Darwinian foundation of modern ethics

Reviews of:
The Origins of Virtue
by Matt Ridley
Softback Preview, 1997
and
Created from Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism
by James Rachels
Oxford University Press, 1990

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Be warned—I am about to spoil each book's ending. Ridley and Rachels are both moderately disingenuous regarding the purpose for their writing. The former touts *laissez-faire* capitalism as the ethical panacea for the world's troubles:

> 'If we are to recover social harmony and virtue ... it is vital that we reduce the power and scope of the state ... . We must encourage social and material exchange between equals for that is the raw material of trust, and trust is the foundation of virtue' (pp. 264–265).

Rachels' design, on the other hand, turns out to be a rather clever defence for his vegetarianism (don't think I have anything against vegetarianism—I was one for 15 years—but it's his philosophical justification over which I have misgivings!). He professes, finally, that,

> 'to work for better treatment of the animals would be to work for a situation in which most of us would have to adopt a vegetarian diet ... [because] the rule against causing unnecessary pain is the least eccentric of all moral principles, and that rule leads straight to the conclusion that we should abandon the business of meat production and adopt alternative diets' (p. 212).

The foil: the rise of altruism

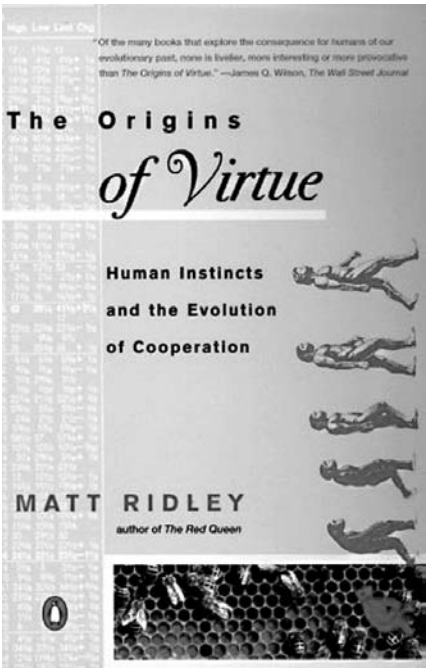
It is not out of caprice that Richard Dawkins titled his early book *The Selfish Gene*. According to the received 'wisdom', the whole spread of evolutionary history is the triumphant march of the more fit surviving at the expense of the less able. Populations, groups, individuals, even genes, are inexorably controlled by this metaphysical law. As Dawkins wrote,

> '[w]e are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes. This is a truth which still fills me with astonishment. Though I have known it for years, I never seem to get fully used to it.'[1]

And this is where the conundrum arises for evolutionists: How does one tell a story about a way of behaving which, by putting oneself last, runs counter to the expectations of the theory? Evolution argues that we are in a continual battle to pass on our genes. Altruism, on the other hand, has an entirely antithetical perspective on life: action is to display concern for the other with no expectation or desire for reward. Any explication of ethics must address this defining element; for if evolution were true, we would expect altruism to have been eliminated from human behaviour. So how is this conflicting reality dealt with?

Ridicule and reinterpret

Ridley takes an expeditious approach: he implies that there is something extraordinarily perverse about altruism's practice. True altruistic action, if it does exist, is so rare that it is exclusively attributed to people called saints. I am sure that all of us have been guilty of harbouring ulterior motives, but what is singularly disturbing is his response if one were to happen upon a person who genuinely does not inform their right hand about the left's activities:



> 'Indeed, what would you say to somebody close to you who was being truly selfless—a child, say, or a close friend, who was continually turning the other cheek, doing little tasks at work that others should have done ... giving his weekly pay to charity? If he did it occasionally you would praise him. But if he did it every week, year after year, you would start to question it. In the nicest way you might hint that he should look out for himself a little more, be just a touch more selfish' (p. 145).

But of course it does exist, and so there must be some explanation. The idea is quite simple: if altruism didn't just appear fully formed, then it must have arisen from something which wasn't altruistic but which must have somehow been sufficiently fertile to produce it. Ridley sets his gaze upon game theory for succour.

The game is not worth the candle

People live in webs of interlocking relationships in which how one acts is

dependent on what other people do. Game theory belongs to the discipline of mathematics and is an attempt to capture some of the complexity of the real world by reducing it to more manageable items. Ridley takes us through a brief history of game theory, explaining some of the more famous (read, infamous?) experiments that were constructed to explore the issue of altruism.

All the games Ridley discusses are loosely based on the classic Prisoner's Dilemma in which two separated prisoners must decide whether to inform on the other ('defection') or remain silent ('cooperation'). Each action is allotted points: simultaneous defections pay the least, simultaneous cooperations slightly more, while the clear earner is when one defects and the other cooperates. Theorists believe the lesson is clear:

> 'Do not get misled by your morality ... What we are seeking is the logically "best" action in a moral vacuum, not the "right" thing to do. And that is to defect. It is rational to be selfish' (p. 54).

The fact that Ridley finds this outcome uncomfortable is unsurprising, but it does illustrate a serious lapse of epistemological standard. Ridley assumes there is something 'absolutely' wrong here but declines, or is simply unable, to explain why it is ethically unacceptable. A pedigree example of question-begging.

Several chapters are given over to description of better, more intricate versions of the game in which many people participate, with the end result being that defectors ('bad guys') are ostracised or punished, and cooperators ('good guys') flourish (but surprise, surprise, to arrive at that paradisiacal Eden, the rules are continually tweaked by god-like strategists in order to remove the multitude of self-absorbed players that pop up all over the place!). It is far better, Ridley persuades us, to pre-emptively cooperate with others because they will then, most likely, follow suit. And this is what is known as 'reciprocal altruism', the 'I-scratch-your-back-you-scratch-mine' interaction that is all too familiarly experienced:

> 'Think about it: reciprocity hangs, like a sword of Damocles, over every human head. He's only asking me to his party so I'll give his book a good review. They've been to dinner twice and never asked us back once. After all I did for him, how could he do that to me? If you do this for me, I promise I'll make it up later. What did I do to deserve that? You owe it to me. Obligations; debt; favour; bargain; contract; exchange; deal ... Our language and our lives are permeated with ideas of reciprocity' (p. 84).

Let's not forget the real world

This reinterpretation of altruism must begin somewhere and so Ridley singles out the ability to recognise individuals as the key prerequisite for reciprocity. Lower life forms, say ants and bees, often have their group and individual genetic interests coinciding, and thus cooperate in a nepotistic structure. However, higher order mammals and some fish have developed extra survival skills. What follows is a dazzling array of observations from the animal world where, *inter alia*, baboons, chimps, dolphins, vampire bats, even stickleback fish, seem to live out reciprocal cooperation. For example, Gerald Wilkinson, a biologist, studied vampire bats in Costa Rica. He observed that successful hunters, on returning to the roost, will often regurgitate some blood to feed unsuccessful ones. Apparently, the bats keep score on who is generous and who isn't.

It's from such accounts in nature that Ridley then develops his argument: being able to remember cooperators and defectors, to recall the outcomes of past encounters in the animal world serves as the incipient basis for the phenomenon of moral behaviour. Evolution is then asked to do its inevitable search and destroy sweep, weeding out the miserly and allowing the generous to flourish. Naturally Ridley realises that the job is not complete. He believes that evolution has brought into our genes only the beginnings of a potentially rosy future:

> 'Knowing how evolution arrived at the human capacity for social trust, we can surely find out how to cure its lack' (p. 250).

Figure 1. *Prisoner's Dilemma. The police arrest and separate you and your accomplice. Having insufficient evidence to convict you, the police visit you both and offer the same deal: if you choose to confess and your accomplice does not, then he will receive the full sentence and you will go free. If you both choose to stay silent, the only punishment they can give is a minor charge. But if you both choose to confess, then you each get a half sentence.*
The reasoning behind your decision is like this: My accomplice has either confessed, or remained silent. If he confessed and I stayed silent, then I will get the full sentence. However, if I confess also, then I will only get the half sentence. If my accomplice stayed silent and I confessed, then I would go free. However, if I too stayed silent then we would get the minor charge. Either way, it's better for me to confess.
Since the accomplice would reason the same way, they'd both end up confessing and get the half sentence. Even though it seemed to be rational problem solving, if both had just stayed silent, they would only get a minor charge.

Philosophical oversights

I must admit I was spellbound by biologists' and anthropologists' accounts of animal and human behaviour. Despite more than 250 pages of such, Ridley abjectly fails to come to grips with ethics. His efforts to blur the distinct boundary between altruism and the selfish, rests on a fallacy of equivocation. In order to accomplish his tendentious end of having evolution sit on the throne of morality, he sullies the normally accepted understanding of what it means to be ethical.

On many people's account (and not just Christians!), the truly moral action is not teleological. That is to say, a person's actions are not forward-looking, seeking something to gain, but rather they are intrinsically either right or wrong and are undertaken irrespective of outcome. This is what is known as deontological ethics (from the Greek word *deon*, meaning 'binding duty'). Ridley's use of evolution to pave the way for the rise of ethical action means that 'right' is merely a synonym for that which promotes survival, while survival is optimally realised by actions which deliver a harmonious society containing cooperative members. In other words, 'goodness', if it is to have any meaning in Ridley's worldview, is not an absolute, but is construed in terms of instrumentality. In contradistinction to this revamped ethical definition, others have stated that '[t]o behave morally solely as a means to something else is not to behave morally at all'.[2]

Ridley seems to be unaware of the enormous epistemological problem when the ethical is not taken as being properly basic, when it is reduced or remoulded to something else. But this should come as no surprise: Ridley is an evolutionary true believer and thus is logically forced by the nature of this metaphysic to derive support from non-ethical sources. Given evolution's description of biological history, if complex brains and four chamber hearts can't immediately appear fully formed, then it stands to reason that the ethical sense should be likewise derived of something not ethical.

Through this equivocation, Ridley has kneecapped himself. By adopting a standard where right and wrong are a measure of the degree to which an action promotes optimum survival, he in effect has removed the very basis for a meaningful criticism of any and all action. On Ridley's criterion, one cannot, for example, distinguish between society A which is flourishing, but has built its wealth on an expansive and lucrative child-slave trade, and society B, itself a prosperous community, but which proscribes the exchange of human cargo. It would be interesting to hear the basis for Ridley's disapprobation of the former.

The irony: true altruism overlooked

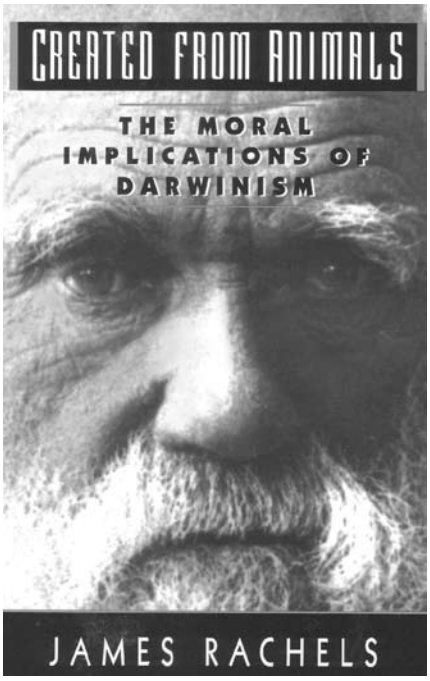
Evolution stands opposed to deontological ethics. Consequently, an instantiation of genuine altruism, as opposed to the *pseudo* variety that Ridley argues for, would be (another) nail in evolution's coffin. Any incidence of loving your enemy (even dying for him!) stands in need of reinterpretation. I think Ridley understands this, and that is why he is forced to misrepresent Christianity.

According to his understanding, the Christian faith is one based on works: 'they teach that you should practise virtue to get to heaven—a pretty big bribe to appeal to their selfishness' (p.132). Nothing need be said about this howler. But something does have to be said about his portrayal of Christ, who is, from a Christian's view, altruism incarnate.

Ridley wants the reader to believe that Christ did not articulate the ethic of loving everyone, irrespective of class, race or culture, while expecting nothing in return. He writes that,

> 'Christianity, it is true, teaches love to all people, not just fellow Christians. This seems to be largely an invention of St Paul's [*sic*], since Jesus frequently discriminated in the Gospels between Jews and Gentiles' (p.192).

My earliest recollection of Christian teaching at school, despite being an atheist, was a lesson built around The Good Samaritan, arguably the foremost anti-discriminatory discourse. In addition, a considerable number of his discerning 'heroes' in his face-to-face encounters were Gentile. As with many criticisms of Christianity, Paul is credited with far too much and Christ with too little.



Historical revisionism: blame it on Christianity

Rachels' book sets out a long argument that hails Darwin's idea as one that completely rewrites everything about our hitherto understood relationship with animals. Traditionally, or so Rachels believes, Christianity has had a poor record in its treatment of animals. He holds that Christianity has wilfully ignored the obvious suffering of animals because it posits that we alone are made in God's image, that man, not animals, partake in the curse arising from the original sin, and that humans are exclusively rational. He inculpates, *inter alia*, Augustine, Aquinas and Descartes, for this justification of cruelty. Two obvious errors present themselves here.

First, there could be no possible biblical justification for cruelty to animals. A fair exegesis would conclude that animals do suffer (e.g. Isaiah 65:25; Romans 8:19–22), that

they weren't originally meant to (e.g. Genesis 1:30; 9:2), and that we are to be compassionate toward them (e.g. Deuteronomy 22:10; 25:4). Second, while Rachels correctly identifies lack of rationality as the basis for many Christians' acceptance of animal cruelty (no mind/rationality, no reflection, therefore no pain), his attribution of this to Christian invention is erroneous. This idea was not a Christian formulation but Greek, specifically Stoic philosophical rumination. Augustine borrowed directly from ancient Stoic argument, and many Christians after him built upon his work.[3]

The death of God thesis: man made in the image of animals

To counter Christian and Western insensitivity to animal pain, Rachels suggests that Darwinism is ruinous to the uniqueness of humans. Because we are the product of a long series of interlinking biochemical accidents, ones that tie us directly to other animals, human dignity can no longer be built upon the 'made-in-the-image-of-God' thesis. Rationality must be rejected as the distinguishing criterion because, since evolution is true, rationality must be at least partially possessed by other life forms. Rachels' ethical considerations are thus underpinned by evolution being true:

> 'This way of thinking goes naturally with an evolutionary perspective because an evolutionary perspective denies that humans are different in kind from other animals; and one cannot reasonably make distinctions in morals where none exist in fact' (p. 174).

He spends many pages detailing empirical evidence in support, including an impressive account of experiments at Northwestern University in the 1960s which had Rhesus Monkeys refusing to electrocute other monkeys, even when it meant that they would starve. Such behaviour was interpreted as a display of altruism. To Rachels' mind, demonstration of such ethical action in animals is a clear semaphore for decision making and thus rationality.

To extend ethical consideration to non-human life his theoretical consideration argues for a 'principle of equality'. Rachels holds that this prescriptive maxim is a consistent extension of Darwinian description. Accordingly he writes:

> 'We learn from Darwin that, contrary to what was previously believed, humans and other animals are not radically different in kind… Therefore, our treatment of humans and other animals should be sensitive to the pattern of similarities and differences that exist between them. When there is a difference that justifies treating [animals] differently, we may; but when there is no such difference, we may not' (p. 197).

All humans are equal, except some are more equal

Notwithstanding several factual and philosophical errors in Rachels' book, it remains a cleverly written one. This may sound contradictory but one must admire the effort this philosopher from the University of Alabama expended in his attempt to justify his pro-vegetarian, anti-vivisection stance. Unfortunately, his Darwinian epistemology raises some problematic ramifications on how he views *all* humans.

Rachels calls his new ethical theory, 'moral individualism'. It is a view 'that looks to individual similarities and differences for moral justification' (p. 174). So, if both an animal and a human experience pain and exhibit rationality, then they should be treated equally, given the same situation. Just as one should not inflict wanton injury on a man because he feels pain and is rational, similarly one should not ill-treat, say, a monkey for the same reason. But because of this epistemic, his theory produces an unedifying attitude toward humanity.

Rachels is thorough and does not shirk the responsibility of giving us a full understanding of his argument. He realises that when these comparable qualities are absent then we are pardoned from treating animals and humans equally. But he knows that this rule must be applied to individual humans as well. Along with Dawkins, Rachels holds that a child with Tay-Sachs disease is of less value than 'an intelligent, sensitive animal such as a chimpanzee' (p. 209). His final disparagement of the sanctity of human life sounds despairingly like an Orwellian nightmare:

> 'It may be protested that this view leaves the value of human life less secure than traditional views. Indeed it does. The abandonment of lofty conceptions of human nature, and grandiose ideas about the place of humans in the scheme of things, inevitably diminishes our moral status ... Although it may seem odd to say so, in some respects traditional morality placed too much value on human life, and we might actually be better off with a more modest conception. ... Reverence for human life, which seems such a noble ideal in so many circumstances, can degenerate into a mindless superstition. When this happens, reason flies out of the window and what is in fact good for people is sacrificed to an abstract conception of their "worth" ' (p. 205).[4]

The naturalistic fallacy

In a brief summary toward the end of his book, Rachels states that his proposed ethical system is,

> 'nothing but the consistent application of the principle of equality to decisions about what should be done, in light of what Darwinism has taught us about our nature and about our relation to the other creatures that inhabit the earth' (p. 197).

It is important to be aware of what Rachels has just done, something the eighteenth century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, spent not a little time complaining about.

Rachels' case is constructed upon the presuppositions that Darwinism is

true, humans evolved from animals, and thus are closely related to them (i.e. what *is* the case). He then moves to a moral denunciation of animal cruelty (i.e. what *ought* to be). In philosophical parlance this is known as the Naturalistic Fallacy. Any attempt to extract an *ought* from an *is*, is entirely unwarranted and duplicitous. Even if it were true that evolution theory is accurate, it is not clear how the epistemological bridge from this facticity of the world to any ethical considerations necessarily follows.

The irony is that Rachels' sketched this fallacy early in the book, but seems oblivious to its eventual incorporation in his closing arguments. Regardless of whether animals are closely related to us, despite our underestimation of animal rationality and sense of altruism, I find it difficult to see why I *ought* to be sensitive to animal pain just because of the putative truth of these phenomena. Furthermore, on what ethical basis would someone be deemed irresponsible if they recognised these truths but simultaneously thought vivisection and the consumption of 500 grams of medium-rare T-bone valuable acts (indeed, as many evolutionists do!)? Because it is unethical to treat animals in such a way because we are related to them and we don't act toward other humans in such a manner? Sounds peculiarly circular!

The insight of an atheist

Arguably, the most important section of Rachels' book, for both creationists and theistic evolutionists, is a perspicacious digressional section on the unwelcome fallout if God had created by evolution. With tongue firmly in cheek, Rachels ironically calls these attempts to combine God and evolution an 'heroic step' (p. 125). It is salient to him that 'the design hypothesis is not an insignificant component of traditional religious belief' (p. 125). He acknowledges that, logically, if evolution and God can co-inhabit reality, then it must be some variation of deism and nothing like the jejune and oxymoronic theistic evolution that the majority of the Western Church is presently confessing to the world. As a powerful rebuke to these people (don't forget, this man is an atheist!) he writes:

> 'If religious belief is reduced to this, is it worth having? What remains is a "God" so abstract, so unconnected with the world, that there is little left in which to believe. ... [this] represents the retreat of religious belief in still another sense. There is now far less *content* to the idea of God. The concept of God as a loving, all-powerful person, who created us, who has a plan for us, who issues commandments, and who is ready to receive us into Heaven, is a substantial concept, rich in meaning and significance for human life. But if we take away all this, and leave only the idea of an original cause, it is questionable whether the same word should even be used. By keeping the original word, we delude ourselves into thinking that we are talking about the same thing. We may even, as Freud says, 'boast that [we] have recognised a higher, purer concept of God'—but the boast might well deserve the scorn that Freud heaps upon it ... The concept of God that survives is so vague that it has little use in explaining either nature in general or human nature in particular. God has retreated so far from the world we know that he has become, in Freud's words, "nothing more than an insubstantial shadow" ' (pp. 125–126).

Concluding remarks

Creationists should read these books for they provide an insightful view of the Darwinian underpinnings of modern ethical discourse. But there is another reason these books, and others like them, are valuable.

Despite theirs being a distorted conception, both authors correctly reduce ethics to its most meaningful and basic element, that of relationship. However, relationship for them is ultimately one of utility. In Christian thought, the importance of relationship appears as the sole determining aspect to history, namely, God's desire to reconcile all creation to Him. This ought not to be conceived of as satisfying some heavenly-willed legalistic or autocratic demand, but because Christ demonstrated that love is the fundamental and irreducible basis for all relationship, moral action and law. This analysis of ethics, as far as I am aware, seems to be under-utilized in creationist apologetics. Creationist philosophy has understated the most valuable component of its doctrine, that of being able to reconcile the way things appear to be, with death and disease running rampant, to the reality of how things were (and will be) in which there was a deathless paradise. It is upon these facts, combined with the transcendent and immanent ontological nature of God Himself, namely, love, that a rational and whole ethical system could be built and thus provide an alternative to the Darwinian model espoused in these two books.

References

1. Dawkins, R., *The Selfish Gene*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. ix, 1976.
2. Moreland, J.P. and Craig, W.L., *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, p. 447, 2003.
3. For an in-depth historical study see: Sorabji, R., *Animal Minds and Human Morals: The Origins of the Western Debate*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1993.
4. If this sounds all too reminiscent of Nazi eugenic propaganda, it is considerably more interesting to note the elevation of animals and the practice of vegetarianism, accompanied by a corresponding diminution of human worth, that is also found in Nazism. See e.g. Goodrick-Clarke, N., *Hitler's Priestess: Savitri Devi, the Hindu-Aryan Myth, and Neo-Nazism*, New York University Press, NY, 1998.