

CRITIQUE OF EVOLUTIONISM: SINGER

MAIN ELEMENTS OF WILSON'S VIEW. After a preliminary summary, Singer identifies three main threads in Wilson's argument. (A) Biology can provide empirical basis for changing our views on the long-term consequences of our actions. (B) Biology has the authority to amend ethical claims—i.e. premisses of ethical arguments. We saw this in the case of homosexuality. (C) Biological knowledge can supplant traditional philosophical ethics by providing a new set of ethical premisses, the new 'cardinal values'. Singer then proceeds to examining each of these threads in turn.

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EVOLUTION AND CONSEQUENCES. There is a key distinction to make, Singer argues, between ethical theories that are sensitive to consequences and theories that are not. If a theory *T* is sensitive to consequences of moral actions, then empirical knowledge of the world is necessary for understanding how those consequences play out. Utilitarianism is an obvious example. Utilitarians of course have to know what kind of actions generate what kind of consequences. This knowledge is empirical. However, nothing here touches on the authority of the fundamental ethical premiss—the principle of utility. That principle cannot be derived from empirical facts, no matter how rich or accurate.

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Question 1. Explain Wilson's (alleged) fallacy in examining Rawls' argument.

However, there are theories of 'absolutist' ethics that ignore the consequences. Kant's theory is one instance. These theories cannot, by design, profit from novel empirical knowledge. This, in Singer's view, is a weakness. The slogan 'Fiat iustitia, ruat caelum' (see Handout 0) is *obviously* false. But we do not need biology to tell us that. Ordinary thinking should suffice.

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COMMENTS. This is the least ambitious of Wilson's claims. But it is not trivial. Moral philosophers are encouraged to argue with concrete knowledge of evolution at hand, to supplement their theories with evolutionary explanations. We do not see it practised today.

REVISING ETHICAL PREMISES. Biology and natural science generally can be made useful for morality by helping us see reasons in favour or against certain moral claims. Consider homosexuality (see Handout 19). The purported argument against homosexual behaviour was:

- (A) Homosexual behaviour is unnatural. [$\neg Na$]
- (B) Every behaviour that is unnatural is immoral. [$\forall x(\neg Nx \supset \neg Mx)$]
- (C) Therefore, homosexual behaviour is immoral. [$\neg Ma$]

But we can show that homosexuality is not unnatural, since it can be assigned a certain ultimate evolutionary function (and also observed in other mammalian species). Therefore, the premiss (A) should be rejected. Moreover, we can show that some behaviours (driving cars) are unnatural, although no-one would consider them immoral. Thus the premiss (B) can be rejected as well.

But how significant is this contribution of biology? Not very. It can be directed against natural law ethics—yet who is attached to this ethics nowadays? So this is a straw man fallacy, an attack on the view no major philosopher would really hold.

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DEBUNKING ABSOLUTISM. Still, there may be more to Wilson's polemic. If morality is an adaptation, then moral rules (judgements) do not have universal character. Now right away Singer makes an important qualification. We cannot challenge all moral rules, judgements, and intuitions. If we could, then we should have found some ground from which to examine the whole of morality. But science cannot supply us with this ground, because it is 'outside of ethics'.

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Instead, we can only challenge some moral principles. We can try to show that they are relics of evolutionary past. Other principles, however, have to be accepted. Well, this means, given our just declared methodology, that they fit our current evolutionary situation. And therefore, we can now interpret the moral role of biology as supplying us with a *novel* set of moral principles (rather than merely destroying some of them).

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NATURALISTIC FALLACY. The question is: *can* biology be a foundation of ethics, a source of ethical principles? Singer thinks it can not. There is an unbridgeable gap between facts and values. Registering all the facts about the world would not deliver the answer to the question: what, therefore, *ought* to be done?

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And why not, exactly? Moral principles are charged with providing us reasons for action. Being *merely* informed about the facts would not deliver reasons for how to act. My reasons are determined by my values—that is, by my judgement of good and bad, right and wrong. But these values cannot be discovered, whether by natural science or by everyday observation. Of course I should properly be informed about my station in the world, and how the world works. But none of that would determine my choice. I could collect statistical data about how people in my condition have acted, are likely to act. Or how this particular choice would increase my pleasure (as a matter of statistical correlation). Yet I will be able to choose otherwise.

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So increasingly, this insistence on the non-natural, immune-to-facts ability to choose rings a Kantian bell. My capacity to choose is as much part of human nature, as the empirical capacity to observe or to experience emotions. Sociobiology, no more than anthropology or sociology, can determine our choice. Only a rational deliberation can.

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