Explaining Morality - What 18th Century Proto Social Scientists Can Teach to Evolutionary Psychologists?

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Evolutionary psychologists are keen to cite David Hume and Adam Smith as their precursors in the scientific study of human nature. This is right both historically and philosophically. However, I argue that they should be taken more seriously than that. Their theories should be treated both as benchmarks and as rivals for evolutionary accounts of morality. They should be treated as benchmarks, because they provide more sophisticated naturalistic account of human morality than current evolutionary psychology. And they should be treated as rivals, since their sociological account of human morality diminishes the relevance of evolutionary considerations.

Introduction

Evolutionary psychologists refer to Hume most often in the context of naturalistic fallacy and the fact-value –distinction. Although this is one context in which attention to what Hume really said might by highly relevant to debates around evolution (Wilson, Dietrich & Clark 2003), I will not discuss it in this paper. The most common reference to Smith is the famous passage about the invisible hand in *Wealth of Nations:* (I.ii.2):

> It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest.

I will not discuss this misunderstood passage either. This paper will concentrate on the naturalistic theory of human morality developed by Hume and Smith and try to see whether it could be relevant to the debates around the scientific project of evolutionary psychology.

It is quite natural to regard Hume and Smith as precursors of evolutionary psychology. Historically, they have had strong, but not always direct, influence on thinkers working in Darwinian tradition. Furthermore, most of evolutionary psychologists seem to be working in the quite similar spirit of the Enlightement. There are also some general similarities between the two intellectual projects.

First, both are engaged in giving some sort of 'natural histories' of human practices. In his *Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith* Dugald Stewart describes philosophical inquiries by Hume and Smith as special kind of historical studies that aim to understand the origin and development of various topics, including language, morals, religion and social institutions. He writes:

> On most of these subjects very little information is to be expected from history; for long before that stage of society when men begin to think of recording their transactions, many of the most important steps of their progress have been made. A few insulated facts may perhaps be collected from the casual observations of travellers, who have viewed the arrangements of rude nations; but nothing, it is evident, can be obtained in this way, which approaches to a regular and connected detail of human improvement.
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> In this want of direct evidence, we are under a necessity of supplying the place of fact by conjecture; and when we are unable to ascertain how men have actually conducted themselves upon particular occasions, of considering in what manner they are likely to have proceeded, from the principles of their nature, and the circumstances of their external situation.
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> Nor are such theoretical views of human affairs subservient merely to the gratification of curiosity. In examining the history of mankind, as well as in examining the phenomena of the material world, when we cannot trace the process by which an event has been produced, it is often of importance to be able to show how it may have been produced by natural causes. Thus, in the instance which has suggested these remarks, although it is impossible to determine with certainty what the steps were by which any particular language was formed, yet if we can shew, from the known principles of human nature, how all its various parts might gradually have arisen, the mind is not only to a certain degree satisfied, but a check is given to that indolent philosophy, which refers to a miracle, whatever appearances, both in the natural and moral worlds, it is unable to explain.
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> To this species of philosophical investigation, which has no appropriated name in our language, I shall take the liberty of giving the title of Theoretical or Conjectural History; an expression which coincides pretty nearly in its meaning with that of Natural History, as employed by Mr. Hume, and with what some French writers have called Histoire Raisonnée.

Much of the evolutionary psychology belongs to this same genre of Conjectural History. Evolutionary psychologists are trying to account human psychological make-up (and by an extension human social organization) in terms of conjectures about evolution of our species. The evidential basis about the past is often very narrow, so speculation on the basis of theoretical principles is the only way to proceed. Finally, these naturalistic accounts are taken to have more general relevance than mere satisfaction of curiosity. The evolutionary psychology is intended to serve as a naturalistic backbone for all other human sciences.

Of course, Hume and Smith did not have a clue about the mechanism of natural selection, which makes their natural histories quite different. However, the theory of natural selection would have fitted quite well into their thinking, and they would probably have loved to

incorporate it in their theories. (Especially Smith would have loved to replace the Author of Nature with Natural Selection).

The second common theme is the notion of human nature. Quite surprisingly, many evolutionary psychologists are keen to employ this pre-darwinian notion (Tooby & Cosmides 1992; Pinker 2002). A number of philosophers of biology (Sober 1980; Hull 1988) have emphasized that old essentialist notions, among them the idea of human nature, do not go well with the Darwinian population thinking. Be this as it may, the crucial thing in this context is that the way evolutionary psychologists are using this notion is quite similar to the way it is employed by the tradition represented by Hume and Smith. For example, the way in which evolutionary psychologists set themselves against the (imaginary) defenders of what they call the Standard Social Science Model sounds very similar to the way in which the narrator (Hume?) answers to his (also imaginary) opponent Palamedes, when the latter challenges the narrator's firm belief in the notion of human nature:

> [Palamedes argues] I only meant to represent the uncertainty of all these judgments concerning characters; and to convince you, that fashion, vogue, custom, and law, were the chief foundation of all moral determinations. The Athenians, surely, were a civilized, intelligent people, if ever there was one; and yet their man of merit might, in this age, be held in horror and execration. The French are also, without doubt, a very civilized, intelligent people; and yet their man of merit might, with the Athenians, be an object of the highest contempt and ridicule, and even hatred. And what renders the matter more extraordinary: these two people are supposed to be the most similar in their national character of any in ancient and modern times; and while the English flatter themselves that they resemble the Romans, their neighbors on the Continent draw the parallel between themselves and those polite Greeks. What wide difference, therefore, in the sentiments of morals, must be found between civilized nations and barbarians, or between nations whose characters have little in common? How shall we pretend to fix a standard for judgments of this nature?
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> By tracing matters, replied I, a little higher, and examining the first principles which each nation establishes of blame or censure. The Rhine flows north, the Rhone south; yet both spring from the same mountain, and are also actuated, in their opposite directions, by the same principle of gravity. The different inclinations of the ground on which they run cause all the difference of their courses. [*A Dialogue*, 333]

Hume, as evolutionary psychologists after him (Tooby & Cosmides 1992; Pinker 2002), postulates universal human nature behind the appearance of human diversity. He accepts that fashion, vogue, custom, and law influence human moral practices, but does not accept it as evidence against human nature. As evolutionary psychologists, he is interested in what all people have in common, not in what distinguishes one culture from another. He also faces the same problem: It easy to show that there is some sort of underlying human nature, more challenging is to demonstrate that it is truly important notion with explanatory import. Very few people would deny that there is something in common between people, especially at

some deep level. They just doubt that the shared things are as important as the many differences. It still open question whether people like Pinker (2002) have been more successful in answering these doubts than Hume and Smith were.

Finally, and most importantly, the comparison is justified because evolutionary psychologists (or rather people who inspire evolutionary psychologists) are reinventing many of the ideas that can be found from Hume's *Treatise* or Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. The recent work on the role of emotions in moral judgment and decision-making in general is surprisingly close to their ideas. (Frank 1988; Haidt 2001) Smith's ideas about sympathy have not yet made to the evolutionary studies or moral psychology, but this will happen soon, since his ideas seem to be partly validated by recent work on mental simulation and empathy. There will also be an increased interest in Hume's work on conventions and institutions in game theory as the role of sanctions, moral emotions and reputation is recognized and the relevance of games other than prisoner's dilemma is recognized. (Skyrms 2004)

Despite these similarities, the emphasis of this paper will be in some of the differences between Hume and Smith and evolutionary psychologists. I will not consider the issues where they would agree with evolutionary psychologists. My interest is on the issues where they might disagree, and provide arguments for people who are doubtful of the credentials of some of the more ambitious claims made by evolutionary psychologists. And here the relevant fact is that Hume and Smith are not only precursors of evolutionary psychology. They are also precursors of psychology, sociology, political science, economics, and history. This is the reason why I call them proto social scientists. Their work predates all the divisions between different disciplines, so from them we might get a view that is not polluted by the disciplinary prejudices that animate current debates and (probably) each of us. This provides us with a chance to take them as impartial spectators of the current debates. They would also have a number of things to say about the current social sciences, but in this paper I will concentrate on evolutionary psychology.

Are people selfish?

One cannot claim that Hume had an unrealistic view of the motivations of people:

> … the generosity of men is very limited, and that it seldom extends beyond their friends and family, or, at most, beyond their native country. (*Treatise*, 602; compare *Moral Sentiments*, 256-279)

However, he was not one of those who would deny the existence or relevance of the other-regarding motivations. For him, the human benevolence is real and theoretically important

motivation that should not be explained away just because it is not as a strong force in human affairs as is self-love. The denial of it derives from abstract philosophical speculation, not from sound empirical observations:

> The most obvious objection to the selfish hypothesis is, that, as it is contrary to common feeling and our most unprejudiced notions, there is required the highest stretch of philosophy to establish so extraordinary a paradox. To the most careless observer there appear to be such dispositions as benevolence and generosity; such affections as love, friendship, compassion, gratitude. These sentiments have their causes, effects, objects, and operations, marked by common language and observation, and plainly distinguished from those of the selfish passions. And as this is the obvious appearance of things, it must be admitted, till some hypothesis be discovered, which by penetrating deeper into human nature, may prove the former affections to be nothing but modifications of the latter. All attempts of this kind have hitherto proved fruitless, and seem to have proceeded entirely from that love of *simplicity* which has been the source of much false reasoning in philosophy. (*Enquiry*, 298)

I will not go to his more detailed arguments, I just want to point out how he regards the burden of proof: the advocate of the selfish hypothesis should show that the common sense view of the matter is wrong. In contrast to physics where things are often contrary to first appearance, in all enquiries concerning the origin of passions and the internal operations of the human mind, the presumption always lies on the other side. (*Enquiry*, 299) In Hume's (and Smith's) judgment, people who have argued either for hedonistic or for selfish hypothesis have not been successful in making their case.

Most evolutionary psychologists seem to assume that such arguments have been successful, since in their view the burden of proof is on those who claim that people really have altruistic motives. They are eager to argue that the altruism we can observe is just apparent: the seemingly altruistic behavior can be explained away in terms of kin selection and reciprocal altruism. This raises an interesting question: has there been some significant advances in the sciences of the human nature since 18th Century that would have justified this change in the burden of the proof? Sadly, this is not the case. The modern default status of the selfish hypothesis derives from similar conceptual confusions and category mistakes Hume and Smith were able to identify. The presumption of selfishness has two principal sources: economics and evolutionary biology. Neither of these can really answer the challenge posed by Hume.

In the case of economics, the selfish hypothesis is rather an assumption rather than proven principle. Usually it is justified either by its simplicity in model building or by the long tradition in economics. Without doubt, Hume and Smith would not regard these as serious arguments. The first is not really a basis for an empirical claim and the second would just make them sad: they would rather not be the founding fathers of this tradition. A bad candidate for an

argument would be the following: people can only try to achieve their own goals, so the selfishness follows from the definition of agency. Hume and Smith would be quick to point out that this argument confuses a truism about agency with a substantial thesis about the contents of goals. In order to act towards a goal an agent have to adopt that goal, but that does not mean that this goal have to be self-regarding. The goal can also be the welfare of others or even harm to oneself. Neither does the self-interest derive from rationality. As Hume points out:

> 'Tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger. 'Tis not contrary to reason for me to chuse my total ruin, to prevent the least uneasiness of an *Indian* or person wholly unknown to me. (*Treatise*, 416)

Satisfying self-regarding desires is not more rational than satisfying other-regarding desires. The considerations of rationality come into picture only after the preferences are already set.

In the case of evolutionary biology, the usual argument derives from a category mistake. Altruism as a metaphorical attribute of genes is quite a different thing from the altruism as a psychological motivation. The term 'selfish gene' coined by Richard Dawkins has created more confusion than helped understanding the logic of natural selection, which was the original motivation for using it (Sober & Wilson 1998: 87-92; Gintis, Bowles, Boyd & Fehr 2003). The theory of evolution does not make psychological altruism impossible, in fact from evolutionary point of view the purely selfish motivation might be highly dysfunctional for social species like us (Sober & Wilson 1998). The existence and the extent of altruistic motivations is still an empirical issue, not something to be decided on the basis of abstract philosophical arguments.

The importance of the right *explanandum*

Wilson, Dietrich and Clark (2003: 678) have noted that evolutionary psychologists have mostly avoided the topic of human morality. This is surprising, since Darwin thought that the "ethical sense" was one of the most important attributes of humans. If evolutionary psychologists are serious about their relevance to social sciences, they should aim to complete picture, not selective storytelling.

The problem is not that the topic of morality is avoided completely by evolutionary psychologists, but that it is approached in a piecemeal manner that easily creates misleading implications. It fully legitimate to study preconditions and building blocks of moral motivation, cognition and behavior, but one should also keep in mind the phenomenon one is ultimately trying to account for. The great danger in 'conjectural history' is that the conjectural

explanans is combined with equally speculative *explanandum*. In order to keep one's story in line, one has to be careful in having clear and unprejudiced picture of the thing one is accounting for. Otherwise one ends up fitting the thing to be explained to one favorite explanation, and not vice versa.

This is a present danger in evolutionary theories of specifically human attributes. In order to make sense of these attributes, like morality or language, one looks for something similar in other species (or in ones conjectured ancestors). After a while, one gets used to idea that, for example, apes have elementary ability for language or some sort of morals. As one spends time with these 'simpler forms' one starts to think them as the essential elements and as a consequence the ultimate *explanandum* gets unintentionally inflated. In the case of language this fallacy is avoided more easily, as there is a rich pre-existing account of human language.

In the case of morality, the case is different. There is no consensus about the right description of the human morality. In this context, an independently developed, explicitly non-theological theory of human moral psychology and behavior could be useful. It could serve a benchmark for one's explanatory theories. Of course, the details of such theory could, and should, be challenged, but it would still serve a useful purpose by helping to keep in mind the kind of thing one is ultimately trying to explain. One such benchmark theory can be found in the works of Hume and Smith. In the following, I will briefly look at things that current evolutionary accounts of morality might have missed.

To begin with, Hume stresses the importance of distinguishing between emotional attitudes and properly moral sentiments.

> When a man denominates another his enemy, his *rival*, his *antagonist*, his *adversary*, he is understood to speak the language of self-love, and to express sentiments peculiar to himself, and arising from his particular circumstances and situation. But when he bestows on any man the epithets of *vicious*, or *odious*, or *depraved*, he then speaks another language, and expresses sentiments in which he expects all his audience are to concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view common to him with others: he must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string to which all mankind have an accord and symphony. (*Enquiry*, 273)

The crucial feature of the moral sentiments is that they presuppose a common point of view. This is reflected further in the difference between simple moral emotion and moral judgment. The latter corrects the former making the communication and shared social life possible. Hume clarifies the issue with an analogy with perception:

> The judgement here corrects the inequalities of our internal emotions and perceptions; in like manner as it preserves us from error, in the several variations of images presented to our external senses. […] And indeed, without such a correction of appearances, both

> in internal and external sentiment, men could never think or talk steadily on any subject, while their fluctuating situations produce a continual variation on objects, and throw them into such different and contrary lights and positions. (*Enquiry*, 225-6; compare *Moral Sentiments*, 156-157)

The crucial point is that morality and altruistic motivation are different things:

> The intercourse of sentiments, therefore, in society and conversation, makes us form some general inalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of characters and manners. And tho' the *heart* does not always take part with those general notions, or regulate its love and hatred by them, yet are they sufficient for discourse, and serve all our purposes in company, in the pulpit, on the theatre, and in the schools. (*Treatise*, 603)

Altruism, so often discussed by evolutionary psychologists, should not be identified with morality. The latter does presuppose some altruism (or benevolence), but it is not same thing. As Smith argues, the love of humanity or general benevolence is too feeble force to contain our self-love. The crucial factor is the

> … conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct. It is he who, whenever we are about to act so as to affect the happiness of others, calls to us, with a voice capable of astonishing the most presumptuous of our passions, that we are but one of the multitude, in no respect better than any other in it; and that when we prefer ourselves so shamefully and so blindly to others, we become the proper objects of resentment, abhorrence, and execration. It is from him only that we learn the real littleness of ourselves, and of whatever relates to ourselves, and the natural misrepresentations of self-love can be corrected only by the eye of this impartial spectator. It is he who shows us the propriety of generosity and the deformity of injustice; the propriety of resigning the greatest interests of our own, for the yet greater interests of others, and the deformity of doing the smallest injury to another, in order to obtain the greatest benefit to ourselves. It is not the love of our neighbour, it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of those divine virtues. It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place upon such occasions; the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters. (*Moral Sentiments*, 158)

Hume and Smith do not assume the conscience to be all powerful. They do recognise its limited strength and fact that it can be corrupted. However, it is a crucial part of moral phemenomena, and every theory of moral should take it into account.

Hume and Smith do not just take this phenomenon for granted. For them, the moral language and sense of rightness is acquired through socialization, it is not an innate feature of humans.

> The more we converse with mankind, and the greater social intercourse we maintain, the more shall we be familiarized to these general preferences and distinctions, without which our conversation and discourse could scarcely be rendered intelligible to each other. Every man's interest is peculiar to himself and the aversions and desires which result from it cannot be supposed to affect others in a like degree. General language therefore, being formed for general use, must be moulded on more general views, and must affix the epithets of praise or blame, in conformity to sentiments which arise from the general interests of the community. (*Enquiry*, 226)

Hume does not have much more to say on this interesting topic, and we have to turn to Smith's theory of impartial spectator and its social development. In his account, the idea of the impartial spectator arises from social interaction:

> … our first moral criticisms are exercised upon the characters and conduct of other people; and we are all very forward to observe how each of these affects us. But we soon learn, that other people are equally frank with regard to our own. We become anxious to know how far we deserve their censure or applause, and whether to them we must necessarily appear those agreeable or disagreeable creatures which they represent us. We begin, upon this account, to examine our own passions and conduct, and to consider how these must appear to them, by considering how they would appear to us if in their situation. We suppose ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour, and endeavour to imagine what effect it would, in this light, produce upon us. This is the only looking–glass by which we can, in some measure, with the eyes of other people, scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct. (*Moral Sentiments*, 128)

The internalization of the gaze of the others leads to a man within, a looking-glass that can be more or less good reflector of appropriateness of our, and other people's, behavior. More one interacts with people, especially different people, better one's grasp of the stance of the impartial spectator gets.

The idea of the impartial spectator helps Smith to get rid of any special moral sense or faculty. The perspective of the impartial spectator develops out of our desire for the love and respect of other people. However, it does not reduce to it. Being worth of praise and actually being praised are different things, and people are eager to distinguish them.

> The jurisdiction of the man within, is founded altogether in the desire of praise–worthiness, and in the aversion to blame-worthiness; in the desire of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we love and admire in other people; and in the dread of possessing those qualities, and performing those actions, which we hate and despise in other people. (*Moral Sentiments*, 150)

This account could still serve as a basis of interesting social psychological theory of human moral development. It is built upon innate capacity to share other people perspective and receptiveness to their stance towards oneself. Evolutionary psychology could try to account for the evolution of these building blocks. However, if this account is in the right direction, the innate mental modules are not the most interesting part of the moral psychology. Biological evolution would not the key to understanding humans, contrary to what evolutionary psychologist advertise.

How important is evolution?

Let us now consider the following passage in *Enquiry:*

> It is needless to push our researches so far as to ask, why we have humanity or a fellow-

> feeling with others? It is sufficient that this is experienced to be a principle in human nature. We must stop somewhere in our examination of causes; and there are, in every science, some general principles, beyond which we cannot hope to find any principle more general. No man is absolutely indifferent to the happiness and misery of others. The first has a natural tendency to give pleasure, the second pain. This every one may find in himself. It is not probable that these principles can be resolved into principles more simple and universal, whatever attempts may have been made to that purpose. But if it were possible, it belongs not to the present subject; and we may here safely consider these principles as original, - happy if we can render all the consequences sufficiently plain and perspicuous! (*Enquiry*, footnote, 219-220)

Hume is clearly making a virtue out of necessity here. He did not have theoretical resources to answer questions concerning the origins of human sympathy, so he underplays the significance of these questions. Had he known Darwin's theory, he might have recognized it as a naturalistic means to explain this "principle of human nature". Evolutionary psychology would have served as a natural extension of Hume's account of morality. Without doubt it would have strengthened its naturalistic credentials and made it more convincing.

Hume reached his conclusion without knowing theory of evolution, which makes us uncertain whether he would have reached the same conclusion if he had known it. I do not want to start psychological speculation about Hume here, so I do not consider what he would have thought. However, I want to raise the question whether his conclusion is still the right one.

The evolutionary psychologists campaign for their research program in quite curious way.The principal point of evolutionary psychology is the importance of the evolutionary considerations for psychological theory. They argue that evolution should be seen both as a constraint on psychological theories, they should be compatible with evolution, and a positive heuristic for the psychological theory development. However, they have chosen the social sciences as their main opponent. They have identified the notorious Standard Social Science Model as the root of the problems the social sciences have. As a cure, they suggest that the evolutionary psychology could serve as foundation for social and cultural sciences and bring them into a fertile connection with the natural sciences. (Tooby & Cosmides 1992)

Now in principle, this might sound plausible. If evolution is relevant for psychology and psychology is relevant for the social sciences, then without doubt evolution has also some relevance for the social sciences. If the relation of relevance is understood in the sense that the latter has to be compatible with the former, the thesis is quite uncontroversial. However, if it is understood in the sense that the former is a theoretical basis or foundation for the latter, the issues are much more controversial. Evolutionary psychology has still to show its theoretical relevance for psychology. And that would not yet make it the foundation for the social sciences. Without doubt, the social scientists have to pay more attention to psychology.

Their theories all too often make cognitive assumptions that just are not psychological plausible (Turner 2002; Ylikoski 2003). However, it does not follow that evolutionary considerations would play a dominant role here. The question, what are the human psychological capacities, is clearly different from the question: how our species has acquired those capacities? The social scientific explanations and theories *presuppose* answers to the former kind of questions, but they do not presuppose any *specific* answers to the latter kind of questions. Of course, evolutionary psychologists might wish to change the kind of explanatory questions the social scientists are asking, but this challenge would require different sort of arguments.

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