

Can Morality Be Darwinized? 03/25/2010

March 25, 2010 — There's a cottage industry within the Darwin empire that tries to explain morality in terms of natural selection. Hardly a week passes without some new paper trying to explain why humans reward moral behavior and punish immoral behavior. Some try to do it by finding morality in animals, as if to portray a continuity in moral motions between bacteria, fish, insects, birds, rats, apes, and *Homo sapiens*. Others try to model morality on game theory. How well do these attempts succeed? Can they explain the outpouring of support for victims of Haiti? Can they explain the soldier who gives his life for his friends? Can they explain the person facing a firing squad for having given aid to the persecuted?

1. **Unselfish molecules:** One of the most extreme continuity approaches attributed unselfishness to molecules. This bases morality back at the origin of life itself: "Unselfish molecules may have helped give birth to the genetic material of life," announced [PhysOrg](#). When those RNA strands were struggling to get together, according to Nicholas V. Hud of the Georgia Institute of Technology, small molecules might have unselfishly acted as "molecular midwives" to enable the base pairs to bond. It doesn't appear that Hud was intending this model as anything beyond a metaphor, but he visualized a rudimentary form of morality right at the start: "a sort of 'unselfish' molecule that was not part of the first genetic polymers, but was critical to their formation."
2. **Evolutionary forces:** A recent example of the genre is found in [PhysOrg](#) and [Science Daily](#). "**Researchers have long been puzzled by large societies in which strangers routinely engage in voluntary acts of kindness, respect and mutual benefit even though there is often an individual cost involved.**" both articles began, ignoring any input from theology. "While **evolutionary forces** associated with kinship and reciprocity can explain such cooperative behavior among other primates, **these forces do not easily explain** similar behavior in large, unrelated groups, like those that most humans live in."

Enter the theory of Richard McElreath at UC Davis. He and his team have it figured out in terms of market forces, religious beliefs and criminal law. Their paper in *Science* used the E-word in the title: "Markets, Religion, Community Size, and **the Evolution of Fairness and Punishment**,"¹ and extensively throughout. Norms evolved; and with them, "Recent work has also tentatively proposed that certain religious institutions, beliefs, and rituals may have coevolved with the norms that support large-scale societies and broad exchange." They spoke of "our evolutionary history" and "Evolutionary approaches" to understanding our "evolved psychology" expressed in the "evolution of social complexity," – evolution here, there, and everywhere.

It should be understood that *fairness, norms, religion, trust* and other moral terms were used without reference to absolute standards. They are mere props in a behavioral model seeking to understand how evolutionary forces produce observed behaviors. They treated these words as mathematical terms: e.g., "Theoretical arguments suggest that punishment (MAO) should be related more directly to the natural logarithm of CS [community size], because the effectiveness of reputational systems decays in rough proportion to this variable." The "experiments" they talked about were really games: "we used **three experiments** that were **designed to measure individuals' propensities for fairness** and their willingness to punish unfairness across 15 populations that vary in their degree of market integration and their participation in world religions," they said. "Our three experiments are the **Dictator, Ultimatum, and Third-Party Punishment Games**." Volunteers in these made-up games acted as proxy lab rats for real human populations under evolutionary forces. (The reader should remember that "evolutionary forces" are passive like the bumpers in a pinball game.)

The study, funded in part by taxpayer dollars via the National Science Foundation, "found that overt punishment, religious beliefs that can act as a form of psychological punishment and market integration each were correlated with fairness in the experiments." It doesn't appear that "fairness" was given any non-question-begging definition in their model. Those punished probably thought it was unfair. And was it fair for the researchers to take taxpayer dollars to treat their fellow human beings as lab rats?

Karla Hoff of the World Bank, commenting on this paper in the same issue of *Science*,² saw that same evolutionary forces in her vision: "A society is not just a random group of people with a shared territory," she said. "It is a group that shares cognitive frames and social norms. **We cannot know for certain how fairly our ancestors in foraging bands behaved** in situations lacking relationship information, but Henrich *et al.* **bring us a closer understanding** by studying people in **simple societies** that may be very like those of **our early ancestors**."

3. **Greenbeard altruism:** The prior week in *Science*,³ Stuart A. West and Andy Gardner of Oxford gave a more traditional Darwinian account of altruism. They defended Hamilton's theory of inclusive fitness that "showed how natural selection could lead to behaviors that decrease the relative fitness of the actor and also either benefit (altruism) or harm (spite) other individuals." All they felt they had to do was clean up a few contentious issues:

Here, **we show how recent work has resolved three key debates**, helping **clarify** how Hamilton's theoretical overview **links to real-world examples, in organisms ranging from bacteria to humans: Is the evolution of extreme altruism, represented by the sterile workers of social insects, driven by genetics or ecology? Does spite really exist in nature? And, can altruism be favored between individuals who are not close kin but share a 'greenbeard' gene for altruism?**

the death of his wife after 40 years of marriage did he struggle to understand the meaning of Christ's death on the cross for him personally. This point should be noted by creationists and by those in the "intelligent design" movement. Just knowing there is a Creator is not the same as knowing the Creator personally. Facts are not enough. Each person must take the step beyond the evidence to trust in the Person to whom the evidence points.

Though David Brewster was intellectually convinced of the truth of the Bible and the divinity of Christ, he had a contentious and argumentative streak. The work of the Holy Spirit was not evident in his life. After diligent study of the Scriptures in his sorrow over his bereavement, he understood that he needed to trust the death and resurrection of Christ alone for his salvation: not his science, not his fame, not his intellectual knowledge. As each pilgrim must do to enter the door of salvation, he confessed his sin personally and gave his life unreservedly and completely to Christ. Only then did real evidence of regeneration begin. He grew less opinionated and more gracious, more peaceful and contented. The last years of his life were characterized by dynamic and confident faith and infectious love for Jesus Christ, his *personal* Lord and Savior.

One conviction remained constant throughout his 86-year life: the harmony of science and Scripture as means to know God. Brewster denied there were contradictions between the two. When confronted with alleged contradictions, he argued for the deficiency of science, not the Bible; any discrepancy was due to imperfect understanding or faulty interpretation, not the trustworthiness of God's Word. On his deathbed, he lamented the growing skepticism among men of science. "Few received the truth of Jesus," he said. "But why? It was the pride

That odd “greenbeard” term refers to any genetic marker (such as a green beard) that – well, let them explain: “Dawkins proposed the hypothetical example of a gene that gives rise to a green beard while simultaneously prompting individuals with green beards to direct cooperation toward other green-bearded individuals.” One of their diagrams even includes cartoon figures of men, some with green beards and some without (see “Beard Chromodynamics,” [03/31/2006](#)). They dispensed with the problem of “falsebeards” (cheats) who might sport the marker without performing the behavior, thus reaping the benefit without paying the cost. They said altruistic greenbeards have been found in slime molds, yeast, bacteria, and a lizard – but the greenbeard trait is amoral. It could just as well be a marker for spite.

It’s clear that West and Gardner are in the continuity camp: i.e., they view human morality as continuous with animal behavior observed in social insects and microbes. So is morality due to genetics or ecology? Both, they concluded. Did they miss something in their [either-or](#) formulation? Whatever; right from the opening sentence, their paper started on a Darwinian foot: “Darwin’s (1) theory of natural selection explains both the process and the purpose of adaptation.” That (1) in the quote gave pride of place to Darwin’s *Origin of Species* as first entry in the list of references. They also praised Darwin later (after discussing Hamilton’s and Fisher’s extensions to selection theory), saying, “inclusive fitness is not simply a concept that relates to interactions between relatives; it is **our modern interpretation of Darwinian fitness**, providing a general theory of adaptation.” (See “Fitness for Dummies,” [10/29/2002](#)).

4. **Evolving morals:** The most recent article in the evolution-morality tale genre was Paul Bloom’s Opinion article in today’s *Nature*,⁴ “How do morals change?” Right at the outset, he asked, “Where does morality come from?” For answers, he looked to atheist philosopher David Hume (certainly not to Moses or Jesus), noting that “Babies as young as six months judge individuals on the way that they treat others and even one-year-olds engage in spontaneous altruism.” To many psychologists, Bloom says, the fact that “a rudimentary moral sense is universal and emerges early” means it is a non-rational (i.e., unreasoned) aspect of our biology. We rationalize it later; but really, according to some, “**we have little conscious control over our sense of right and wrong.**” Theologians used to refer to this as a conscience.

Bloom thinks this view of morality, “in its **wholesale rejection of reason**,” will be proved wrong. Why? Because it cannot explain why morality evolves, he argued. We can change our minds about moral standards. We can be persuaded, and persuade others. He pointed to evolving views of racial minorities and homosexuality as examples. Not even the “contact hypothesis” (that our views evolve as our circle of contacts enlarges) explains this. “**It doesn’t account for how our moral attitudes can change towards those with whom we never directly associate** – for example, **why some of us give money and even blood to people with whom we have no contact and little in common.**” He even found flaws in the typical Darwinian explanations for morality: “There have been **attempts to explain such long-distance charity through mechanisms such as indirect reciprocity and sexual selection**, which suggest that individuals gain reproductive benefit from building a reputation for being good or helpful. But this **begs the question of why such acts are now seen as good when they were not in the past.**”

What is missing, Bloom argued, is the role of deliberate persuasion in morality. “**Stories emerge** because people arrive at certain views and strive to convey them to others,” he explained. “It is **this generative capacity that contemporary psychologists have typically ignored.**” He sees humans as “**natural storytellers, [who] use narrative to influence others**, particularly their own children.” But what about his initial question of infants engaging in spontaneous altruism? And how can we be sure he is not telling us a story himself? Whatever questions might be posed back to Bloom, he is one of very few evolutionists seeing shortcomings in a strict materialistic or behavioristic account of human morality. “Psychologists have correctly emphasized that moral views make their impact by being translated into emotion,” he ended. “**A complete theory must explain where these views come from in the first place.**” Though he spoke of morals evolving, he offered no Darwinian theory for them.

In all but the last of these papers, preachers and theologians were assigned a status no different than worker bees in a hive, fruiting bodies in a slime mold, or yeast cells in dough. What a different interpretation has arisen these days in the Apostle Paul’s proverb, “A little leaven leavens the whole lump” ([Galatians 5:9](#)).

1. Henrich, Ensminger, McElreath et al., “Markets, Religion, Community Size, and the Evolution of Fairness and Punishment,” *Science*, 19 March 2010: Vol. 327, no. 5972, pp. 1480-1484, DOI: 10.1126/science.1182238.

2. Karla Hoff, “Fairness in Modern Society,” *Science*, 19 March 2010: Vol. 327, no. 5972, pp. 1467-1468, DOI: 10.1126/science.1188537.

3. Stuart A. West and Randy Gardner, “Altruism, Spite, and Greenbeards,” *Science*, 12 March 2010: Vol. 327, no. 5971, pp. 1341-1344, DOI: 10.1126/science.1178332.

4. Paul Bloom, “Opinion: How do morals change?”, *Nature*, 464, 490 (25 March 2010) | doi:10.1038/464490a.

The Darwinians never include themselves in their models, or their models would implode. They presume to teach the rest of humanity from some exalted plane of science. Yet if they were consistent, we would have to conclude their scientific reasoning is also a behavior determined by natural selection. (Notice that they devised games for their human subjects, but did not ask what game they themselves were pawns in.) To them, morality is just an effect of an essentially amoral process. It’s no different from what happens in any other organism. In fact, Darwinian reasoning kind of resembles a slime mold in a sandwich, or a fruit fly larva population in an apple.

of intellect—straining to be wise above what is written; it forgets its own limits, and steps out of its province. How little the wisest of mortals knew—of anything! How preposterous for worms to think of fathoming the counsels of the Almighty! Looking ahead to his earthly end, he said, “I shall see Jesus, who created all things; Jesus, who made the worlds!” His family heard him express his innermost feelings, filled with joy and confidence: “I have had the Light for many years, and oh! how bright it is! I feel so safe, so satisfied!”

David Brewster’s epitaph is fitting for a man who had spent so many years studying light, vision, and optics. Quoting Psalm 27:1, it reads simply, “THE LORD IS MY LIGHT.”

Credit: This short biography is adapted primarily from the excellent chapter on the life of David Brewster by George Mulfinger and his daughter Julia Mulfinger Orozco, in *Christian Men of Science* (Ambassador Emerald, 2001), ch. 3, pp. 49-68. Incidentally, Brewster was also a historian of science. He wrote works on the lives of Brahe, Kepler and Newton.

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A Concise Guide to Understanding Evolutionary Theory

You can observe a lot by just watching.
– Yogi Berra

First Law of Scientific Progress

The advance of science can be measured by the rate at which exceptions to previously held laws accumulate.

Corollaries:

1. Exceptions always outnumber rules.
2. There are always exceptions to established exceptions.
3. By the time one masters the exceptions, no one recalls the rules to which they apply.

Darwin’s Law

It's ironic that these Darwinians often refer to yeast behavior in their evolutionary models of altruism, because their views are like the spreading, corrupting influence often used metaphorically in Scripture of leaven. Jesus said to his disciples, "Beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" ([Matthew 16:6-12](#)), referring to their doctrines. Today's disciples need to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, otherwise known as Darwinists. The other metaphor Jesus used was the gradual spread of the kingdom of the God through the world, silently like a small bit of leaven in dough ([Matthew 13:33](#)). Today's disciples need to beware of the corrupting leaven of Darwinism, while working to spread their beneficial influence through the world. It's the battle of the leavens.*

*If the Christian leaven won, the Darwinists, on purely theoretical grounds, could not complain. Why? Because evolution is what evolution does. The defeat of Darwinism would fit their model. The Christians would be the altruists winning against the cheaters. So why fight it, Darwinists? Stop cheating and let the good guys win. In fact, join the good guys and help them out, to increase the fitness of the population. Step one: abandon Darwinism.

Next headline on: [Darwin and Evolution](#) • [Bible and Theology](#)



Recall the biggest cosmic mysteries of 2003 ([03/25/2003](#)). While you're at it, see [03/12/2003](#), [03/06/2003](#) and [03/03/2003](#). Science hasn't made much progress in 7 years; these things are still just as mysterious today (at least to some people).

Archaeologist Employs Design Detection with Little Evidence

03/24/2010

March 24, 2010 — There are hundreds of large stone spheres in Costa Rica, some up to 8 feet in diameter weighing 16 tons. There are no written records or tribal traditions about them. John Hoopes, an anthropologist at the University of Kansas, has been studying these spheres for a long time. According to [PhysOrg](#), he's had to dispel myths about them, that they are related to Stonehenge or Easter Island or Atlantis, or came from extraterrestrials. "Myths are really based on a lot of very rampant speculation about imaginary ancient civilizations or visits from extraterrestrials," he said.

Nevertheless, he thinks they have special value to humanity and should be protected with U.N. World Heritage Status. He doesn't know when they were made, or by whom. They seem to be associated with pottery from pre-Columbian tribes, but no one knows who made them, when, or why they were made. Tribes living in the area have no oral traditions about them. Professor Hoopes acknowledged that they could have been made long before the artifacts surrounding them. He has detected marks on some of them he thinks are from hammer stones. They are very close to perfect spheres, though they can vary from perfect by about two inches.

Professor Hoopes should be fired for not doing his job as a scientist. He's bringing science to a stop by assuming intelligent design made the spheres. If they were designed, who is the designer? And who designed the designer? Are we supposed to believe an intelligent designer wasted his time making round rocks? If he doesn't know what they were used for, how can he claim they were designed?

A scientist is supposed to look for natural explanations for natural objects. These stones are perfectly natural. They are not angelic material. There are plenty of known natural forces that can make spheres; all you need is a centripetal force applied evenly over a material. That's why moons and planets are spherical. The stones could be concretions, growing outward from a central core by mineralization. They could have been irregular stones that rolled around in a bowl-shaped valley, then were distributed when the land rose up later. Natural explanations abound that could be applied to explain these stones without resorting to the myth of intelligent design. Professor Hoopes' designer did a pretty lousy job – the spheres are not perfect.

As for the alleged hammer marks, that's another example of Professor Hoopes' taking the easy way out. Even if no one saw the marks being formed, there are plenty of natural forces – woodpeckers, exfoliation, lightning strikes, whatever – that should always be considered in scientific explanations. Haven't we learned anything since Darwin conquered Paley? If Hoopes doesn't have a good enough imagination to come up with a naturalistic story, he doesn't belong in science. He should be scorned, ridiculed, vilified, marginalized and expelled.

Next headline on: [Intelligent Design](#)

Beetle Pulls 1,141 Times Its Weight

03/23/2010

March 23, 2010 — Ever watch those contest shows for the [World's Strongest Man](#)? Compared to dung beetles, they're wimps. Scientists at Queen Mary, University of London found that the strongest beetle tested could pull an astonishing 1,141 times its own weight – "the equivalent of a 70kg person lifting 80 tonnes (the same as six full double-decker buses)," reported [PhysOrg](#).

The strength of an individual beetle was found to be a function of diet and exercise, just as with humans: "Even the strongest beetles were reduced to feeble weaklings when put on a poor diet for a few days." From there, the article descended into a lurid story of how this super strength is all due to sexual games.

Darwin's Law

Nature will tell you a direct lie if she can.
Bloch's Extension
So will Darwinists.

Finagle's Creed

Science is true. Don't be misled by facts.

Finagle's 2nd Law

No matter what the anticipated result, there will always be someone eager to (a) misinterpret it, (b) fake it, or (c) believe it happened according to his own pet theory.

Finagle's Rules

3. Draw your curves, then plot your data.
4. In case of doubt, make it sound convincing.
6. Do not believe in miracles – rely on them.

Murphy's Law of Research

Enough research will tend to support your theory.

Maier's Law

If the facts do not conform to the theory, they must be disposed of.

Corollaries:

1. The bigger the theory, the better.
2. The experiments may be considered a success if no more than 50% of the observed measurements must be discarded to obtain a correspondence with the theory.

Eddington's Theory

The number of different hypotheses erected to explain a given biological phenomenon is inversely proportional to the available knowledge.

Young's Law

All great discoveries are made by mistake.

Corollary

The greater the funding, the longer it takes to make the mistake.

Peer's Law

The solution to a problem changes the nature of the problem.

Peter's Law of Evolution

Competence always contains the seed of incompetence.

Weinberg's Corollary

An expert is a person who avoids the small errors while sweeping on to the grand fallacy.

Souder's Law

Repetition does not establish validity.

Cohen's Law

What really matters is