just.

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(i) A Reply to Arnhart's First Point

Simply switching the naturalistic definition of the good from (a) the desirable to (b) that which promotes

the fullest satisfaction of desire over a complete life does not by itself allow Arnhart to escape Moore's argument. Moore might still say that something is good only if it is acceptable to desire it or to pursue it and the mere fact that something promotes the fullest satisfaction of desires in a complete life does not mean that it is acceptable to desire it or to pursue it, does not mean that it is good. Arnhart overlooks the fact that some things that promote the fullest satisfaction of desire in a complete life are things that ought not to be pursued, things that are bad. Referring back to my earlier example I noted that I love my job, my wife, and my children very much. Perhaps they are some of the most cherished things in my life. It is quite conceivable that circumstances could arise in life in which I might be led to desire to do any number of unjust deeds to preserve these things for myself. Desiring such things might well promote the fullest satisfaction of my desires over a complete life, but would such things be good? Moore's criticism still holds against Arnhart's revised definition of the good.

(ii) Reply to Arnhart's Second Point

Is it true that separating facts and values as Moore and Kant do would "render all normative judgments impotent, because we would have no factual reason to obey them?" This seems to me to be false. Moore's point is that you cannot define the good in naturalistic terms. Even if this were so, there may be any number of factual reasons why someone should pursue the good. I suppose Moore's view might leave open the possibility that on some occasions pursuing the good might have no connection to the satisfaction of human interests, but these would indeed be rare circumstances. What is the alternative? According to Arnhart, it is defining the good as that which promotes the fullest satisfaction of desires over a complete life. Certainly this would mean that we could always give factual reasons for doing what is good, since doing what is good is defined with reference to what in fact promotes satisfaction of desires. It only makes sense to define the good in this way if it first gives you an accurate characterization of what is good. For reasons given in the preceding section, Arnhart's definition fails this test.

Should we really be motivated to define the good in a certain way which intimately connects it definitionally to human interests just so that we will always be able to give reasons to pursue it even though this definition has serious drawbacks or should we just admit that conceivably on some rare occasions the pursuit of the nonnatural and perhaps indefinable good may not be justified by appeal to human

## II. OVERWHELMING MUTUAL ADVANTAGE AND THE "IS/UGHT" GAP: A REPLY TO CAMPBELL

In his "Can Biology Make Ethics Objective?" Richmond Campbell argues that evolutionary biology can play a role in giving an objective justification for morality. In doing so, he notes that in giving an objective justification for morality one might try to either give an objective justification for possessing some morality or other or for possessing some particular morality. Campbell is skeptical that there can be any objective justification for possessing some particular morality, such as say Mill's utilitarianism or Kant's Categorical Imperative, but he does think that evolutionary biology can play a role in giving an objective justification for possessing some morality.

Campbell's argument might be outlined in the following sort of way:

(1) The biological explanation for the existence of morality implies that having some morality rather than none overwhelmingly improves the life prospects for every member of the group that possesses a morality.

(2) If (a) having some morality rather than none overwhelmingly improves the life prospects for every member of the group that possesses a morality, then (b) having some morality rather than none is justified for every member of the group.

So, (3) having some morality rather than none is justified for every member of the group (Campbell 1996, 24).

In support of the first premise, Campbell tells us that moral beliefs are dispositions to think feel, and act in accordance with certain norms. He states:

Suppose that these dispositions are heritable and fitness enhancing. Then we have the basic ingredients for a Darwinian story of how natural selection favors the preservation and refinement of such dispositions from one generation to the next— in short, the evolution of morals. Would such dispositions be fitness enhancing? The moral prohibition against incest is perhaps the most frequently cited example where this assumption seems reasonable, since avoidance of incest (at least prior to the advent of sophisticated methods of birth control) is biologically adaptive in strict Darwinian terms. But prohibitions against murder, assault, stealing, and breaking one's word are

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arguably fitness enhancing as well, for humans have on average more to lose in terms of fitness when they are subject to these wrongs than they have to gain as perpetrators. In sum, natural selection would appear to favor what we can call a common core of moral inhibitions, which we now express in the form of general moral beliefs about what we ought to do and not do. (Campbell 1996, 21–22)

Campbell takes this to be the typical account of how morals have evolved. Further, since morality enhances fitness by improving the life prospects of the members of groups of organisms, it follows that having some morality rather than none improves the life prospects of every member of the group that possesses a morality.

In explaining the second premise of his argument, Campbell must explain why (a) implies (b). Why is it that if (a) having some morality rather than none overwhelmingly improves the life prospects of every member of the group that possess a morality, then (b) having some morality rather than none is justified for every member of the group? In answer to this Campbell states:

Since humans are naturally moved by considerations of overwhelming mutual advantage, the fact that having some morality rather than none is overwhelmingly mutually advantageous (OMA), carries normative force, justifying morality. (Campbell 1996, 26)

According to Campbell, then, in the second premise of his main argument (a) implies (b) because humans are naturally moved by considerations of overwhelming mutual advantage.

As with Arnhart's argument, in thinking critically about this argument we must ask whether it commits the naturalistic fallacy. Certainly Campbell does not believe he commits the naturalistic fallacy. In response to the claim that he has unwarrantedly reasoned from facts to values, he states:

... my argument proceeds directly from a normative premise about what should count as justification in this context. Whatever the merits of that premise, there is clearly no attempt to deduce "ought" from "is." Nor, I should add, is the argument circular, for the "ought" implicit in this premise is not a moral "ought" but the "ought" of rationality. (Campbell 1996, 25)

But this reply to worries about the naturalistic fallacy is misguided. When you look at the justification that he provides for premise (2), it is clear that he has unwarrantedly moved from an "is" to an "ought." The mere fact, if it is a fact, that humans are naturally moved by considerations of overwhelming

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mutual advantage, does not mean that they ought to be so moved. Social scientific studies have shown that many people are naturally inclined to regard certain fallacious forms of inference as legitimate. Does this mean that these people are reasoning as they ought?

To provide an objective justification for possessing some morality, Campbell needs to give a defense of premise (2), for otherwise his argument is question-begging. The defense he provides commits the naturalistic fallacy. Thus, Campbell has not shown how evolutionary biology can be used in giving an objective justification of morality.

### III. RICHARDS'S REVISED VERSION OF EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

In a number of articles (1986a, 1986b, 1989), Richards has defended what he calls "the revised version of evolutionary ethics (RV)." He summarizes this position in the following way:

RV stipulates that the community welfare is the highest moral good. It supposes that evolution has equipped human beings with a number of social instincts, such as the need to protect offspring, provide for the general well-being of members of the community (including oneself), defend the helpless against aggression, and other dispositions that constitute a moral creature. These constitutionally imbedded directives are instances of the supreme principle of heeding the community welfare. Particular moral maxims, which translate these injunctions into the language and values of a given society, would be justified by an individual's showing that, all things considered, following such maxims would contribute to the community welfare. (Richards 1986a, 286)

In his writings, Richards endeavors to give a justification for the supreme principle of morality—promote the community welfare or act altruistically. In what follows, I will briefly summarize his justifications for this principle and then subject them to critical assessment.

Richards does not try to justify the sociobiological foundations of RV. Rather, in providing a justification of RV and the supreme principle of morality, he wants us to work on the assumption that the sociobiological account of the evolution of morals is true. His project is not to defend these sociobiological accounts of the origins of morality but to show that if true, then they give justification for moral claims, providing the objective grounding for a system of ethics.

He claims to provide three justifying arguments for the supreme principle of morality. I take the first two arguments

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to amount to the same thing. Richards acknowledges this himself. The following passages make this point clear. In expressing his first justifying argument, he writes:

[T]he constructive forces of evolution impose a practical necessity on each man to promote the community good. We must, we are obliged to heed this imperative. We might attempt to ignore the demand of our nature by refusing to act altruistically, but this does not diminish its reality. The inability of men to harden their consciences completely to basic principles of morality means that sinners can be redeemed. Hence, just as the context of physical nature allows us to argue "Since lightening has struck, thunder ought to follow," so the structured context of human evolution allows us to argue " Since each man has evolved to advance the community good, each ought to act altruistically. " (Richards 1986a, 288)

In expressing his second justifying argument, he writes:

The justifying argument, then, amounts to: the evidence shows that evolution has, as a matter of fact, constructed human beings to act for the community good; but to act for the community good is what we mean by being moral. Since, therefore, human beings are moral beings—an unavoidable condition produced by evolution—each ought act for the community good. (Richards 1986a, 289)

A glance at the preceding passages makes it plain that the first two justifying arguments amount to the same thing. Richards is arguing that just as we can reasonably infer that thunder ought to occur from the fact that lightening has struck, so too can we reasonably infer that humans ought to act altruistically from the fact that each man has evolved to advance the community good. Thus, he believes that how we ought to act can be logically deduced from the facts of human nature.

Richards's third strategy for justifying the supreme principle of morality involves showing how RV must be "warranted because it grounds other of the known strategies for justifying moral principles" (Richards 1986a, 291). He argues that to get agreement on the basic principles of the ethical systems of Moore, Kant, and Spencer requires that human beings "must resound to the same moral cord, acting for the common good" (Richards 1986a, 292). RV provides an explanation for this. Richards writes:

... for the vast community of men, they have been stamped by nature as moral beings. RV, therefore, shows that the several strategies used to support an ultimate ethical principle will, in fact, be successful, successfully showing, of course, that the

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community good is the highest ethical standard. But for RV to render successful several strategies for demonstrating the validity of the highest ethical principle is itself a justification. (Richards 1986a, 292)

In critically assessing Richards's position I am most interested in determining whether he has adequately

justified his claim that we have a moral obligation to act for the community good. Given that this is my interest it strikes me that what he calls his first “two” arguments are more important than the third. The third does not really show that we ought to act for the community welfare so much as it shows that different systems of ethics, like Moore’s, Kant’s, and Spencer’s, can reasonably expect agreement on their principles only because evolution has constructed us to value the community good. Just because evolution has constructed us in this way, it does not obviously follow that we have a moral obligation to value or to act for the community good. Certainly Richards thinks it does follow but the only argument he gives for this is expressed as his first “two” arguments. Thus, in short, we need to ask whether the following bit of reasoning demonstrates why we are morally obligated to act for the community welfare:

Just as we can reasonably infer that thunder ought to occur given that lightening has occurred, so too can we reasonably infer that we ought to act altruistically given that we have evolved to do so.

What are we to make of this argument?

A natural and legitimate reply is to argue that Richards has not demonstrated that we are morally obligated to act for the community good because the “ought” employed in the argument above is not a moral “ought.” Rather it is a predictive “ought.” This point has been made in the literature by at least two critics of Richards’s work (See Voorzanger 1987 and Williams 1990).

Richards has published a reply to this sort of objection. He insists that the “ought” used in his derivation is a moral “ought.”

The “ought” is a moral “ought,” not because of its logical character, but because of the nature of the causal context to which it is applied—namely, man’s moral nature (i.e., his altruistically disposed nature). The case of thunder is precisely the same: it is the physical process of “lightening-producing thunder” that makes the “ought” a physical-process ought. So the moral process of acting according to the evolutionarily derived disposition to altruism makes the “ought” a moral ought. (Richards 1989, 340)

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The idea here is that since humans are led to act altruistically because of their evolved disposition to so

act and since this disposition just is a moral disposition, it follows that the “ought” used in his derivation is a moral “ought.” Richards’s point is that human beings are morally obligated to act altruistically because of their moral nature, their evolved disposition to act altruistically.

The legitimacy of this reply rests on the assumption that our evolved disposition to act altruistically just is a moral disposition. But one might wonder why this is true. Richards states:

The “ought” derived from the structured context of man’s evolutionary formation, then, will be a moral ought precisely because the activities of abiding the community good and approving of altruistic behavior constitute what we mean and (if RV is correct) must mean by “being moral.” (Richards 1986a, 290–291)

So, the disposition to act altruistically is a moral disposition because this is what we do and must mean by “being moral.”

This reply opens Richards to the charge of circular reasoning. Clearly “being moral” also means disposed to act as one ought. However, it is an open question as to whether one should act altruistically or egoistically. Consequently, if one says “being moral” means being disposed to act altruistically, then one is not simply defining “being moral” one is also telling us how we ought to act. If Richards’s argument for the supreme principle of morality rests on a claim about how we ought to act then he is not deriving an “ought” from an “is” as he claims. Rather, he is providing a circular argument to the effect that we ought to act altruistically.

In reply, Richards might object to my claim that the question of how we ought to act is an open question. After all he says that if RV is true then by “being moral” we must mean acting altruistically.

However, this will still not save his argument. Richards’s original argument was that, “Since we have evolved to act altruistically, we ought to.” Now even if by “being moral” we must mean acting altruistically, he has argued that the “ought” in his original argument is a moral “ought” on the grounds that acting altruistically is what is meant by “acting morally.” To argue in this way means that his original argument really says, “Since we have evolved to act morally, we ought to.” Now if the “ought” of this argument is a moral “ought,” the argument is vacuous, for of course we morally ought to act morally. The question to be answered is not whether we ought to act morally, but which of the various acts we might perform that could be called “moral” do we have a moral obligation to perform. If the

“ought” in his argument is not moral but, say, predictive then Richards is not deriving the relevant kind of “ought” from “is” and, consequently, he gives no justification for how we morally ought to act.

#### IV. ROTTSCHAEFER'S TELEOLOGICAL REWORKING OF RICHARDS'S EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

In Rottschaefter (1991), it is argued that indeed there is a problem with Richards's justification of the supreme principle, William Rottschaefter takes the problem to be the same as the one noted in the previous section. Referring to Richards's justification of the supreme principle, Rottschaefter states, “Isn't Richards confusing causal and moral 'oughts'?” (Rottschaefter 1991, 344). Despite this, Rottschaefter believes the problems encountered by Richards's evolutionary ethics can be solved by (1) drawing a distinction between mechanistic and teleological causal laws and (2) noting how teleological laws are at work in the evolution of man's moral disposition.

According to Rottschaefter, mechanistic causal explanations explain phenomena with reference to their antecedent conditions. Teleological explanations explain phenomena with reference to their consequences. The traits of human beings, including the disposition to act altruistically, can be explained teleologically by referring to them as traits that have the consequence of promoting reproductive success.

[W]hile both mechanical and T/T [teleological/teleonomic] causal laws can provide explanations only the latter can provide justifications. Appeals to ends set the marks to be achieved and enable the formulation of criteria of success. Appeals to ends can provide, therefore, justificatory explanations; appeals to antecedents can provide only explanations. Therefore, RV's mere appeal to a relevant causal context fails to discriminate between the two and thus blurs the logic of NJ (naturalistic justification). Thus it is precisely because evolutionary, behavioral and cognitive explanations are sometimes in terms of consequences that they can be candidates for justificatory explanations. (Rottschaefter 1991, 345)

Clearly Rottschaefter finds Richards's RV, revised version of evolutionary ethics, problematic. He also thinks the problems with it are solved once we recognize that teleological causes are at work in the evolutionary explanation of the human tendency towards altruistic behavior.

One might wonder just how the appeal to the teleological aspects of evolutionary explanations helps matters any. Rottschaefer is not especially clear about this. The point seems

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to be the following: Richards's inference, "Human beings have evolved to act altruistically, so they ought to," justifies a moral "ought" only because the evolved disposition to act altruistically exists for benefitting reproductive success. In the passage quoted above, Rottschaefer says, "Appeals to ends set the marks to be achieved and enable the formation of criteria of success." The idea seems to be that since as biological organisms we all share the goal of reproductive success and since the disposition to act altruistically can correctly be explained as existing for this common goal of human existence, it follows that we ought to act altruistically in order to achieve this end. According to Rottschaefer, moral "oughts" are practical "oughts," meaning they must be justified with reference to the consequences of human action (Rottschaefer 1991, 345). Thus, it is not until the teleological character of evolutionary explanation is explained and related to Richards's argument that we can recognize the argument as justifying the supreme principle.

Another way of looking at Rottschaefer's point that "Appeals to ends set the marks to be achieved and enable the formation of criteria of success" would involve stating that since we have the biologically given goal of reproductive success and since goodness is to be judged with respect to achieving goals and since acting altruistically increases chances at reproductive success, the good human being acts altruistically. Further since we ought to act as the good human being does, we ought to act altruistically.

In response to Rottschaefer's reasoning here, it could be argued that he begs the question. Pointing out that altruism exists for reproductive success, thereby explaining its existence teleologically, does not provide the keys to determining how we ought to act. The biologically determined goal of reproductive success only helps us prove that we ought to act altruistically if that goal were itself good. Is it good? That's an open question. Thus, without an argument as to why reproductive success is good, Rottschaefer's revision of Richards's revised evolutionary ethics begs the question.

In Rottschaefer and Martinsen (1990), one can find what would seem to be Rottschaefer's most likely response to the criticism above. In this article Rottschaefer and Martinsen give an argument to the effect that human survival and reproductive success are good.

[O]ur claim about the value of human fitness and S/R [survival and reproduction] are not, it seems to us, completely unwarranted. For their value is supported both by the fact that they are necessary conditions

for the achievement of what we deem to be intrinsically, or, at least, independently valuable, and because they are often valued in themselves. (168)

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Their point is that since human survival and reproduction are (1) necessary for the attainment of other things that we deem to be intrinsically valuable and (2) often valued in themselves, human survival and reproduction are good. On the same page that this argument appears Rottschaefter and Martinsen list science, math, and art as some of the other things that we deem to be intrinsically valuable.

In reply to this, it should be noted that while the premises of this argument are true the conclusion just does not follow. The mere fact that we deem human survival and reproduction as good or that we deem art, science, and mathematics as good does not mean that they are good.

Rottschaefter wants to provide a naturalistic justification for the claim that we ought to act altruistically and given that he wants to do this by arguing that altruism serves the goal of human survival and reproduction, he does need some argument to show that human survival and reproduction are good. The argument he provides will not suffice for the reason expressed in the preceding paragraph. Thus, we have still not seen an evolutionary ethic that has adequately bridged the “Is/Ought” gap. Informed readers might feel that I have missed something important in my understanding of Rottschaefter’s position. In Rottschaefter and Martinsen (1990), they argued that moral properties are not reducible to nonmoral properties, rather the former supervene on the latter. They additionally maintained that it is because moral properties supervene on nonmoral properties that moral claims can be given adequate naturalistic justifications. This aspect of Rottschaefter’s thinking was criticised in Barrett (1991). Barrett challenged the contention that moral properties supervene on the nonmoral. See Rottschaefter and Martinsen (1991) for their reply. I have not engaged in any discussion of Rottschaefter’s views on supervenience herein simply because I think that even if we grant him his points about supervenience, there are other more significant problems with his naturalistic approach. 1

## V. COLLIER AND STINGL AND THE PROBLEM OF SPECIES RELATIVISM

Like Rottschaefter, John Collier and Michael Stingl believe that with a minor adjustment the basic idea behind Richards’s RV could be turned into a workable evolutionary ethic. In Collier and Stingl (1993) they argue that Richards’s RV suffers from a problem of species relativism. They provide a solution to this

problem and maintain that their revision of Richards's position will allow for an adequate naturalistic justification of morality.

Richards has argued that "Since human beings have evolved to promote the common good, to act altruistically, they ought to." Collier and Stingl maintain that depending on the contingent circumstances of human existence, for instance had the environmental conditions in which we live been significantly different, human beings might not have evolved to act altruistically. Rather we might have evolved to act in ways quite different from what we now regard as moral. Because of this, Richards's conclusion about how we ought to act only gives justification for a species-relative conception of how we ought to act. Depending on the environmental conditions in which they find themselves, intelligent nonhuman creatures from other planets (if there be any) would not necessarily be justified in drawing the same conclusions about how they ought to act. According to Collier and Stingl, "A satisfactory naturalistic

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morality needs a way to connect our moral capacities and behaviors to nonrelativistic moral values" (1993, 54).

It is really not clear just what the problem is that Collier and Stingl are getting at. Are they trying to point out the absurdity in saying that fictional creatures so very much like us, such as seen on Star Trek, might be justified in acting in ways we regard as horrific? Are they making a point similar to Plato's critique of the divine command theory of value? Just as God's commands would arbitrarily designate what is right, so too would the dictates of evolutionary processes? Maybe the point is captured in both of these ways. Regardless, Collier and Stingl provide what they regard as a solution to this problem, a solution that they think will make a naturalistic justification for morality workable. In what follows I will explain their solution and then critically examine their approach.

In their article Collier and Stingl note that Richards is not alone in falling into the trap of species relativism. Michael Ruse (1986) also falls into this trap. Collier and Stingl write:

On our view, the species relativism that both Ruse and Richards fall into results from their implicit assumption that our evolved moral sense is as good as it could be. If evolution is not optimal, this opens up the possibility of studying the sorts of conditions that could produce creatures with more optimal moral instincts. The conditions for this hypothetical optimality will be determined by the general conditions governing evolution for the sorts of creatures to which morality applies: intelligent social creatures. Optimal moral instincts will ground fundamental moral principles that are absolute for our world and

nomologically similar worlds, but contingent on evolution. These principles are the basis of objective morality. (1993, 55)

The point here is that evolution is not optimal. The traits of organisms that have evolved to perform certain functions could have been even better than they are at serving their function. For instance, our eyes and ears could be better than they are at detecting images and sounds. Consequently, we have reason to believe that our moral principles could be better than they are. According to Collier and Stingl, evolutionary thinking actually runs counter to Richards's assumption that our evolved moral sense is as good as it could be.

Further, Collier and Stingl believe that we can deduce objective moral principles that are "absolute for our world and nomologically similar worlds" by reflecting on "the sorts of conditions that could produce more optimal moral instincts."

The world does... naturally produce creatures that have ends. Given the contingencies of evolution and the various demands for survival, in any intelligent creature the ends are likely to

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have a certain amount of consistency and harmony. Given the need of any organism for nutrients, and the advantages of sensitivity, avoidance of harm, and anticipation of the environment, it seems reasonable to expect that pleasure, avoidance of pain, and intelligence will be natural values. In highly evolved social creatures, true altruism is also likely to evolve, for a variety of well-known reasons. This function can be enhanced in intelligent creatures if it is cognitive. We should expect, therefore, that highly evolved intelligent and social creatures will have, in some more or less distorted fashion, common welfare and other mutual projects as fundamental goals. The convergence of theoretically expected natural values and our evolved moral intuitions suggests that at least sometimes our moral intuitions direct us towards objective and general values. (Collier and Stingl 1993, 56)

What Collier and Stingl seem to be getting at is that by reflecting on the general sorts of conditions in which evolution occurs in this world and nomologically similar worlds and by reflecting on how highly evolved, intelligent, and social creatures might best survive in the face of these broadly conceived

conditions, we might come to discover moral principles that would be reasonable for any intelligent, social creatures facing these conditions to adopt. Thus, by reflecting on the general conditions that give rise to evolution and how intelligent, social creatures, whether human or extraterrestrial, might best cope with these conditions, we can discover moral values that are not merely relative to human beings.

In short, Collier and Stingl think Richards's attempted justification for the supreme principle, "Act for the common good/Act altruistically," is flawed because it appeals only to the fact that human beings have evolved to act this way to justify the claim that we ought to. According to Collier and Stingl, an objective justification requires showing that any evolved, intelligent, social creatures ought to act altruistically. They also believe that reflecting on how any evolved, intelligent, social creatures will best cope with the conditions that give rise to evolution will reveal that any such beings ought to act altruistically. This is part of the point in the passage cited above.

It is time to ask whether their recommendations really improve the chances for a naturalistic justification of morality. Do they? I don't think so. Collier and Stingl are arguing that (1) any evolved, intelligent, social creatures facing the circumstances that give rise to evolution will evolve a disposition to act altruistically. So, (2) any such creatures ought to act altruistically. Putting the argument in this way certainly helps get around the problem of species relativity, but it does not give a satisfactory naturalistic justification of any moral obligations

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because (2) does not follow from (1), or at least not obviously. Thus, for the inference from (1) to (2) to work more needs to be said to justify this inference.

Collier and Stingl seem to want to say that any social, intelligent, creatures faced with the relevant sort of conditions will have "common welfare and other mutual projects as fundamental goals" (Collier and Stingl 1993, 56). They would also refer to these as "natural goals." Since acting altruistically serves these natural goals, we ought to act altruistically.

But here it only really follows that we ought to act altruistically if the goal is good. Thus, to complete their naturalistic justification of the claim that we ought to act altruistically they need to argue that the "natural goals" of the common welfare are good. Yet they provide no clear argument for this.

The general tone of the passage I cited earlier (572–573) suggests their view is that the natural goals that any evolved, social, and intelligent creatures have are goals that any such creature must possess as a product of its evolutionary development. They also think any such goals must be common to all such creatures, thereby establishing their objective value, merit, or goodness. But the mere fact that all

evolved, social, and intelligent creatures possess some goal in common does not thereby entail the objective goodness of the goal. Suppose that the world was radically different from the way that it is such that in it and in all nomologically similar worlds evolved, social, and intelligent creatures were led to value, to have as a goal torturing, killing, and eating their first born child. The mere fact that all creatures living in such worlds must have this goal does not thereby make the goal objectively good. Does it? It certainly seems not.

## VI. CONCLUSION

As the preceding discussion makes clear, I really do believe that none of the recent attempts by evolutionary ethicists to give a naturalistic justification for moral claims is adequate. I hope that I have made it sufficiently clear why these attempts fail. Assuming that I am justified in my claims one might be led to wonder where all of this leaves us.

First, I would like to note that my arguments do by no means demonstrate that there can be no adequate naturalistic justifications for moral claims. Rather, all I have done is shown that recent attempts by evolutionary ethicists are flawed. It may be that some other approaches to giving a naturalistic justification from either the evolutionary perspective or some other one may work.

Second, I do not intend to suggest that all of the justifications considered in this article are beyond any hope of

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working, though I do believe they can never work as naturalistic justifications. To be naturalistic, naturalistic justifications must exclude any normative claims from their premises, moving strictly from nonmoral premises to a moral conclusion. None of the approaches to justification that I have considered will work as long as they remain naturalistic justifications. However, it seems to me that some of them would have promise if they were to import some intuitive normative claims into the premises. For instance, Richmond Campbell's argument might work if he just included the premise "Policies and practices that are overwhelmingly mutually advantageous ought to be adopted." Rottschaefer's argument might work if he just included an intuitive premise to the effect that "Human survival and reproduction are good." But of course once these moves are made, the justifications are no longer naturalistic.

As a third and final point I'd like to put what I have said in some relationship to the recent work of Michael

Ruse, who has argued that sociobiological explanations of morality entail there can be no objective justifications for moral beliefs. Ruse has argued that the belief in objective moral truth can be explained as an adaptive trait of human beings. Since such explanations are adequate and require no appeal to the existence of objective moral truths, it follows that there is no reason to believe in objective moral truth. Additionally he argues that if objective moral truth exists it is governed by either the commands of God or Moorean nonnatural properties or natural properties. But moral truth cannot be governed by the commands of God or Moorean nonnatural properties, because evolution could have led us (and eventually may lead us) to be and act in ways that are wholly incompatible with God's commands or Moorean nonnatural properties. According to Ruse, it is absurd to think that moral truth could be so radically incompatible with human nature, yet evolutionary biology tell us human nature could have been radically different. Thus, objective moral truth cannot be the product of God's commands or Moorean non-natural properties. Ruse also argues that objective moral truth cannot be governed by natural properties, because any attempt to naturalistically define or justify moral claims is doomed to commit the naturalistic fallacy.

Insofar as I have argued that the recent naturalistic justifications of morality provided by evolutionary ethicists are all flawed, my work might be viewed as contributing to Ruse's case for moral skepticism. If it does contribute to his case, so be it. However this is not my intent. In the end I think that Ruse's conclusions are something that we should try to avoid. Like Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), I believe that denying the objectivity of moral discourse might well have dangerous implications for society. Thus, before accepting Ruse's arguments I would urge further and careful exploration of other naturalistic approaches

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and even a reconsideration of the merits of intuitionist approaches to ethics. My survey of the failure of naturalistic approaches has led me to wonder whether intuitionism is all that wrongheaded. It seems to me that this is an option that perhaps has not been given its just due in the recent literature. Certainly my contention that denying the objectivity of moral discourse has "dangerous implications for society" is debatable. MacIntyre's own claims to this effect have received critical responses in the literature. See Waller (1986) and Unwin (1990). I defend MacIntyre's position against their criticisms in my "The Problems With Emotivism: Reflections on Some MacIntyrean Arguments" forthcoming in the *Journal of Philosophical Research*. Similar issues are addressed in Woolcock (1993) and Waller (1996).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Informed readers might feel that I have missed something important in my understanding of Rottschaefer's position. In Rottschaefer and Martinsen (1990), they argued that moral properties are not reducible to nonmoral properties, rather the former supervene on the latter. They additionally maintained that it is because moral properties supervene on nonmoral properties that moral claims can be given adequate naturalistic justifications. This aspect of Rottschaefer's thinking was criticised in Barrett (1991). Barrett challenged the contention that moral properties supervene on the nonmoral. See Rottschaefer and Martinsen (1991) for their reply. I have not engaged in any discussion of Rottschaefer's views on supervenience herein simply because I think that even if we grant him his points about supervenience, there are other more significant problems with his naturalistic approach. <sup>2</sup>Certainly my contention that denying the objectivity of moral discourse has "dangerous implications for society" is debatable. MacIntyre's own claims to this effect have received critical responses in the literature. See Waller (1986) and Unwin (1990). I defend MacIntyre's position against their criticisms in my "The Problems With Emotivism: Reflections on Some MacIntyrean Arguments" forthcoming in the *Journal of Philosophical Research*. Similar issues are addressed in Woolcock (1993) and Waller (1996).

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