

Preface to the Evolution of Ethics

This book develops the idea that there is a rational basis for the existence of ethics. Such an approach is daunting because the idea of reason or rational causes at work in the formation of ethics has been seriously challenged since the eighteenth century Enlightenment. However, there have been developments in biology and cybernetics that lead to a comprehensive theory of morality in which the rational nature of ethics can more easily be explained. Not only can the rise of ethical systems be linked to biological concepts, but ethics can be tied to mathematical concepts as well by way of cybernetic science. When ethics and cybernetics are combined, the resulting theory turns on scientific principles instead of philosophical speculations.

There are several important ideas linked to the emergence of ethical systems: first, that ethical systems evolve in response to the human need to survive in an environment where they are competing with many other organisms for scarce resources; second, that humans survive and flourish by efficiently using their resources and energies; and third, that the evolution of ethical systems is a function of an ongoing cybernetic process involving all humans, animals, and organisms.

Human experiences accumulate as a reservoir of knowledge, which influences the societal perception of which behaviors benefit people and which act counterproductive to their health and welfare. When people deviate from behaviors that are known to be productive, feedback arises that affects their lives in both subtle and obvious ways. Thus, the way in which people write laws and attach moral significance to certain behaviors is linked to a cybernetic process that maximizes human survival, minimizes social conflicts, and increases the meaningfulness of the human experience. Feedback that inspires change enhances the human ability to survive and to compete with other animals and organisms. This is important in the sense that some biologists believe that ninety-nine percent of all species that have ever existed are now extinct.

In order to build a bridge between the biological world of organic struggles for survival and the moral world of right and wrong, a simplified explanation of the evolutionary process is presented. This is necessary to illustrate how survival inspires a cybernetic process leading to the rise of ethical systems. The resulting theory sounds similar to some of the ideas of Thomas Hobbes. Where the two systems differ greatly is that the evolution of ethical systems here is viewed as an extension of a biological process, grounded in cybernetic principles, whereas Hobbesian philosophy derives from traditional ethical thinking touching on linguistic and metaethical aspects of reasoning.

What is important to note is how conflicts and potential conflicts act as a form of cybernetic feedback to society that alerts people to make changes in the way they behave. Feedback is an essential ingredient in evolutionary growth. Traffic laws vividly illustrate how the forces of human survival and the need for the synchronization of many parts work.

While the ideas of individual philosophers are not discussed directly, their relevance is implicit in the writing. Biological perspectives likewise do not address biological theory directly on a technical level. Books such as *Living Systems*, by James Grier Miller; *The Selfish Gene*, by Richard Dawkins; and *Mankind Evolving*, by Theodosius Dobzhansky are more appropriate sources, in a field of many good books, for understanding biological phenomena. These three books illuminate the complexity of biological systems in a way that ultimately leads to ethical questions. For instance, the idea of incorporating the notion of organization and efficiency in ethical theory has its analog in Miller's living systems theory. Here it seems evident that successful organic strategies for survival have created extremely complex and efficient hierarchies of order in nature. The principles governing the evolution and survival of lower organisms seem much the same as the forces driving the development of moral systems. Living systems theory invites the question that if organic systems are so incredibly diverse and complex, why would the nature of moral systems be any different, suggesting that philosophical conundrums of the past regarding the nature of morality stem from underestimating the complexity of moral science.

In Richard Dawkins' writings there are illustrations of how pervasive the struggle for survival is. Such struggle involves not only humans but lower organisms, all competing with each other for scarce resources. Dawkins' ideas are important in realizing that humans, after all, still act involuntarily on a biological level. Like it or not, struggles manifest in elegant and concealed forms have endured and proliferated to this day in human societies. Both Miller's and Dawkins' writings lend visual texture to the sense of complex systems uniting in cooperative strategies to further their mutual survival. The rise of ethical systems in this sense is a cooperative effort of humanity that has the effect of optimizing its energies and resources in an ever increasing dynamic of survival guided by cybernetic principles.

Dobzhansky's work is crucial to understanding how human beings adapt to a hostile environment by changing the way their cultures are structured. The idea that human culture is an instrument of biological adaptation is central to perceiving how Dobzhansky, and those who followed him, were perhaps unknowingly the first to establish credible bridge points linking ethics with biology.