Ethics // Spring 2019

Handout 19

Evolutionism: Wilson

The new naturalism. Wilson begins by postulating the framework of new naturalism. The human condition has its origins in evolutionary processes. No understanding of humanities and social sciences is possible outside the evolutionary framework. 1

Two 'dilemmas'. Awareness of the decisive role of evolutionary factors leads to two dilemmas. I am not sure why Wilson insists that these are 'dilemmas', rather than simply problems. In any event, the first one is that there is no higher purpose of human development, other than survival and reproduction. Whatever change we observe in human history or culture should be traced to better solving the problems of survival and reproduction. All sorts of traditional spiritual goals will soon disappear, if they haven't already done so. All that is left will be engagement in sensual pleasure, self-indulgence. 4

If there is a chance for sustaining any 'higher' goal, we have to look for a new morality. But then we face a second 'dilemma': our moral intuitions and judgement are merely products of the evolutionary change in the brain. What we perceive as morally good or bad is simply a result of a contingent evolutionary process. Rawls and Nozick, two leading moral philosophers, pronounce different moral propositions as indubitable. But their indubitability is simply a result of *emotional* attachment—and nothing else. 5 6

Heredity. Human phenotype, the external appearance of the humans, is affected by genotype. Sometimes the genetic influence can be traced to just a few genes, sometimes to many hundreds. There should be no serious disagreement that human behaviour is similarly affected by genotype. The question is how and to what extent. We know that human societies has some striking similarities to primate societies, including the number of individuals in intimate social groups, training of children, social play. If we try to conform to distinctly non-human social traits, chaos will ensue and reproduction will cease. 19 20 21

But surely, there are traits that are unique to humans and that set them apart from primates (and from other species). Anthropologists have identified a set of behaviours shared by every culture ever observed. One dominant thought that these unique, refined traits are cultural products, not biological ones. However, if there are such 'cultural universals', particular cultures cannot themselves be responsible for the emergence of these traits. Moreover, it is puzzling how these behavioural traits have persisted across space and time, despite different cultural pressures. The only alternative is that these universals are genetically fixed, in a rather complicated way. If any of them is violated, a human society would be severely hampered. They fix the boundaries within which cultural variations are possible.

Case study: homosexuality. You might expect that an evolutionist would be committed to condemning homosexuality. Don't we hear that homosexual practices are repugnant because they interfere with procreation? This kind of argument has an air of enlightened naturalism. But it is quite wrong. For sex, even among primates, is not an instrument of reproduction, but of bonding. So it is entirely possible that in a population where demographic concerns are secondary, and where social bonding is much more urgent, homosexuality should be a behaviour sanctioned by the highest biological considerations. An example could be an all-male military expedition force, of the kind described by Thucydides. 142

What of the argument that homosexuality reduces reproduction rates? Here too, we have to examine closely the details. Reproduction could be served by homosexual individuals altruistically assisting the upbringing of the children of their relatives, perhaps even unrelated individuals. They can further be used in the occupations that are not directly related to parental duties (shamans, seers). 144

Notice here an important nuance. We do not, and should not, claim that *all* individuals are disposed to homosexuality, in the same way as we might claim that all (male) individuals are disposed to adultery. Evidently many individuals, male and female, are quite averse to

homosexual practices. And this is expected: evolution should erect biological obstacles to prevent a fully homosexual population (compare: incest). What we should claim (together with Wilson) is that a certain small number of individuals are expected to have homosexual tendencies, a fact apparently corroborated by observation.

What is the role of morality in this case? It seems that moral prescriptions are idle, just as in the case of incest. Evolution takes care to prevent 'excessive homosexuality' through innate emotional mechanisms. Where such mechanisms are absent, and where the individuals in question are not averse to homosexuality, there is no ground left for moral injunctions either. Why should people be forbidden from engaging in the kind of behaviour that hurts no individual and no community at large?

On one hand, Wilson's speculations may be used to explain why we find a disproportionately high number of homosexuals among artists and intellectuals. But, on the other hand, these speculations have a rather flimsy basis. For example, we should expect that homosexually inclined individuals would be used, in many cultures, in child rearing. As far as I know, this is simply not the case. Similarly, we should expect that these individuals would at least be strongly inclined to assist in child rearing. Again, I think this is simply false. Pending further anthropological and psychological evidence, I would rather revert to the claim about bonding—namely, that with some individuals, always limited in number, the salutary social role of bonding with the same sex is achieved through sexual relations.

Ultimate and proximate. Implicit in Wilson's discussion is the distinction between two level of explanation: ultimate and proximate. Why morality has evolved as an institution, why certain moral rules were adopted at this time within this community, should be explained by reference to survival and reproduction (or 'fitness'). These rules are further constrained by the genotype of the given species. But then there is a question why we *find* some rules plausible, or why we judge certain situations and behaviours immediately good or repugnant. Here the explanation goes through psychological mechanisms. Those have been fashioned by evolution to motivate people to behave in accordance with ultimate evolutionary rules.

Remark 1. This distinction has interesting correlations with the Hegelian concept of the 'cunning of reason'. Only reason has been replaced by evolution.

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