BETWEEN DARWIN AND CULTURE: THE FALSE DILEMMA OF MORALITY

Simona MITROIU1 and Mircea-Dan MITROIU2

1 Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Human Sciences Research Department, Lascăr Catargi 54, 700107 Iași, Romania, simona.mitroiu@uaic.ro
2 Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, Faculty of Biology, Bd. Carol I 20A, 700505 Iași, Romania, mircea.mitroiu@uaic.ro

Abstract. Starting from the contractualist view about the origins of morality and the limitations of this model, the present study analyses both the origins of morality, and the fundamentals of ethics (metaethics). We emphasize at this level the mutation introduced in ethics by the Darwinism, which stated that our moral sense is a biological adaptation – change that provoked numerous debates. Questioning upon the moral principles, we bring into discussion the concept of universality as defined by Kant, as well as the extent in which this concept has a biological base. The analysis of the altruism based on animal social behaviour will facilitate this approach. We adhere to the views of various biologists (Morris, Lorenz, Dennett, Dawkins) and consider that human culture has a biological fundament. Moreover, we consider that our morality is deeply rooted in the biology of our social species, but then evolved separately and is now seen as a distinct cultural product which continues to change.

Key words: morality, ethics, evolutionary ethics, metaethics, human nature, Darwinism, social contract, sociobiology, altruism, culture.

Rezumat. Între Darwin și cultură: falsa dilemă a moralei. Pornind de la abordarea contractualistă a originii moralei și a limitelor acestui model, prezentul studiu urmărește atât analiza originii moralei, cât și a fundamentelor eticii (metaetică). Atragem atenția în acest mod asupra mutației introduse la nivelul eticii de către darwinism, potrivit căruia simțul nostru moral este o adaptare biologică, schimbare care a suscitat numeroase dispute. Chestionând-ne asupra principiilor morale, aducem în discuție conceptul de universalitate așa cum a fost definit de Kant, precum și măsura în care acest concept are un fundament biologic. Analiza altruismului pe baza comportamentului social al animalelor va facilita acest demers. Ne răsărim concepțiilor diferitelor biologi (Morris, Lorenz, Dennett, Dawkins) și considerăm că există un fundament biologic al culturii umane. Mai mult, considerăm că moralitatea noastră este adânc înrădăcinată în biologia speciei noastre sociale, dar că ea a evoluat apoi separat și este considerată astăzi ca un produs cultural distinct care continuă să se schimbe.

Cuvinte cheie: moralitate, etică, etică evoluționistă, metaetică, natura umană, darwinism, contract social, sociobiologie, altruism, cultură.

Brief remarks on the human nature
The subject addressed by this paper is part of a larger philosophical theme – the human nature. This is the central point of the philosophical reflections about the universe, the reflexive approach of this subject being usually centred on two questions: “What is this nature, i.e. what are the characteristics given by the creator, regardless its nature?” and especially “How did this nature become what it is now, so what was the trajectory of the human nature and the extent to which we can leave aside the true face of evolution and use terms such as progress instead?” To these two main questions a third more pragmatic one can be added, namely “What makes the human being what it is, what makes it choose a certain path and not other, what determines its choices?”

To begin, we have to consider the Aristotelian approach, which states that the virtue of a thing consists in the accord between its nature and its purpose (a teleological perspective), and that thus, the virtue of a man consists is the accord between his life and actions, and his goal as a rational being. Thus, what we propose here is to analyse the human essence as determined by nature, but also by the trait that for a long time was
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considered its most important characteristic i.e. the rationality. The hypothesis presented here is that of a rational human nature that creates culture, and is determined both by nature and by culture.

The disputes regarding the human nature are well known, as well as the many definitions given by various philosophers who tried to find the very essence of the human being, the characteristics that determine its nature. The fact that humans are social beings was one of the directions that were followed in the search for the human nature. This social direction caused other questions to be asked, about the living in a community and the true value of the expression “Homo homini lupus” (Hobbes) and this became the research field of Philosophy, Ethology, and Ethics, with its pragmatic approach, the morality.

Ethics, morality, and the social contract

According to the Oxford Dictionaries (www.oxforddictionaries.com), the morality consists in the principles concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour. The Ethics is defined as the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles, while the meta-ethics asks questions about the ultimate bases or the nature of morality.

Without minimizing Aristotle’s role, we have to surpass his typical view for the Greek philosophic space – that of the impossibility of existing outside the society, the city in this particular case (there are many documented cases in history when thinkers e.g. Socrates, asked to choose between exile and death, chose the latter). Although the human being can survive outside the society, real or virtual, its nature is a social one and, paraphrasing Aristotle, outside the society the man has no virtue.

Accepting the social nature of the human being, we have to find out what are the rules that govern the relations within the society. Here we have to bring into discussion the so-called “social contract”. According to it the people chose the social existence due to its benefits and signed a social contract, giving up to a certain freedom in exchange of the safety brought by this social contract.

Thomas Hobbes saw the social contract as an unanimous understanding, its goal being everybody’s safety – a concept named utilitarianism (Hobbes, 1952). Today there are two main types of utilitarians: “So-called «act utilitarians» argue that it is the happiness/unhappiness of each individual act that counts. «Rule utilitarians», on the other hand, argue that it is the general policy that counts” (Ruse, 1998: 209). John Locke also saw the state as the result of a pact, a reciprocal understanding, but he considered that the natural state of the human beings is not one of conflict, as Hobbes stated, but one of freedom (Locke, 2002).

However, any attempt to sign a social contract is based on the capacity of the human being to make compromises about the future, promises that introduce the concept of responsibility whose origins are related to a special type of memory, necessary to keep track of debts and credits (Dennett, 1995: 462-3). This aspect will be detailed later, when we discuss the morality in nature.

Those adopting the social contract view consider that inside the family or tribe there are no norms or moral acts, and that the morality is a characteristic of the human society as a whole, an emergent result of the huge innovation that was the social contract, as a base for the society. On the contrary, Jean Jacques Rousseau considers that the nature of the human being is good, and that it was the society that perverted it (the good savage) (Rousseau, 1997). Thus, the question of the original state of the human being from moral point of view arises.

However, as Dennett (1996) pointed out, the social contract, the human society and the state, are usually seen from the present perspective, forgetting about the numerous
small steps that were necessary to achieve what we have today. He summarizes the born of the social contract as follows: “One day, when yet another conflict arose, just like all the others that had come before it, something new happened to happen. Instead of persisting in the myopically selfish policies of mutual defection and distrust that had reigned heretofore, these particular lucky competitors hit upon a new idea: cooperation for mutual benefit. They formed a «social contract». Whereas before there had been families, or herds, or tribes, this was the birth of a different kind of group, a society” (p. 454). Thus, there might be a high probability for the society to be the result of an accidental decision.

Nature’s ‘morality’

One of the statements that inspired this theoretical inquiry is that of E. O. Wilson in his famous *Sociobiology*: "the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of philosophers and biologicized" (Wilson, 1975: 27). Dennett (1996) also pointed out that “Any theory of the birth of ethics is going to have to integrate culture with biology” (p. 460), and Ruse (1998) admits that “culture soars beyond biology, but I suspect its roots are firmly within biology” (p. 126).

Although there are several theories that deny the existence of morality outside the human society, we consider that the first moral act will appear at individual level wherever there is a capacity to reflect on its own actions (self conscience). Our statement is also sustained by the connection between morality and emotions. De Wall (1996) stated that morality appears together with the capacity towards empathy, which also characterizes the great apes, and Wilson (1975) emphasizes that emotions and ethics are closely related. The emotions themselves are centred in the limbic system, which is a biological structure that appeared through natural selection.

Thus, morality does not begin with the social contract, although it is true that sociality is necessary, as we shall see below. Not the complexity nor the system create and define the morality, but the capacity of the individual to compare and choose. The morality as a *system* probably coincides with the civilization, but the moral *act* precedes it.

Several examples from the natural world support this theory. Different species, mostly social animals, developed during their evolution complex behaviours in order to maximize their chances of survival. They can be divided in non-violent methods of solving conflicts and altruistic actions of sharing resources.

The first category was also called the ritualization of aggression (Morris, 1967; Lorenz, 1974) and consists in specific postures e.g. exposed abdomen, special sounds (yelping), and infantile behaviour and appearance (the “pretty” faces of juveniles used to inhibit the intraspecific aggression). A relevant case presented by Lorenz (1974) is that of the turkey hens that recognize their juveniles by their specific sounds. They will tend to accept any object that makes that sound and attack everything that doesn’t, including its own chicks in the case of a deft turkey hen. Lorenz went further stating that the personal relationships established with other members of the species is at origins a mechanism to avoid aggression. Still in this category, a more sophisticated behaviour concerns the establishment of personal relationships. Rather than limiting the aggressiveness, this behaviour deviates it towards other individuals. Here the identity of the individual becomes important; by creating personal bonds one individual is then enable to make a difference between *friend* and *alien*. For Lorenz (1974) personality begins where personal friendship occurs for the first time. The formation of alliances is thus closely connected with aggressiveness. This behaviour is not specific to humans, being observed in chimpanzees as well (Goodall, 1998).

Regarding the second category of behaviour – when resources are shared – it is supposed that the natural selection will favour the genes of the organisms that tend to share resources when they can, and request resources when they need them; in the same
time, it will favour the tendency to remember obligations and to punish the cheaters
(Dawkins, 2008). In accordance with this theory, the process of sharing the resources was
observed in many species, mostly in animals that need food rich in calories, which is
usually difficult to obtain (Lestel, 2001). Such animals can be primates, social carnivores
(wolves, dogs, hyenas), vampire bats, but also ants. Thus, the carnivorous diet can be a
promoter of morality, favouring food sharing between different individuals because the
hunt usually requires a good cooperation (De Waal, 1996). Such behaviour was
documented in chimpanzees that share the meat after a successful hunt as a way to
establish their social relations. In this case it seems to be more than a problem of
dominance, because the request does not start only from the subordinate (Goodall, 1998).

De Waal (1996) considers the egalitarian behaviour as one of the necessary
conditions for the appearance of morality. This step is made possible through the
appearance of the community concern, defined by De Waal as “the stake each individual
has in promoting those characteristics of the community or group that increase the
benefits derived from living in it by that individual and its kin” (p. 207). For example the
studies show that the chimpanzees know the sentiment of indignation and that they are
practicing the so-called moralistic aggression, making cheating costly. The vampire bats
learn on which individuals from their social group they can count for the return of their
obligations (regurgitated blood), and which are the cheaters.

If the philosophers have debated for a long time whether the moral principles are
acquired during lifetime or not, Darwin (1859, 1871, 1872) dramatically changed our
perspective regarding our place in nature. From now on humans will no longer be seen as
the centre of nature (Pico della Mirandola), but as part of the food chain. Concomitantly
more and more examples of “moral” behaviours seen in others species shed a new light on
the origins of our own morality.

Two major explanations were proposed by the evolutionary psychologists to
explain the altruistic behaviour in nature (De Waal, 1996; Radcliffe Richard, 2000). The
first is the kin-directed altruism known also as kin selection. Because close relatives share
a good part of their genes, it is thus advantageous for a gene to make the individual that
carries it help other individuals that are genetically close to it. As Dawkins (2007) puts it:
“...There are circumstances – not particularly rare – in which genes ensure their own selfish
survival by influencing organisms to behave altruistically [...]. A gene that programs
individual organisms to favour their genetic kin is statistically likely to benefit copies of
itself. Such a gene’s frequency can increase in the gene pool to the point where kin
altruism becomes the norm” (p. 247). He enumerates animals like social insects, naked
mole, rats, meerkats, acorn woodpeckers, which have evolved societies in which elder
siblings care for the younger ones. Goodall (1998) reported several cases when baby
chimpanzees whose mothers have died were nursed by the mother’s sister or brother, but
remarkably, sometimes by an unrelated female that was close to the mother. In one case
the baby was protected by an unrelated male. These unusual cases represent a different
type of altruism that only humans were considered capable of. The idea of kin selection i.e.
the tendency of animals to behave more altruistically towards their relatives than towards
unrelated members of their species, is not new, but satisfactory explanations were
proposed only in the 1960s and 1970s (De Waal, 1996).

The second type of altruism is called reciprocal altruism or mutual aid and it is
best illustrated by the expression “You scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours”. It works
by the principle respond to good with good and to bad with bad, or the Tit-for-Tat strategy
(Radcliffe Richard, 2000). This type of altruism is not dependent on genetic closeness, its
extreme form being represented by the symbiosis. To the objection that reciprocal
altruism is not really altruism, but a rather elaborated form of self-interest, Dennett (1996)
replied that “This objection misses the point that we have to pass by small steps [...]

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and reciprocal altruism, ignoble (or just a-noble) as it may be, is a useful stepping-stone on the progression. It requires advanced cognitive abilities—a rather specific memory capable of reidentifying one’s debtors and creditors, and the capacity to spot a cheat, for instance” (p. 479). As Ruse (1998) pointed out, “the important distinguishing feature is that, although help is given, returns are in some way anticipated” (p. 219). However, we don’t have to believe that reciprocal altruism makes all our social interactions moral. Non-moral, restricting feelings are also produced and ensure that morality does not become biologically disadvantageous (Ruse, 1988: 242).

A third type of altruism seen mostly in the human society is the altruism for reputation or indirect reciprocity. Here an individual shows an apparently non-reciprocal altruistic behaviour towards other individuals in order to spread the word about his generosity and to consolidate his dominant position. As an example Dawkins (2007) uses the so-called Potlatch Effect, where “rival chieftains of Pacific north-west tribes vie with each other in duels of ruinously generous feasts. In extreme cases, bouts of retaliatory entertaining continue until one side is reduced to penury, leaving the winner not much better off” (p. 250).

And, related to the third type of altruistic behaviour, there is also “the particular additional benefit of conspicuous generosity as a way of buying unfakeably authentic advertising” (Dawkins, 2007: 251). The example that he cites concerns the Arabian babblers (genus Turdoides Cretzschmar), where the dominant birds assert their dominance by feeding subordinates. So, instead of advertising dominance by violent behaviours (as chimps may), these birds chose to use the food resources in an altruistic and much peaceful strategy.

Humans' morality

According to Dawkins (2007), “through most of our prehistory, humans lived under conditions that would have strongly favoured the evolution of all four kinds of altruism” (p. 251). Moreover, we consider that our cultural moral principles are built on a suitable biological support. This support is given by the social nature of our species, which enabled us with some rudimentary moral principles that could be further exacerbated and modified by culture (Fig. 1). In this way we can explain our moral sense (“it just feels right/wrong”): besides our cultural traditions regarding what is good and what is wrong, we probably tend to adopt certain attitudes that match the natural behaviour of our ancestors. Compared to the millions of years of biological evolution of our species, our culture is only a tiny fraction.

An example given by Ruse (1998) is the incest. What is the origin of the interdiction? Or, to put it differently, do we reject the incest because we “sense” that it is wrong, do we reject it because we know that the eventual offspring will have a high risk of genetic malformations, or do we reject it because we were educated to? A possible answer is that our ancestors might have felt that it was wrong (due to a biological instinct, which can be seen in other species too), then observed the consequences that followed when it happened, and finally decided that it is wrong and taught others so (formulated rules). Thus, the interdiction towards this behaviour seems double: it has a biological origin (that’s why we accept the interdiction so easily) and a cultural enhancement. Regarding the initial “feeling”, Ruse (1998) said: “It is not just we do not want to go to bed with our siblings. We feel that we ought not have to intercourse with them [...]. Morality does the trick” (p. 222).

We consider that although there is a biological reason behind each moral precept, this can explain at most what people feel; morality as we know it today, was however separated from the natural world due to the powerful tendency of Christianity to place the humans above nature.
Figure 1. The interdependence of biology and culture, showing the contribution of both genes and memes to the construction of our moral behaviour (see text for further explanations).

A question that appears in this context concerns the universality of these moral precepts, as imposed by the Kantian conception. To extrapolate this universality in the quotidian means that all the people should respect the same principles, regardless their culture, space and time. However, this does not always happen. The supreme moral principle, “do not kill” seems to be differently interpreted and rather transforms itself in the more specific “do not kill your kin”, tending to overlap with the natural, biological tendency. So, we might speculate that the truly universal moral principles of our species will overlap more or less with those that naturally occurred in our ancestry, as social primates. On the other hand, those moral principles that are only culturally induced will tend to differ from one population to another. This is an argument for ethical relativism. In its strongest form it asserts that morality is entirely dependent on culture and that different cultures/groups have different moral systems. For example Haidt and Graham (2006) showed that there is a link between moral principles and politics. They consider that there are five psychological systems that provide the foundations for the world’s many moralities. “The five foundations are psychological preparations for detecting and reacting emotionally to issues related to harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. Political liberals have moral intuitions primarily based upon the first two foundations, and therefore misunderstand the moral motivations of political conservatives, who generally rely upon all five foundations” (p. 1).

Of course, an equal danger is to deny the importance of the culture, and also to conclude that biology and culture are widely separated. Dennett (1996) recognizes the biological base of culture, but underlines that we cannot pretend that every action or reasoning is commended by our genes, without taking into consideration other interfering factors. Besides the biological evolution we can talk about a cultural evolution too. It has a Darwinian component, but it cannot be interpreted only in these terms. To take over some biological concepts and use them at cultural level as Wilson and Ruse do can be a
fascinating step, but it can easily slip towards reductionism. Thus, Dennett criticizes the assertion that morality is “merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends” (Ruse & Wilson, 1985, cited in Dennett, 1996), stating that “Our reproductive ends may have been the ends that kept us in the running till we could develop culture, and they may still play a powerful – sometimes overpowering – role in our thinking, but that does not licence any conclusion at all about our current values” (p. 470).

Lorenz (1974) emphasizes that we have to understand that morality is just a compensation mechanism that helps us to adapt our instinctual (biological) nature to the necessities of the cultural life, realizing a common functional system. The example he gives is relevant: a man saved a child who was drowning and he is very proud he acted both rationally and morally. Lorenz stated that if this was true, the child would have drowned before the man jumped in the water. But people don’t like to hear that their actions are based on instincts and that any pavian would have done the same. Accepting this will help us face the new challenges that our supertribal society imposes. The overpopulation of our planet increases the stress of living together and our moral principles are pushed to their limits (Lorenz, 1974; Morris, 1969).

The parallel process that can be observed both in nature and in culture, can be adequately expressed by the analogy between genes and memes (unities of cultural memory), both potentially immortal, but being dependent on physical vehicles; natural selection occurs at both levels (Dawkins, 1976). Memes can be ideas (including moral principles), songs, clothes fashions, ways of building things etc. They are analogous to genes, but instead of using sperm and eggs, “memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation” (Dawkins, 1976: 206). Thus, we can speak of a true cultural evolution, the different cultures modifying themselves over time, constantly losing and acquiring new features. In this sense we can talk about a moral evolution too. At present we managed to escape from the action of the natural selection and the altruistic actions are no longer or only partly genetically-induced. As Radcliffe Richard (2000) put it, an altruistic person that dies saving another is no longer a danger for the altruistic genes. His/her altruistic behaviour entered the world of memes and from now on it can be transmitted culturally; his/her sacrifice can be seen as an example that must be followed.

Referring to the moral progress Radcliffe Richard (2000) considers that “we have to start with our intuitions and our evolutionary-produced sensitivities and consciences, just as we have to start with what we are born with in all other areas of enquiry. But we are capable of recognizing when these lead to anomalies and contradictions in ethics, just as we are capable of recognizing how unreliable our intuitions often are in science and mathematics, and that alone is enough to allow the possibility of moral progress” (p. 209).

Conclusions
The western moral system is tributary to Christianism, but also to the western philosophy, which from the Greeks (“man is the measure of all things” – Protagoras) to Kant (“treat the man as purpose, never as mean”) detached the human being from the rest of the nature. We agree with Ruse (1998) who pointed out that “thanks to evolution, humans have innate dispositions to believe that we should promote the general happiness, and that we should treat people as ends rather than means” (p. 242).

Thus, we adhere to the views of various biologists (Morris, Lorenz, Dennett, Dawkins), and consider that human culture has a biological fundament. Moreover, we consider that our morality is deeply rooted in the biology of our social species, but then evolved separately and is now seen as a distinct cultural product. Richard Dawkins was surely right when he said: “We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination... We are built as gene machines and
cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators.” (Dawkins, 1976: 215).

The above statement implies that human freedom is possible due to culture, which itself is constantly changing over time. And, referring to morality, this means that we are free to develop moral actions and behaviours that can move away from those found in nature. Our moral principles can evolve and are evolving.

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