

In fact, I do not think it is what Darwin intended with his work. Today it is easy to have the casual impression that his key terms and arguments and concepts would write us into existence by writing out the basic reality of our intelligence, reflection and deliberation. On the contrary, it may be that Darwin's work assures us that we are at home in the cosmos. His work is retrospective. It looks to the past and discovers no point at which nature is not creative. Species are not created independently of their habitats. Darwin was enamored of work by Alexander von Humboldt, the Romantic scientist and philosopher and explorer who attended Schelling's Berlin lectures. Perhaps we can say that Darwin uses the past, for its total lack of safety net, to rehabilitate us to our shared presence. Though Schelling's sights are set on the *ascent* of man, what Heidegger will call the destiny of being, Darwin is not an "unflinching mechanist." As Robert Richards puts it, "The sensitive reader of Darwin's works, a reader not already completely bent to early-twenty-first-century evolutionary constructions, will feel the difference between the nature that Darwin describes and the morally effete nature of modern theory" (553).

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Evolution Doesn't Eliminate, it Illuminates: A Comment for Dr. Shoppa of St. Francis College

David C. Lahti

Three common misconceptions of biological evolution are (1) that it is random, (2) that it parasitically consumes and eliminates other sorts of explanation, and (3) that its outcomes are touted as morally or normatively good by evolutionists. Dr. Clayton Shoppa's piece "Neurobiology, Intention, and Decision" might give an impression that some evolutionary biologists today tend to think all three of these things, or any one of them. So, just as a clarification, here I would begin by mentioning that most evolutionary biologists, including Charles Darwin and Richard Dawkins (the only two mentioned in Dr. Shoppa's piece) do not hold any of these three opinions. This I will mostly just assert, because Dr. Shoppa and I and most readers will want to get quickly to figuring things out in actuality rather than discussing the opinions of people, however illustrious. But, briefly, they, by which I mean Darwin, Dawkins, and my conception of "most evolutionary biologists," instead hold that (1) natural selection, the most powerful and evident mechanism of evolution, is far from random, but is in fact an

agent of design because it ties traits and thus DNA functionally to features of the environment; (2) evolution is indeed a powerful source of explanation and challenges certain competing explanations, but leaves other sorts of explanation intact, although placing them into a broader context; and (3) the results of evolution are amoral and we must use other means to decide whether to embrace their effects on us or to fight against them. Such is the general consensus.

Evolution certainly does have a random component, though it lies not in the engine of natural selection so much as in the fuel of mutation. Still, to say that mutations are random is too short a cut. Mutations can have very predictable and deterministic causes, such as ultraviolet or other radiation and certain chemicals; they also occur through simple mistakes in copying as DNA replicates, much as any machine will make errors at a certain rate through processes that are at least somewhat understood. Moreover, the degree of error-proneness of replication can itself evolve by natural selection. What is meant by “random mutation” is not that there is a permanent inscrutability, much less a mysterious lack of causal specificity, to mutations. Rather, the particular instances of mutation are not guided by whether they are advantageous or not. A mutation is not produced “in order to” achieve a specific effect. Mutation rate in general can evolve by natural selection, but with some rather boring exceptions natural selection cannot favor the occurrence of a mutation with a particular advantageous effect; thus mutation is random with respect to its effects in the game of life. In this same sense the next card a dealer peels off is random, even though there were very specific causes of its precise position in the deck. This sort of randomness is not the sort with any metaphysical teeth. If any more important sort of randomness applies to evolution, it is not particular to evolution but is a matter for the physicists to discuss.

Evolution not only describes, but explains; and its explanations render certain others defunct, as all scientific explanations do. This pill is always hard to swallow for some who prefer certain falsified or obsolete explanations. The discovery by evolutionary biology that the function of sweet colorful fruits hanging from plants is to achieve dispersal of the plants’ offspring via hungry animals supersedes other explanations, for instance that fruit is produced by plants to benefit animals because animals are higher on the chain of being than plants. Evolutionary functional explanations tend to have a striking, penetrative or trenchant quality. They explain “why” in a way that pre-evolutionary folks typically thought (and think) possible only for metaphysical or religious explanations. Still, we need not worry that such explanations are all-consuming or eliminative of other sorts of explanation. We teach our students that evolutionary function (adaptation), evolutionary history (phylogeny), organismal development (ontogeny), and physiological processes are all separate sorts of biological explanation that cannot possibly undermine each other but contribute to an integrated understanding of “why” and “how” at different levels. And we can move from these levels out of biology into chemistry and physics in one direction, and (for some traits at least) into psychology and agency in another direction, and the rich mosaic of explanation is maintained. Even if we had a complete neuroscience, for instance, a neural explanation would not answer us as effectively as a verbal agency-centered one if we asked why a chess player moved the knight from G1 to F3. Agency is not even directly accessible to science, and so it brings us into a novel sort of purposive explanation that at most can be interdigitated with science rather than being replaced or

consumed by it. I do not mean that science cannot undermine the validity of particular such explanations – science could show that knight G1 to F3 was the wrong move. Science can also contextualize such explanations – evolution makes sense of why we play games like chess at all. But science cannot replace or eliminate the sort of explanation that an agent’s mind provides for its own decisions.

To extend the logic of levels of explanation even further, questions of ultimate purpose, such as those that occupy the authors of Dr. Shoppa’s more preferred citations (Schelling, Newman, and Schönborn) are likewise inappropriate targets of evolutionary elimination in general. Nobody would argue for the ultimate purpose of a chess game – in that game we are creating (or in Tolkien’s words subcreating) our own cosmos for fun; and our purposes are ultimate and inexorably imposed by us upon the pieces. But the possibility remains – decreasing in popularity today perhaps, but remaining nevertheless – that there are right or wrong moves for us humans in life, regardless of our own decisions on the matter and distinct from the sorts of explanations evolution or any other science provides. Again, the evolutionary and other sciences will illuminate circumstances and context, but will be silent on the big questions. Darwin knew this, as does Dawkins.

Evolutionary explanation pokes at metaphysics more than any other sort of scientific explanation – not because it is eliminativist, but because it is illuminating. It hacks away certain crude ideas. If a belief in God rests at all on a great chain of being among organic living things, special creation of human beings apart from other animals, or the immunity of our psychology from any ancestral influences, evolution will shake that metaphysic, that religion. However, evolution cannot tell us what metaphysic or religion to embrace. Evolutionary biologists worth their salt do not claim that whatever exists, is good. They do not claim that our motivations, even if products of natural selection, ought to be lauded for that reason. Or, if they do claim such things, they are not acting as evolutionary biologists when they do so, but acting as certain sorts of religious individuals, somewhat akin to Gnostics. Most of us, however, look at evolutionary explanations even of human behavior as (potentially) factual tidbits, of no more direct normative weight (no more good or bad) than factual tidbits about grasses and grapes, although of course of greater indirect relevance for our decision-making because of the subject matter.

If evolutionary biology were to teach me that humans tend to do X, or even that humans tend to think X is morally right, and why this is so, this would neither replace nor eliminate my own moral discernment. I do accept the premise of the evolutionary social sciences: my faculty of morality does not operate independently of my evolutionary history nor of the evolutionary functions of my behaviors and thoughts. Evolutionary biology even indicates and explains empirical tendencies or trendlines in human attitudes and behavior. Such explanations are exciting and tremendously useful. But they are limited in scope. In chess, few would think of a common tendency as an overwhelming reason for action; “most players move X in this situation” or “most people think that move X is best in this situation” is not useless but is not the best sort of advice either. Anyone who strives to win will attempt to be excellent, a point off the trendline. Likewise, if there is any such thing as excellence or arete in human life, then there is no saying that the final arbiter of that is any sort of historical, evolution-

ary, functional trend or effect. In some cases the mean can be golden, but in other cases the common is vulgar. One of the most fascinating things about our species, and at least as fascinating to an evolutionary biologist as to anyone else, is that we humans, not any science, decide what we are to consider good, what that means, and whether we will pursue it.



The Importance of Practical Understanding for Altruistic Behavior

Jonathan R. Goodman

Abstract

In this paper I present a revised view of altruistic behavior, whereby neither intention, nor effect, nor their combination, is sufficient for distinguishing altruistic behavior. On this view, a behavior is altruistic to the extent that it signals an intention to benefit another at a cost to oneself, irrespective of actual intention or effect. This understanding yields interesting but sometimes counterintuitive implications; for instance, a particular behavior intended to be altruistic that has a positive effect on the intended recipient is not necessarily altruistic. One of the features of this view is that a practical understanding of the nuances of particular social circumstances is a necessary criterion for acting altruistically; this is shown with examples of gift-giving intended to be generous that fail to qualify as altruistic on this conception. Two corollaries of this view of altruism are proposed: first, an altruistic signal is designed to elicit costly behavior from recipients and observers; second, honestly altruistic signaling is more likely to benefit the agent than deceitful signaling.

I. Introduction

In this paper I propose a revisionist view that altruistic behavior should be understood as a signal designed to elicit beliefs and costs from others. While the accepted definitions in philosophy and biology provide sufficient criteria for a behavior qualifying as altruistic within these respective fields, neither explains how and why agents are perceived to be altruistic in any possible circumstance.

Altruism, sometimes defined in ordinary language as “selfless concern for others,” requires, on this view, that a person intends to help others without ulterior motive, for example by making an anonymous donation to a poor person or group the giver does not know. Yet it is unclear what the sufficient criteria are for behaving altruistically: one can intend to be altruistic and do nothing, one can misunderstand the etiquette in a particular culture, and so forth.

In biology, on the other hand, where the sufficient criterion for altruism is benefiting another individual at a genetic cost to oneself – for example by foregoing a meal so that someone unrelated to one can eat – it’s possible to intend to hurt others and to inadvertently help them, and yet for that action to qualify as altruistic.

Neurobiology, Intention and Decision

Clayton Shoppa

Very late in his philosophical career, Friedrich Schelling gives a lecture on the principles of philosophy in Berlin. He devotes a portion of his talk to what he calls “The Exhibition of the Process of Nature.” Darwin was in his 30s when these lectures occurred, busy writing about geology, volcanoes and barnacles. Not unlike Darwin, Schelling thinks we are thoroughly natural entities. Working at a very high altitude, Schelling wonders about what kind of thing the cosmos must be for it to permit philosophy. The universe, as we are supposed to call it today, really does emerge, really does move, and really does decay. Likewise with entities. If beavers know how to build dams, the universe does too. If you know how to ride the subway, the universe does too. If you fall in love, the universe does too. Physics studies motion, the universe in so far as it moves, chemistry the active and reactive qualities of bodies by which elemental bodies form compounds according to ratios, and so on through the list of sciences and their proper objects. For Schelling philosophy studies “the existent in general,” the ordered network of operations of being.

Again working from a very high altitude, Schelling reconstructs and rejects previous generations of philosophers. As he exhibits nature as a process, he reviews his theory of the potencies – the idea that sailed a thousand philosophy dissertations – and he reaches back to Aristotle, pretending Aristotle reaches exactly the same conclusion as he does, but it is the end of the lecture that is most interesting to us here. The network of plants and animals, what we might call non-human nature, serves as a precondition to consciousness. The natural ascent from stellar corpses to planets to grasses, tall trees and predatory birds and creatures of the deep seas, of creeping things, of three-toed sloths and chimpanzees, all of this Schelling labels “becoming conscious.” Non-human nature starts what we complete. It serves as the metaphysical premise, the precursor, for humanity, and humanity, he says, is nothing but consciousness. Each of us contributes to the idea of humanity. The record of our choices adds to, contributes to, the record of humanity in the sense of the meaning of humanity.

With typical post-Kantian grandeur Schelling writes, “We must of course assume that the Earth is the point of emergence for humanity – why, we do not know, it refers to relations we cannot survey, but humanity is therefore not specifically a product of the Earth – it is a product of the entire process – not the Earth alone, the entire cosmos contributes to humanity, and if of the Earth, as continuing from the earlier standpoint, he is, then humanity is not exclusively created for the Earth, but for all the stars, since humanity is created as the final goal of the cosmos.” Other animals have their niches; we have the cosmos. The universe catches itself in the act of emerging, moving, and dying because consciousness is real in it. In contrast, today’s evolutionary studies are often more modest, a deflated, thoroughly terrestrial account of creative nature and of “higher creatures,” as Darwin calls us.

Evolution, a word Darwin uses rarely, first in the sixth edition of *On the Origin of Species*, is a theory of development the target of which is the natural world. For Darwin it per-

tains to the development of plant and animal species. Descent with modification, as he more often calls it, is composed of two related operations: (1) natural selection, which is based on schedules of probabilities, and (2) a commitment to the explanatory value of origins in the struggle for life. The former answers questions about frequency. How often? How many? At what rate? According to the latter, to understand something is to understand how it emerges.

Darwin operates with a latent metaphysics, a set of implicit expectations about what is real and what is worth studying. He brings these expectations to bear on the objects he studies, the orchids, the finches and so on. But it is when the expectations, the latent metaphysics, of later generations of authorities is brought to bear on the human species that some deficiencies are plainest. To put the point the other way around: the easiest way to detect oversights in popular or crude Darwinism is, first, to locate the major insights but, second, to locate where they are, to some degree, misspent by later generations. Such Darwinism, for its many successes and its wide influence, misses the phenomena of the human in a basic way. Darwin's bodies evolve so well that he, or later expositors who attempt to remain continuous with his breakthrough, overlooks the difference between a body and a person, between matter and form, and, because of the limits of his own thinking, his theory fails to self-apply. In other words, the theory of evolution refuses to evolve. I do not mean to suggest it goes unchallenged or unchanged, that what Darwin thought in the 1800s is what contemporary evolutionary biology teaches us today. Nevertheless, his scientific successes are philosophical liabilities in the wrong hands.

The popular reconstruction of Darwin has a hold on the public imagination today. Vienna's Cardinal Christoph Schönborn writes an editorial for *The New York Times* in 2005. In it he contends that the neo-Darwinian requirement of randomness undermines traditional theological commitments. Traditionally, Catholics have held that reason helps humankind discern the purpose and design of creation and, by extension, some limited understanding of its creator. If the neo-Darwinian story is true, and the private concept of randomness is the author of the world instead of the divine, then science is incompatible with key articles of faith.

In part I think this and other such debates depend on equivocal meanings of *design*. *Design* may refer to intelligible patterns discovered and then verified in empirical data. On this interpretation the Cardinal has less to worry about. But drawing on our religious imaginations rather than our best theology, *design* may stipulate an imaginable designer, creation's puppet-master, an old man in the clouds who offers up the rest of creation to us, for our use and projects. Never mind that the bare existence of God as a transcendent explanation is, at best, an abstruse point of contention in meta-metaphysics; it is the least interesting conviction among monotheistic religions as they are lived by millions of humans. Too often, at least in popular culture, we are asked to make a choice between middling science and worse religion. So the argument between advocates of neo-Darwinian evolution and advocates of intelligent design, most of whom are creationists in sheep's clothing, depends on semantic disagreements. Parties talk past each other with little agreement about the key concepts and terms on which their disagreement depends. Our words reflect our best understanding. As long as one group fails to reflect on the way their words are prone to misunderstanding by others,

the public debate continues. Newman gets at a provocative accommodation when he writes to a friend, “It does not seem to me to follow that creation is denied because the Creator...years ago gave laws to matter...I do not [see] that the accidental evolution of organic beings is inconsistent with divine design – It is accidental to us and not to God” (77).

But not all debates can be settled with a more consistent vocabulary. Some are more thorough, more hidebound and less reducible to semantics. Such debates are unlikely to be settled in a single conference, much less a single paper. Celebrity intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens – Terry Eagleton enjambes them into one, “Ditchens” – concoct a heady mix of Darwinism, scientism and fatalism. They explain human behavior in terms of body chemistry, biological instincts, anarcho-capitalism and sexual needs reflecting our evolutionary history.

Thus evolutionary studies can become a form of eliminativism, whether tacit or explicit, according to which any number of impersonal forces converge to explain the way your life and your wider culture work. Your autobiography is the result of these impersonal forces; they explain you better than your decisions do. In part this is what Darwin wanted. Species are, he says, “utterly inexplicable on the ordinary view of the independent creation of each species, but are explicable on the view of colonisation from the nearest and readiest source, together with the subsequent modification and better adaptation of the colonists to their new homes” (849). Evolution does not describe natural history as much as attempt explain it. Billions of years of cosmic expansion serve as a backdrop to our lives, and the backdrop does not disappear just so one actor in its drama can freely choose Coke or Pepsi. We are produced within a universe we cannot do without.

Hobbes uses the English Civil Wars to prove his own Ditchens point. Participants on both side of the conflict revert to brutality and mindless cruelty to hide their viciousness behind appeals to justice, rights, God’s will, each of which is a mask for the will to power. Eliminativism edges out moral decision-making by rendering it superfluous. The choice to do something looks appealing if and only if impersonal forces coordinate to render it so. Social Darwinists in the past century contend every act of charity works against the natural order by which some are weak and others strong, some poor and others rich. Many today do all manner of intellectual gymnastics to preserve the unkind choices made in the past, to defend the injustices of the status quo. Reflecting Robert Chambers’ idea of species transmutation, as evolution was known before Darwin, Alfred Lord Tennyson gives us the line about nature “red in tooth and claw.” Dawkins approves in *The Selfish Gene*: “I think [Tennyson’s phrase] sums up our modern understanding of natural selection admirably” (2). It is bald, brutal praise for the predator tenaciously willing to do what it takes to survive.

Enticed by this view of freedom and taken in by the strength it rewards, some neo-Darwinian theorists endorse survival as the criterion of success. If it lasts, it must be good. If it is still around today, it must be really good. Longevity is the arbiter both of life and of virtue. But history is “not a biological category” any more than riding a bike is a psychological one. Aristotle through to Spinoza contend happiness is the goal of life, the answer to the question of why we get up in the morning and do what we do, and when some endorse *survival* as a more persuasive alternative, I think a few short-

comings deserve to be mentioned. “Red in tooth and claw” is fair praise for a lion who manages to make it through another day on the savannah. Food is scarce; life is hard. It is what makes the *Planet Earth* documentary series so compelling to watch. But we should be uncomfortable applying this description of nature to ourselves. For us, survival is one necessary but insufficient condition to living well. It is the lowest common denominator; it is where the story begins rather than where it ends.

When neo-Darwinians characterize the universe as indifferent to our best laid plans, when they say morality is an illusion, they induce on the basis of a limited sample. Darcia Narvaez uses Darwin’s work, as well as more recent work in evolutionary studies, to show how human development involves moral growth. She encourages her readers to “rethink our systems. Adults can change cultures by developing institutions and selecting activities that minimize detachment [and] support moral heritages. We can believe that communal morality is humanity’s default, not immorality, violence or selfishness. As adults, we can use our [imagination, courage and strength] so that we can construct a society and world where all thrive” (306). She characterizes nature not as a cruel and indifferent governor but as a plastic and open-ended opportunity to become who we are on the basis of the care we show ourselves and each other via the careful choices we make.

Darwin acknowledges our species has a moral sense, and “prosocial instincts” do seem to be fixtures of our natural-historical endowment (Narvaez 4). Narvaez summarizes dreadful scientific results according to which “empathy has been decreasing in U.S. College students,” meanwhile we have “been plagued by an increase in the flaunting of social rules, more oppositional behavior and less shame for selfish behavior and even advocacy of it.” But she refuses to naturalize such descriptions. From a developmental-theoretical perspective, poor behavior does not undermine a more complete account. Unlike many other species, ours can grow old without growing up. But the fact that some fail to mature does not make it normal, natural or desirable. From the poor choices of some, it does not follow that nature favors poor behavior. Perhaps it is preferable to give up the ghost of morality, to go with the flow of accelerating decline?

Most basically the normative statement of survival of the fittest begs the question of criteria. To the degree we install natural selection as the elemental force, explaining all manner of human choices, we take away personal acts of attention, intelligence, reflection and decision that together compose responsible decision-making. To pick on Herbert Spencer’s famous phrase, what is fittest is what survives, yet what survives is what is fittest. Survival of the fittest at best means an apology for the present. After all, we are the lucky ones who made it. It leaves unanswered questions like, why isn’t the universe already totally evolved? Why doesn’t evolution occur at an infinite speed?

When we contend there is a single, maximally explanatory elementary force, we allege the uniformity of nature; we make it the result of just one thing. There is no difference between a plant species and an animal species, no difference between me and any other entity because everything belongs to or is the result of this one force. It is bad science and worse metaphysics, what logicians once called the fallacy of the vacuous contrast now dressed up like an alpha predator.

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