Evolution, Morality, and Historiographic Modes[1,2]

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How have we evolved to approximate what we regard as moral animals? Although this major book treats some other aspects of the history of evolutionary approaches to behavior, its focus is on the history and philosophy of the evolution of morality itself. Richards also makes explicit a modified kind of historiography and uses the book to exemplify this methodology. Not surprisingly, Darwin receives more attention than anyone else, but Spencer is taken seriously for once. (This is a somewhat heroic task whatever its merits; Spencer's writing is soporific.) Other workers receive more or less attention also (did you know that Galen made a beautiful experiment that showed some mammalian behavior to be nonlearned?) and the coverage extends to the present. The book must be taken seriously.

That isn't to say I agree with it all. There are the unavoidable botches, as with Darwin's barnacles and the biogenetic law, and occasionally confusing terminology such as calling social or group selection "community selection" in its application to social insects. (Richards finds that Darwin's initial difficulty in explaining nonreproductive castes of social insects was a main reason for his delay in writing the Origin.) And he sometimes even seems to regard sociobiology as a form of social Darwinism. The latter term has sometimes been used recently in ways which extend its pejorative connotation beyond the objectionable Nineteenth-Century referent. I'm not enough of a historian to know whether its use has always been reasonably precise, but now people who use it should define it. Richards doesn't. It has meant to me the evaluation of forms or interactions in human society by reference to processes or mechanisms or patterns of evolution. In this sense, I think historically accurate, I know of no evidence that Darwin was a social Darwinist, as has been claimed by at least two others although not explicitly by Richards.

Paradigms of historiography

Richards does compare several modes of historical analysis, with emphasis on those most similar to his own. He gives the same (adequate but shallow) refutation of the social theory of science in at least three places. His own historiography centers around the natural selection of ideas, a process trivially obvious, I suppose, to evolutionary biologists but less so to historians. It has nevertheless been discussed to some extent in both areas for some time; Richards does not refer to several books in the past decade by biologists which treat it in ways partly different from each other and from his.

While such an approach to the history of ideas is valuable, adopting it as one's sole method of exegesis means that one does not take seriously, except as

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[1]Contribution 82, Lothlorien Laboratory of Evolutionary Biology.

[2]**Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behavior. Robert J. Richards.** 1988 (stated 1987 in book). Univ. Chicago Press. xvii + 700 pp. ISBN 0-226-71199-4. Hardbound. $29.95.

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context, those ideas and lines of research which have not led to current (or at least later) thought. That such a result is found acceptable apparently comes from a deeper assumption, that the proper subject of study in history is influence. Influence is what historians normally study, in one form or another, but it's not the only subject of interest. Following this approach by itself means that one need not (unlike Richards) be careful about understanding the real science, the real justification (with respect to what was known at the time) of the scientific conclusions which may themselves, as well as their proponents, have influence.

Thus an alternative, but hardly exclusive, paradigm of historiography, one not even mentioned by Richards in his survey, is to trace and evaluate science relative to the conceptual and scientific framework of the time in which it was done. As Jane Masterson has shown in a marvelous manuscript, Darwin's theory of pangenesis was developed to explain a diverse set of supposed facts which were current at the time and which Mendel's theory ignored. (They were disproved shortly before the recognition of Mendel, which may be a reason for the timing of the recognition.) Thus Darwin was wrong for the right reasons and Mendel was right by default rather than by proposing a theory really adequate for the time. This conclusion to some extent sets the history of genetics on its head and requires taking the actual science seriously. It doesn't fit the influence-tracing paradigm.

Similarly, Richards's own account of what we now call the Baldwin Effect is misleading. When Simpson coined this term he recognized the contributions of others but thought that the basic workable idea was given first by Baldwin. Richards discusses this but concentrates more on Baldwin's greater efforts to gain attention. The phenomenon itself was more or less forgotten for years; Baldwin's efforts seem irrelevant even to his own later influence.

Good science may not have influence and bad science may. The history of science qua science is not the same as tracing the paths and causes of influence, although of course the two are interrelated. Science is public discovery, not public relations.

Ethics

Spencer comes in for detailed attention because his evolving theory of evolution was formulated largely to explain how moral behavior originated, and the theory itself had much contemporary influence. Richards argues at length that although Spencer's own views have little particular resemblance to those now current, they were nevertheless essential parts of the ancestry of the latter. I find most of this argument unconvincing. Various later workers did read Spencer, poor chaps, but it is not clear that most of his ideas were transferred or transformed rather than lost. The two apparent exceptions are an evolutionary basis for ethics and part of a heterogeneous set of subjects now usually called evolutionary epistemology, but both these exceptions seem to belong to philosophy rather than to biology.

Richards is among those who believe that evolution can justify a basic ethical principle. He is more sophisticated about it than is usual. He thinks that a means of convincing oneself of a moral proposition is the same as a justification of it, and that what most people think is moral thereby is moral. Put so baldly the position looks like dangerous nonsense, dangerous because it implies that, say, we should call Hitler a great moral leader. (I assume that he and his followers were sincere.) The position has a curious resemblance to the exclusive emphasis on influence over content which I criticized for historiography.

The problem of a justification for logic resembles that for ethics, and Richards regards both the problem and the form of the solution as the same for the two cases. It is, however, possible to accept this viewpoint and merely deny that either has a genuine justification, because one has to start somewhere. Such a position need not imply a strict moral relativism, because one's own basic moral

principle(s) can themselves be universal. Thus Hitler may have been moral from his perspective but he certainly wasn't from mine, and I think mine is right. It may have no absolutist foundation, I may not be able to persuade you of its worth, it has causes in my mental development, and so on, but I still think it's right. That's part of what a basic moral principle is; if I didn't think so it wouldn't be one. From my perspective but not from Richards's, at least as stated, even basic moral dissent can be moral. Alternatively, one can regard logic (or individual principles of it) as empirically grounded, as I do, with the existence of alternative logics showing a basis for choice, conceivably even different in different cases. Such an empirical grounding of morality is probably impossible unless one redefines "ought", as Richards does explicitly at one point, just to make the problem seem to go away.

The origin of morality is of course a quite different problem from its justification, as Richards recognizes. He seems to equate morality, more or less, with one kind of altruism, which to me is a remarkably narrow perspective. It does, though serve to focus an answer toward a biological and social problem which has a long history of its own and for which at least the forms of the solution may be known. As is well known, the difficulty is how to keep cheaters or free-loaders from progressively taking over. Richards has a good discussion of part of this but seems to miss one critical social phenomenon, the recognition of individuals and association of their identity with their actions. Thus we have truistic maxims such as "power corrupts" or "anonymity reveals the beast." Altruism is then empty and morality is expediency. A further lack is an emphasis on behavioral generalization, behaving to a wider group as one does to what was selected <u>per se</u>. Any baby, within reason, excites sympathy from most of us. Who then is thy brother? The expansion of the referent group is an interesting phenomenon in itself, one for which I have not seen a useful study. And to what extent does morality apply to other species? Why, exactly?

Moreover, it is not clear to what extent we do represent a moral animal. Philosophers seem to take this for granted, but is some other quarters the opposite viewpoint prevails. Perhaps someone has made an empirical study of the distribution of degrees and kinds of morality among different sorts of people. If so, philosophers should consider the evidence, as it would define the real rather than idealized phenomenon which they are trying to explain. If no such study has been done, I hope someone does it. It would have diverse and ramifying implications.