



Darwin's nihilistic idea: evolution and the meaninglessness of life

TAMLER SOMMERS and ALEX ROSENBERG*

*Department of Philosophy, Center for Philosophy of Biology, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA; *Author for correspondence*

Received 6 January 2002; revised 15 February 2002; accepted in revised form 2 July 2002

Introduction

No one has expressed the destructive power of Darwinian theory more effectively than Daniel Dennett. Others have recognized that the theory of evolution offers us a universal acid, but Dennett, bless his heart, coined the term. Many have appreciated that the mechanism of random variation and natural selection is a substrate-neutral algorithm that operates at every level of organization from the macromolecular to the mental, at every time scale from the geological epoch to the nanosecond. But it took Dennett to express the idea in a polysyllable or two. These two features of Darwinism undermine more wishful thinking about the way the world is than any other brace of notions since mechanism was vindicated in physics.

The solvent algorithm deprives nature of purpose, on the global and the local scale. Both evolutionary phylogeny and organismic ontology can be explained as the operation of passive environmental filtration on variations produced by real (not just epistemic) randomness. Types and tokens are built by the iteration of this same process at multiple levels. Even when you get to the *locus classicus* of purposeful phenomena in human cognition and its consequences in action, natural selection explains both capacities and performance in a way that dispenses with purpose even here. Darwinism thus puts the capstone on a process which since Newton's time has driven teleology to the explanatory sidelines. In short it has made Darwinians into metaphysical Nihilists denying that there is any meaning or purpose to the universe, its contents and its cosmic history. But in making Darwinians into metaphysical nihilists, the solvent algorithm should have made them into ethical nihilists too. For intrinsic values and obligations make sense only against the background of purposes, goals, and ends which are not merely instrumental. But the leading Darwinian philosophers have shied away from this implication and instead have embraced ethical naturalism. And this despite the ever-increasing power of Darwinism to explain away normative ethics as a local adaptation.

One might well expect tenderhearted scientists and others faced by a forced choice between naturalism and nihilism to choose the former, if only because acknowledging Darwinism's commitment to nihilism makes it an even less attractive theory to the unconverted. But to see ethical naturalism exuberantly defended by no less a steely eyed Darwinian than Dennett is something of a surprise. In the

conclusion to *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, Dennett waxes thus:

There is no denying, at this point, that Darwin's idea is a universal solvent, capable of cutting right to the heart of everything in sight. The question is: what does it leave behind? I have tried to show that once it passes through everything, we are left with stronger, sounder versions of our most important ideas. Some of the traditional details perish, and some of these are losses to be regretted, but good riddance to the rest of them. What remains is more than enough to build on. Does Darwin's idea turn out to be, in the end, just what we need in our attempt to preserve . . . the values we cherish? I have completed my case for the defense (Dennett (1995), p. 521. Page references below are all to this work)

We cannot think we are alone in finding this the most surprising and unsettling conclusion of Dennett's defense of Darwinism against all comers.. Most of those who fear Darwin's dangerous idea reject it owing to their recognition that it is universal acid, eating through every available argument for the values people cherish. We differ from those who fear Darwinism because we believe it is true. But we do not think that we can or need hide our countenances from the nihilism it underwrites. In this paper we seek to show that the first fifteen chapters of Dennett's work is a case for the nihilist's prosecution, not the naturalist's defense. We will argue that chapters 16 and 17 of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* do not fit within the framework of the 453 pages that precede them; nor does the thesis they defend pass Dennett's own intellectual muster. If we are right the only alternative to the naturalism Dennett hopes to embrace is either an intuitionism that deprives Darwin's idea of its danger by denying its universal writ, or a sort of "nice" nihilism. It is this latter, which in the end Dennett and the rest of us Darwinians must embrace.

Nihilism, naturalism, intuitionism

For present purposes, we need a characterization of nihilism, naturalism, and intuitionism. Ethical naturalism combines three theses: a) normative terms that name intrinsic (as opposed to instrumental) values, and categorical obligations denote real properties of things or acts, b) there are true or at least well justified synthetic propositions about which items or actions instantiate these properties,¹ and c) There exists a set of scientifically accessible natural facts about us or the world that can

¹ Naturalism is a wider doctrine than "cognitivism"—the metaethical thesis that ethical claims have a truth-value. For if it turned out that "noncognitivism" is correct, that the fundamental ethical claims are imperative statements, or norms that lack truth value, naturalism would be still be committed to grounding them as obligatory in accordance with condition c). It is for this reason that condition b) and c) are expressed in terms of the disjunctive "true or well justified or well grounded". Hereafter, when we write of ethical truths, we mean to be understood in terms that do not beg the question between cognitivism and noncognitivism.

justify a) and explain the truth or well groundedness of b). To qualify as a naturalist one must treat the theory of natural selection as well established, but it may be supposed that one need not ground the truth of ethical claims on this theory. Darwinian naturalism is a restriction on the more general version of naturalism only in one respect: it holds that the natural facts about the world that explain and underwrite ethical truths are reported by the theory of natural selection and its application to biological data. In section 3, we return to the important question of whether one can be a naturalist without also being a Darwinian naturalist.

Nihilism consists in the following claims: a) normative terms—good, bad, right, duty, etc—do not name real properties of events or things, either natural nor non-natural ones; b) all claims about what is good in itself, or about categorical moral rights or duties, are either false or meaningless; c) the almost universal beliefs that there are such properties and that such claims are true can be “explained away” by appropriate scientific theory. Nihilism takes the form of what Mackie (1977) calls an “error theory.” It does not deny that beliefs about norms and values can motivate people’s actions. It does not deny the felt “internalism” of moral claims, nor does it deny that normative beliefs confer benefits on the people who hold them. Indeed nihilism is consistent with the claim that such beliefs are necessary for human survival, welfare and flourishing. Nihilism only claims that these beliefs, where they exist, are false. It treats morality as instrumentally useful—instrumentally useful for our nonmoral ends or perhaps the nonmoral ends of some other biological systems, such as our genes for example. As such, it must undermine the values we cherish. If Darwinism underwrites nihilism, Dennett cannot be right about Darwinism’s salubrious effects for “the meanings of life”. However nihilism can be, as one might say, “nice”, provided that in its explaining away of ethics, it also shows that we are in fact disposed to behave nicely—to cooperate, be altruistic, show guilt and shame, anger and resentment in just the way we would if some morality were true, right, or real. *Darwinian* nihilism is the thesis that the theory of natural selection and its application to biological data explains why morality is at most an instrumentally useful illusion. According to the Darwinian nihilist, the theory of natural selection can both show that we are in error about the status of moral claims, and, perhaps more importantly, can explain this why the error is so widespread.

Intuitionism is the tendentious label we shall use for a common view about ethics. It shares with naturalism a commitment to two theses: a) normative terms that name intrinsic (as opposed to instrumental) values, and categorical obligations denote real properties of things or acts; b) there are true or at least well justified synthetic propositions about which items or actions instantiate these properties. But unlike naturalism, intuitionism’s epistemology makes it possible for us to have knowledge of a) and b) without the aid of Darwinian, biological, or any other sort of scientifically warranted means, but rather by direct inspection or perception, or “intuition,” whence the label.

Intuitionism of course rejects naturalism’s thesis that the facts which make ethical claims true or objectively binding are scientifically accessible. Accordingly, it constitutes a serious threat to Dennett’s claim that Darwinism is a universal acid. For suppose ethical values or truths may be identified by direct inspection,

perception, pure reason or other means unsanctioned by the epistemology employed by natural science. Then it is open to claim that intuition can provide us with further non-ethical information about factual matters, including the falsity of Darwinism. On the other hand, if Darwinism is truly a universal acid, then it works on epistemologies as well as metaphysical theories. As such it dissolves the epistemology of intuitionism, by excluding the emergence of an epistemic modality that can directly secure access to concrete matters not realized by the natural arrangement of things. We return to this point in section 3 below. So when it comes to ethical value, Darwinians must choose between naturalism and nihilism. There is no *tertium quid*. As noted above, however, almost every Darwinian has preferred naturalism (or a dignified silence) to nihilism and Dennett is no exception. But Dennett more than other Darwinians should be sensitive to the difficulties of naturalism, difficulties that have made naturalism problematic in philosophy since the time of David Hume.

Darwinian nihilism shares with Darwinian naturalism common commitments in metaethics: indeed, they can embrace the same program of research in the explanation of how cooperation arose and morality emerged. The salient features of this program, which Dennett cogently reviews, include Hamilton (1967), Trivers (1971) treatments of the selective advantage of kin and reciprocal altruism in iterated prisoner's dilemmas, Axelrod (1984) accounts of how tit-for tat triumphs in certain simulations, Ruse and Wilson (1989)'s demonstration of how even division in cut-the-cake games constitutes the largest basin of attraction in a selective environment, Wilson and Sober (1998)'s elaboration of how between group selection for cooperation may swamp within-group selection for selfishness, Frank (1989) account of the role of moral emotions as commitment-strategies in prisoner's dilemmas-iterated or not, and Gibbard (1992)'s theory of the content and structure of moral norms. Darwinian naturalism departs from Darwinian nihilism when it goes on to suggest that the natural selection of cooperation, justice, and other normative institutions underwrites some moral claims as true or correct. The nihilist will deny that adaptational explanations can preserve "the values we cherish", and still less that they enable us to construct "sounder versions of our most important ideas" [p. 521]

We may illustrate the differences between naturalism and nihilism by examining Dennett's critique of Thomas Hobbes. Dennett views Hobbes as a greedy sociobiological reductionist; that is, one who seeks to naturalize ethical values and obligations "without the use of cranes", apparently without "whole layers of theory" [p. 81] that will ground ethical value in biological fact while doing justice to the complexities of human behavior and its causes. It is this greediness that leads Dennett to deem Hobbes naturalizing project a failure.

On our view, however, Hobbes had no naturalizing project. He was in fact a moral nihilist. The relevant Hobbesian passages are infamous: "these words of good and evil . . . are ever used with relation to the person that uses them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves [*Leviathan*, Bk 1, chapter 6, *Good, Evil*]." Rights and obligations simply reflect men's "conclusions or theorems concerning what conduces to the conservation and defense of themselves," "*Good and Evil* are

names that signify our appetites and aversion, which in different tempers, customs, and doctrines of men are different” [Leviathan, chapter 15]. As an analysis of ordinary moral language, Hobbes’ account may be found wanting. But his intentions are clear enough: he is giving an instrumental justification of these norms, or as he called them, “laws of nature,” revealing them to be hypothetical imperatives conducive to human survival and satisfaction. On this view Hobbes was not hoping simultaneously to explain “how . . . right and wrong came into existence in the first place”, and to “*justify* a set of ethical norms.” Only the first project was uncontroversially a part of Hobbes’ program. If we agree that *justifying* morality involves more than just showing that morality is a conditionally advantageous policy, then we may say that this justification-project was not among Hobbes’ aims. For this reason he is better treated as a nihilist than a naturalist. And as a mere nihilist, aiming to explain (away) morality, Hobbes would also stand acquitted of the charge of seeking “greedily” to reduce ethical statements and predicates wholly to natural facts and properties.

Ambivalence about the naturalistic fallacy

Scholars rightly hold that we should distinguish Moore (1903) “naturalistic fallacy”, and the “open question” argument on which it is based from Hume’s point about the fallaciousness of inferring ought from is. However, it is this latter Humean claim that Dennett seems to treat as the “naturalistic fallacy” and we will follow this practice. Dennett does not so much reject the “naturalistic fallacy” as regret it. In other words, he does not deny the cogency of the point that you cannot infer “ought” from “is”, rather he prunes the claims of naturalism back just because the inference is fallacious:

According to the standard doctrine, if we stay firmly planted in the realm of facts about the world as it *is*, we will never find any collection of them, taken as axioms, from which any particular ethical conclusion *can be conclusively proven*. You can’t get there from here, any more than you can get from any consistent set of axioms about arithmetic to all the true statements of arithmetic. [p. 467]

This passage expresses acceptance of Hume’s dictum, at least the claim that there are no valid deductive inference from premises about what is the case to conclusions about what ought to be the case. Adding Moore’s open-question argument to Hume’s dictum is sometimes supposed to produce a stronger version according to which factual premises cannot even inductively support normative conclusions. It is in part for this reason that they are often thought to work in tandem. Naturalism must reject either the deductive or the inductive version of Hume’s (and Moore’s) dictum. The naturalist must show that normative conclusions are actually justified either by deduction from factual premises, or inductive inference from them. Dennett accepts the obligation to do this very thing. But what he actually does is something much weaker, as we shall see.

Having conceded that you cannot infer “ought” from “is” with deductive validity, Dennett writes,

Well, so what? We may bring out the force of this rhetorical question with another one, rather more pointed: If “ought” cannot be derived from “is” just what can “ought” be derived from? Does it float, untethered to facts from any other discipline or tradition? Do our moral intuitions arise from some inexplicable ethics module implanted in our brains? That would be a dubious skyhook on which to hand our deepest convictions about what is right and wrong. [p. 467]

Here intuitionism, as we have called it, is rightly rejected. But without pausing to even consider the alternative of nihilism—Darwinian or otherwise—an apparently inductive inference to naturalism is embraced:

From what can “ought” be derived? The most compelling answer is this: ethics must be *somehow* based on an appreciation of human nature—on a sense of what a human being is or might be like, and on what a human being might want to have or want to be. If *that* is naturalism, then naturalism is no fallacy. No one could seriously deny that ethics is responsive to such facts about human nature. [p. 468]

A lot depends here on what Dennett means by “based on.” “Does he merely express a demand that ethics be responsive to human nature? Then it is the obvious and uninteresting point that since “ought to do x” implies “can do x” by contraposition “can’t do x” implied “is not (morally) required to do x”. Thus, for example, there is no obligation to fly unaided because human beings cannot fly unaided. If that is all that is at stake, Dennett’s claim is innocent of the move from ‘is’ to ‘ought’.

But naturalism requires more than “responsiveness to human nature.” It is the thesis that “ought” is derivable (deductively or inductively) from “is”. Naturalism must insist that the naturalistic fallacy is no fallacy, and Darwinian naturalism must show that the theory of natural selection provides the (inductive) support for the truth of ethical claims. Dennett wants to show this, and insists that the only fallacy here is “is not naturalism but rather, any simple minded attempt to rush from facts to values. In other words, the fallacy is *greedy* reductionism of values to facts, rather than reductionism considered more circumspectly, as the attempt to unify our world-view so that our ethical principles don’t clash irrationally with the way the world is.” [p. 468] But can naturalism require no more than that our ethical beliefs not clash irrationally with the way the world is? This is too low a standard for something to count as naturalism. For naturalism to be vindicated, Darwinism must do more than merely reconcile morality and natural selection. Darwinism must underwrite morality and work to justify its claims.

The mere compatibility of ethical truths with the theory of natural selection would of course be acceptable for the intuitionist, but as noted, intuitionism is not a

permissible outcome for the Darwinian naturalist. For if there are ethical truths which escape explanation by naturalism, then at a minimum there will be a range of emergent irreducible facts, forces, causes, that make a difference to human life beyond those that Darwinian science deals with. If such facts and forces exist and can be known to us, there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamed of in Darwinism. If there are ethical truths which escape naturalism, then there are facts about biological systems (us and perhaps other creatures) that are not the result of the operation of a mindless substrate-neutral algorithm Dennett rightly identifies as Darwinism's core. The admission of this one class of exceptions which won't succumb to the universal acid must open the flood-gates to other exceptions—the immaterial mind, vital forces, hidden purposes, omega points, the deity of the theists—that trimmers of and qualifiers on Darwinism (along with its deniers) have sought from A.R. Wallace's day to John Paul II's. It is in fact this implicit and sometimes explicit recognition that mere compatibility of ethical claims and Darwinian theory is not sufficient, coupled with the horror of nihilism, that have driven Darwinians, who should have known better, to commit the naturalistic fallacy.

Of course, the mere compatibility of Darwinism with the claims of ethics we endorse would suffice, if these claims were like the claims, say, of arithmetic. Mathematical truths must be unified into the same worldview with Darwinism, but need not all be naturalized by Darwinism alone or even in part. If we cannot effect this unification as yet, owing to problems about the metaphysics and epistemology of mathematical abstracta, it will be sufficient for the nonce if mathematical claims are shown, in Dennett's words, "not to clash irrationally" with the way Darwinism says "the world *is*." Why then, it may be argued, should we impose a higher standard than mere compatibility with Darwinism on the claims of ethics?

The answer to this question lies in the fundamental difference between ethical truths—specific or general—and mathematical ones. It is a difference that demands that the Darwinian naturalist establish more than mere consistency between Darwinism and the ethical judgments we believe to be true. The difference also shows that in the end Darwinian naturalism is the only game in town for naturalists. There is no scope for a non-Darwinian naturalism, no scope for a theory that treats ethical facts as natural, but accounts for them on the basis of some other natural, factual, scientific but non-Darwinian considerations. This difference between moral truths, if there are any, and other truths, such as for example mathematical ones, shows that all naturalists must in the end be Darwinian naturalists. If Darwinian naturalism fails, there is no alternative non-Darwinian naturalism available. The only alternatives left will be nihilism and intuitionism.

The reason that there is no scope for non-Darwinian naturalism in ethics is that ethical beliefs, whether general or specific, guide conduct that makes a difference for survival and reproduction. In this respect ethical beliefs are quite unlike all but a few truths of arithmetic. Naturalists are committed to the thesis that if there are ethical truths, it must often have been adaptive to believe them. Our capacity to make *true* moral judgments must therefore be wholly or largely the result of the

operation of natural selection. To see why this is the case, consider the two alternatives: (1) our capacity to form true ethical judgments has resulted in spite of the strong deflecting force of natural selection. To believe this alternative is tantamount to denying that capacity to form ethical beliefs has consequences for survival and reproduction or denying the truth of Darwinism in general. Neither move is open to a naturalist of any sort. Or (2) The adaptiveness of our capacity to make moral judgments and their truthfulness are not causally related. On this view the fact that any of our moral judgments are both adaptive and true is a cosmic coincidence. For if natural selection did not connect the truth-makers of our ethical beliefs with our capacity to form such beliefs, it must have shaped us to adopt ethical beliefs because they were adaptive but *not* because they are true. We should accordingly expect that only a vanishingly small fraction of our moral judgments are correct.² And such a conclusion no naturalist—Darwinian or otherwise—who seeks to vindicate our most important and widely shared ethical views can endorse

The upshot of all this is that neither a Darwinian naturalist nor any other kind of naturalist can be satisfied merely to show that ethical truths are consistent with the theory of natural selection. They must show how the adaptationist scenarios of the theory of natural selection constitute at least a significant portion of the truth-makers for the ethical truths they allege we know. For example, suppose one adopted an “ideal-observer” version of naturalism, according to which the natural truth-makers for true ethical judgments are facts about how each and every normal *Homo sapiens* would respond psychologically to some event under so-called “ideal conditions”. Without reference to the Darwinian connection between the “natural” fact about ideal observers and our actual moral beliefs, such a theory cannot claim to be naturalistic. Why? Because there is an undeniable causal connection between on the one hand, psychological response to stimuli, especially of the sort which result in expressions of the (moral) emotions of anger, shame, guilt and disdain (under ideal conditions or otherwise)—and, on the other hand, survival and reproduction. Our dispositions to react affectively to certain situations have been formed, at least in large part, by natural selection. Even the ideal observer naturalists cannot be satisfied with mere consistency between their theory and Darwinism.

This is why, short of simply denying the truth of the theory of natural selection in general, Darwinian naturalism is the only game in town for any naturalist. If Darwinian naturalism fails, the Darwinian is left with a choice between nihilism and intuitionism. And no Darwinian can be satisfied with intuitionism.

The critique of greedy reductionism

Dennett criticizes greedy reductionists like BF. Skinner and E.O. Wilson because, like emergentist sky-hookers, they too seek to dispense with cranes. “What is wrong with Skinner,” Dennett writes, “is not that he tried to base ethics on scientific facts about human nature, but that his attempt was too simplistic! The same defect can be

² We owe this argument to Sharon Street. No agreement with any of the further conclusions we draw from it should however be attributed to her.

seen in another attempt at ethics by another Harvard professor, E.O. Wilson . . . ” [p. 469] The criticism leads one to suppose that Dennett will provide the required crane, once he has shown that Skinner’s and Wilson’s ethics are unsupported by their science. Alas, the implicit promissory note remains unredeemed.

Together with Michael Ruse, Wilson has argued that “Morality, or more strictly our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends” Dennett quotes them:

In an important sense, ethics as we understand it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate . . . Furthermore the way our biology enforces its ends is by making us think that there is an objective higher code to which we are all subject. (Ruse and Wilson (1989), p 51)

Notice that this is an argument for nihilism, not greedy naturalistic reductionism. It gives us an explanation for why we would believe ethics to be real or objective when it is not. As such, it sits uncomfortably with the patently naturalistic view of ethics Wilson adopts elsewhere. But what is interesting in Dennett’s attack on this claim is that he does not argue directly against the claim that ethics is an illusion, or that we have been selected to think it objective when it isn’t (as the Darwinian nihilist believes). Instead he argues against the claim that ethical beliefs obtain *for the benefit of the genes* (as principal beneficiaries) on the grounds that once persons and their memes are on the scene, these too are potential beneficiaries of the emergence of ethical dispositions. This is true enough, and not something any nihilist or greedy reductionist need deny (not even the most monomaniacally selfish gene theorist). However, from this observation Dennett infers that therefore “the truth of an evolutionary explanation [of the emergence of ethics] would not show that our allegiance to ethical principles or a “higher code” was an “illusion”. Also correct as far as it goes. But when we combine an evolutionary account of ethical beliefs with the conception of Darwinian theory as a “universal acid” (which Dennett has argued for in the first 15 chapters of his book) the result is moral nihilism. If all apparently purposive processes, states, events, and conditions are in reality the operation of a purely mechanical substrate neutral algorithm, then as far explanatory tasks go, the only values we need attribute to biological systems are instrumental ones. An evolutionary account of moral belief will not only explain ethics but it will explain it away.

Of course, the Darwinian nihilist accepts that like other phenotypes, once the ethical dispositions emerge, as a result of natural selection, they may variously confer benefits (and costs) on the creatures that evince them independent of their impact on reproductive fitness. All the nihilist requires is that these dispositions initially emerged and persist over evolutionary time scales as a result of an etiology of selection, and that they will disappear if they reduce reproductive fitness for long enough, regardless of the non-reproductive fitness benefits they confer. Persons, as Dennett says, “are not at all bound to answer to the interests of their genes alone-or their memes alone”. True, but all the Darwinian nihilist needs is the admission that under the aspect of evolution, persons must sooner or latter always answer to their

genes. As Wilson wrote, “The genes hold culture on a leash. The leash is very long, but inevitably values will be constrained in accordance with their effects on the human gene pool. [On Human Nature, p.167]” He could have said this by way of a retrospective explanation: values have been constrained by their effects on the gene pool, and the constraints are narrow enough to explain and explain away much of their common features across time and tide.

Dennett however believes that culture-memes-have the power to snap the genetic leash Wilson identifies. But the reason he gives for this conclusion is far too weak: It begins strongly enough, accusing Wilson, and others, like Richard Alexander, who advance a similar argument, of committing not the naturalistic fallacy but the *genetic fallacy*, no pun intended. However, it isn't the genetic fallacy those who explain away ethics biologically are accused of committing.

The traditional genetic fallacy criticism points out that the historical origins of a belief are by themselves no reason to either to substantiate or undercut it. Thus, it is fallacious to infer directly from the fact that selection for reproductive fitness is the cause of our dispositions to advance and honor moral claims, to the claim that ethical propositions are either false or unjustified. Of course Darwinian nihilism makes no such *direct* inference. It makes it indirectly by adding to the historical claims that explain why we embrace our values the further claims that a) one cannot derive moral values from natural facts (the naturalistic fallacy), b) Darwinism is well supported; c) the existence of un-naturalized facts about values is incompatible with Darwinism's universal acidity. From its historical explanation of the emergence of ethical beliefs, together with these auxiliary premises, nihilism infers the conclusion that ethical propositions are false or otherwise unjustified. No genetic fallacy here.

But in Dennett's hands the genetic fallacy turns out to be something different anyway. It is the mistaken claim that since morality arose for the benefit of the genes, it can only benefit the genes: “the massively misleading idea that the *summum bonum* at the source of every chain of practical reasoning is the imperative of our genes. [p. 473]” But this claim is no part of the sociobiologist's claim when he argues that “ethics is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate”. Explaining away ethics is quite different from the suggestion sometimes made by E.O. Wilson, when he is not in nihilist mode, that the survival of the human genome is the “cardinal value”, the *summum bonum*, and that the history of genic selection can ground this valuation. This conclusion is indeed the callow naturalistic fallacy which, in their ambivalence some sociobiologists- like Wilson-commit when they seek to avoid the conclusions of nihilism. Of course the idea that the diversity of our gene pool-whether ‘our’ means the genes only of *Homo sapiens*, or mammals, vertebrates, . . . or animals, or the biosphere as a whole-is the *summum bonum* can never be grounded in any matter of fact. However, the important point here is that the naturalistic fallacy isn't the genetic fallacy. You can commit either one without the other. And the mistake which Dennett is really accusing Wilson, Alexander, Skinner, and other greedy reductionists of, is not the genetic fallacy but the plain old Naturalistic Fallacy, the one his own commitment to naturalism is going to require Dennett to commit.

Dennett's naturalistic non-fallacy

Dennett might make good use of the logical point that just because morality emerged owing to the advantages it conferred on the replicating lineage of genes of the organisms who hearken to its teachings, it does not follow that morality fails to advantage these people as well as their genes. Indeed he might go on to identify the benefits to such organisms, and to show how the benefit to people, instead of just their genes, provides the factual basis from which to infer the justification of morality. But note, it cannot just be the instrumental justification for morality; it cannot be the claim that being moral serves the subjective, selfish, personal interests, tastes, preferences, or other adventitious goals of humanity. For that is what no nihilist-Darwinian or otherwise—will deny. Dennett's project has to show that morality secures some intrinsically, not just instrumentally valuable goals, ends, purposes identified as such by Darwinism, or biology, or science. This is Dennett's task.

What Dennett is obliged to produce for us is a crane or cranes that can erect what those who hanker for skyhooks demand: ethical truth, intrinsic value, categorical obligation. How does he attempt to do this? He asks the question explicitly, as the title of the first section of the penultimate chapter of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*: "Can ethics be naturalized?" He begins by pointing out that there are

no discoverable and confirmable ethical truths, no forced moves or Good tricks. Great edifices of ethical theory have been constructed, criticized and defended, revised and extended by the best methods of rational inquiry . . . but they do not yet command the untroubled assent of all those who have studied them carefully." [p. 495]

He suggests:

Perhaps we can get some clues about the status and prospects of ethical theory by reflecting on what we have seen to be the limitations of the great design process that has ethicists among its products to date. What follows, we may ask, from the fact that ethical decision making, like all actual processes of exploration in design space, must be to some degree myopic and time-pressured." [p. 495]

The answer is nothing. Nothing of relevance to the present question of naturalizing ethics follows unless an inference can move from is—from actual processes in design space—to ought, to normative claims of one or more ethical theories. What the reflection proposed can teach us is that, as with other biological phenomena, the environmental irregularities, the reflexive character of selection and counter-selection, the ever increasing volume of design space occupied and attainable, all undercut any useful generalizations about universally optimal or even generally satisfactory instrumental stratagems in our strategic games against nature or against

other strategizers. “No remotely compelling system of ethics has ever been made *computationally tractable*, even indirectly, for real world moral problems.” This is not only true, it is what evolutionary biology should lead us to expect. Given the variegated character of the environment over even short time spans, no single behavioral strategy for attaining a given outcome will always work, or even usually work to attain it. And even if something works to attain the aim of some organism often enough over long enough a period of time, some other organism will evolve a strategy that takes advantage of the first bit of behavior to the disadvantage of the first organism. If anything, these considerations suggest that there is nothing to naturalize by way of moral theory. If there are ethical truths to be naturalized they will not be the systematic claims of Mill or Kant, but the singular, particular claims we make about the rightness or wrongness of individual actions and outcomes. But that fact does not free Dennett from the obligation to show how biological facts underwrite the truth of even these singular judgments.

But rather than discharging this obligation, Dennett instead turns to the task of showing us, by a well-wrought analogy, how we *actually make* these particular confident local moral judgments. The example, of choosing the best qualified applicant from 250,000 candidates, “is meant to illustrate, enlarged and in slow motion, the ubiquitous features of real-time decision making.” [p. 502] Decision processes, Dennett tells us, are matters of satisficing, in Simon’s now famous term. “Time-pressured decision making is like that all *the way down*. Satisficing extends even back behind the fixed biological design of the decision-making agent, to the design “decisions” that Mother Nature settled for when designing us and other organisms.” [p. 503]. This appreciation of the nature of actual decision making leads Dennett to the question “how, then, can we hope to regulate, or at least improve, our ethical decision making, if it is irremediably heuristic, time pressured, and myopic.” Dennett will go on to provide an answer to this question. But in thinking about it, we need to bear firmly in mind that this is still not the project he has set himself. Showing how we can improve our moral decision making presupposes some standard—whether truth, correctness, justifiability—to which the improvement will enable our actual ethical decision making more nearly to approach. But that standard needs to be naturalized to begin with.

What we need in moral decision-making, Dennett tells us, are “conversation-stoppers”—devices that put an end to internal debate, reflection, calculation. Because of natural variation in the environment and our own cognitive and emotional equipment, “we cannot expect there to be a single stable solution to such a design problem [of creating the internal conversation stopper], but rather a variety of uncertain and temporary equilibria, with conversation-stoppers tending to accrete pearly layers of supporting dogma which themselves cannot withstand extended scrutiny but do actually serve on occasion, blessedly, to deflect and terminate consideration”. For example, “But that would violate a person’s *right*.” is such an internal conversation/deliberation stopper. And here Dennett recalls the infamous and accurate remark of Bentham that rights are nonsense and natural rights are nonsense on stilts. It’s nonsense, Dennett agrees but, “*good* nonsense—and good only because it is on stilts, only because it happens to have the “political” power to keep rising about the meta-reflections—not indefinitely, but usually “high enough”—to

reassert itself as a compelling—that is, conversation-stopping-first principle.” [p. 507]

It will not have escaped the reader that what Dennett is arguing is that “the moral claim of rights, natural or otherwise” is *instrumentally* good nonsense, good for putting an end to deliberation about which among prospective actions to choose. But this isn’t the required task. It is true that Buridan’s ass lacked a conversation stopper which might have enhanced its fitness, reproductive or otherwise. But lacking such a stopper was not immoral, only ineffective. This is not the sort of endorsement of rights which is wanted in the present case. “Having rules works-somewhat-and not having rules doesn’t work at all,” [p. 507] concludes Dennett. And having rules must be a matter, not of rational acceptance on the basis of well-supported evidence, but “some unquestioned dogmatism that will render agents impervious to the subtle invasion of hyper-rationality.” [p. 508] Explaining rules as the reflection of a convenient but unquestioned dogmatism does not advance any naturalization project.

Still owing us a naturalization of value or obligation, Dennett comes to the final chapter of *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, where he again invokes his apt account of natural selection using cranes to lift lineages of biological systems and their traits through the subregions of design space to ones where good, better and (locally) best adaptations lie. The trajectory of this path through design space produced, among other things J.S. Bach, who is “precious not because he had within his brain a magic pearl of genius-stuff, a skyhook, but because he was, or contained, an utterly idiosyncratic structure of cranes, made of cranes, made of cranes, made of cranes.” [p. 512]. But is it impertinent to ask why the fact that his genius is the result of cranes within cranes within cranes makes it precious? Surely the assertion without argument that its origins in the algorithm of natural selection make Bach’s genius precious to us or precious *simpliciter* is another instance of the genetic fallacy. To see the point quite palpably, note that Stalin or Osama bin Laden, or Michael Behe, or your favorite villain, is also “an utterly idiosyncratic structure of cranes, made of cranes, made of cranes, made of cranes.”

Dennett asks the question of “how much of what we value is explicable in terms of its designedness”. There is an ambiguity here. Are we seeking a Darwinian explanation of our valuations or a Darwinian explanation of the emergence of the objects that our values lead us *correctly* to prize? In the discussion of Bach it sounds like the latter. What Dennett seeks is the path of random variation and natural selection through design space that resulted in those things we correctly value—correctly because they have value above and beyond our subjective appraisals of them. He says that asking this question runs the “omnipresent risk of greedy reductionism”. This is the risk of trying to show how objective value can be underwritten by natural facts and without cranes. Presumably, therefore, Dennett can be expected finally to introduce or identify the cranes that will do this job ungreedily. For this is the job that needs doing. But instead he re-identifies or mis-identifies the project as one of explaining our subjective appraisals instead of the objective values of the objects we in fact prize. He tells us, “the Design Space perspective certainly doesn’t explain everything about value, but it lets us see what happens when we try to unify our sense of value in a single perspective. On the one

hand, it helps to explain our intuition that uniqueness or individuality is “intrinsically” valuable. On the other hand it lets us confirm all the incommensurable values that people talk about.” [p. 513]

But explaining our intuition that something is intrinsically valuable is not what is required here. To vindicate naturalism Dennett owes us a set of considerations which underwrite that intuition as *correct*. In fact Dennett recognizes that Darwinism cannot provide answers to questions about absolute or comparative intrinsic value. But he doesn’t recognize that its silence on these questions is due to the non-existence of the requisite cranes, not our failure hitherto to detect them: “I do not suggest that Darwinian thinking gives us answers to such questions [as the preferability of euthanasia over heroic measures for deformed infants]; I do suggest that Darwinian thinking helps us see why the traditional hope of solving these problems (finding a moral algorithm) is forlorn.” [p. 514] This hardly sounds like naturalism.

In the last few pages of *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* Dennett advocates the value of many things: “Among the precious artifacts worth saving are whole cultures themselves . . . several thousand languages”, species, religions traditions (including those with a previous or current track record of intolerance and anti-Darwinism), even a certain song he learned as a child. He writes: “. . . we can take steps to conserve what is valuable in every culture without keeping alive (or virulent) all its weaknesses.” But what purely naturalistic (and non-instrumental) considerations can provide grounds—inductive or deductive—for the conclusion that these things ought to be preserved for reasons independent of their local adaptiveness?

The nihilist holds that there is no answer to this question and that is why Dennett cannot answer it, despite the need he feels to do so. The nihilist goes on to observe that Dennett doesn’t really have to answer it, for in the universal acid he has a doctrine that renders superfluous the need to infer from “is” to “ought”. Indeed, the way Darwinism cuts through all the cant about intrinsic value—simple, complex, evident or hidden, widely instanced or uniquely realized, is evident on the very last pages of *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*. There Dennett confronts for the last time the wishful thinking of ambivalent theologian and physicist Paul Davies. Davies simply cannot accept that a cosmically purposeless universe could have, let alone did, find its way through design space to something so important as the human mind. Davies conclusion is that the human mind is too important to be the result of the long-term operation of a substrate neutral algorithm. Here is Dennett’s last chance to grasp the nettle of nihilism. Again, he declines. Instead he first agrees with Davies on the overwhelming importance, excellence, presumably intrinsic value of the human mind. Then he notes, with undoubted logic, that Davies assumes without argument that what has been produced through the operation of blind variation and natural selection cannot have the required importance, excellence, or value. True enough, but again the mere consistency of natural selection and intrinsic value is not enough to ground Dennett’s conclusion. He needs to show that Darwinian processes do actively confer upon the mind this value, not merely that they are compatible with its having this value. But Dennett seems blind to this lacuna in his argument, for he writes, “I have argued that Darwin has shown us how, in fact, *everything* of importance is just such a product.”

Having described so effectively the systematic deprivation of design in nature by the dint of uncovering the substrate-algorithm which eats through all purposes, Dennett concludes:

Darwin offers us an explanation of how God is distributed in the whole of nature: it is in the distribution of Design throughout nature, creating in the tree of life, an utterly unique and irreplaceable creation, an actual pattern in the immeasurable reaches of design space that could never be exactly duplicated in its many details. Is this Tree of Life a God one could worship? . . . Is it something sacred? Yes, say I with Nietzsche. I could not pray to it. But I can stand in affirmation of its magnificence. This world is sacred.” [p. 520]

The prose is moving and sincere. But in the cold light of philosophical scrutiny, it won't wash. It doesn't do the work Dennett requires. Sacred to us, for example is not the same as sacred *tout court* or sacred *simpliciter*. The indubitable fact that chance and necessity together have produced one or a vast number of unique things is by itself no reason that these things have value or impose obligation just in virtue of their origin, their existence, or their uniqueness. All this is obvious enough. But what may be harder to focus on in the moving prose is that Dennett has really provided no argument for thinking to the contrary. What he has produced are strong arguments for thinking that everything of importance to us, including (indeed especially) our ethical beliefs, is just a product of mindless purposeless forces. If, as Dennett must agree, these are the only forces that there are in the universe, importance is explainable without residue in terms of mindless purposelessness. And if there is no residue left to explain, we can answer the challenge of the anti-Darwinian, “You'll *never* explain *this!*” [p. 521] at least to our own Darwinian satisfaction. There is nothing left of morality to explain.

Conclusion: Nice nihilism

Dennett's failure to substantiate naturalism does not by itself establish nihilism. But in light of every naturalist's obligation to be a Darwinian about how ethical beliefs emerged in the first place, Dennett's failure makes Darwinian nihilism a good bet. Darwinian nihilism departs from naturalism only in declining to endorse our morality or any other as true or correct. It must decline to do so because it holds that the explanation of how our moral beliefs arose also explains away as mistaken the widespread belief that moral claims are true. The Darwinian explanation becomes the Darwinian nihilist's “explaining away” when it becomes apparent that the best explanation—blind variation and natural selection—for the emergence of our ethical belief does not require that these beliefs have truth-makers. To turn the Darwinian explanation into an “explaining away” the nihilist need only add the uncontroversial scientific principle that if our best theory of why people believe P does not require that P is true, then there are no grounds to believe P is true.

It is worth noting by way of conclusion, that nihilism need not be a particularly disquieting doctrine. Embracing nihilism is not, as is commonly believed, a prescription for a-morality or immorality. Nihilism is not a prescription or proscript-

tion of any conduct. The nihilist may well admit that accepting categorical and hypothetical imperatives may often serve the parochial interests of oneself and others. To be an ethical nihilist commits one to nothing more than the denial of objective or intrinsic moral values and categorical imperatives.

Darwinian nihilism explains away ethics by showing that our ethical beliefs reflect dispositions very strongly selected for over long periods, which began well before the emergence of hominids, or indeed perhaps primates (*vide* the vampire bat). These dispositions are so “deep” that for most people most of the time, it is impossible to override them, even when it is in our individual self-interest to do so, still less when there is no self-interested reason to do so. Hence, the Darwinian nihilist expects that most people are conventionally moral, and that even the widespread acceptance of the truth of Darwinian nihilism would have little or no effect on this expectation. Most of us just couldn’t persistently be mean, even if we tried. And we have no reason to try.

But nice nihilism is hardly “a stronger, sounder version of our most important ideas.” If it is the right conclusion then we must respond to Dennett’s final question “Does Darwin’s idea turn out to be, in the end, just what we need in our attempt to preserve . . . the values we cherish? [p. 521]” with a simple “no.”

Acknowledgements

Thanks to a referee for *Biology and Philosophy*, David Kaplan, Frederic Bouchard, Geoff Sayre-McCord, and his graduate seminar at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for helpful comments. Rosenberg gratefully acknowledges support of research on this subject by the Social Policy and Philosophy Center at Bowling Green State University. Since nihilism is true, no one is morally responsible for the remaining errors.

References

- Axelrod R. 1984. *The Evolution of Cooperation*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor.
- Dennett D.C. 1995. *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*. Simon and Schuster, New York.
- Frank R. 1989. *Passions Within Reason*. W W Norton, New York.
- Gibbard A. 1992. *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Hamilton W.D. 1964. “The genetic evolution of social behavior”. *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7: 1–52.
- Hamilton W.D. 1967. “Extraordinary sex ratios”. *Science* 156: 477–488.
- Hobbes T. 1651. *Leviathan*.
- Mackie J.L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Moore G.E. 1903. *Principia Ethica*. Routledge, London.
- Ruse and Wilson 1989. “Evolution of ethics”. *New Scientist* 17: 51.
- Skyrms B. 1996. *Evolution of the Social Contract*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Street S. 2002. “Normativity and Life: The Metaethical Implications of Darwinism.”.
- Trivers R.L. 1971. “The evolution of reciprocal altruism”. *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46: 35–57.
- Wilson D.S. and Sober E. 1998. *Unto Others*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

He co-authored an article in 2003, "Darwin's Nihilistic Idea: Evolution and the Meaninglessness of Life," in which he dismissed morality as an illusion. However, Rosenberg assured us that moral meaninglessness has no effect on our behavior, because "Most of us just couldn't persistently be mean, even if we tried." Rosenberg needs to take some of my history courses or just read the news if he doesn't think many people could be mean to each other. Further, in a 2013 debate with William Lane Craig, Rosenberg objected to some of Craig's arguments as "morally offensive," because some of his relatives were murdered in the Holocaust. But if life is meaningless and morality is an illusion, why does it matter if Hitler killed millions? Darwin's nihilistic idea: evolution and the meaninglessness of life. Authors. Tamler Sommers. Alex Rosenberg. Content type: OriginalPaper. Published: 01 November 2003. Pages: 653 - 668. A new group-selection model for the evolution of homosexuality. Authors. Jeff Kirby. Content type: OriginalPaper. Published: 01 November 2003. Pages: 683 - 694. Adaptationism, Adaptation, and Optimality. Darwin's Dangerous Idea book. Read 287 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. In a book that is both groundbreaking and accessible, Dani... Goodreads helps you keep track of books you want to read. Start by marking "Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life" as Want to Read: Want to Read saving! Want to Read. A copy of Charles Darwin's notebook containing his idea of an evolutionary tree. The notebook is in the American Museum of Natural History in New York City. Darwin began work on a series of secret notebooks containing his thoughts about the evolutionary process. Darwin would later say that this work caused him to realize the struggle for limited resources was a fact of life. He said small changes took place in individual animals. Changes that helped them survive would continue.