

Phil 176/276G: Historical Philosophers—American Philosophy

Professor: Aaron Zimmerman
Email: aaronzimmerman@ucsb.edu

Office Hours: M&W 5-6PM
Office: South Hall 5707

Handout #4: The Application of Natural Selection to the Study of Humanity's Past and Future

“As a nation, we began by declaring that, ‘*All men are created equal.*’ We now practically read it ‘All men are created equal, *except negroes.*’ When the Know-Nothings get control, it will read ‘all men are created equal, except negroes, and *foreigners, and Catholics.*’ When it comes to this I should prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretence of loving liberty—to Russia, for instance, where despotism can be taken pure, and without the base alloy of hypocrisy” (Lincoln 1855).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Know_Nothing

1. Forms of Selection

Individual Selection: A heritable phenotype (or manifest property of an organism) gives the organism that has it a reproductive advantage in comparison to other members of its population in the environmental niche in which they live. Because of this reproductive advantage and the traits heritability, the trait is manifested in a growing proportion of the population over time (until it becomes species typical).

Group selection: In an environmental niche in which more than one group of organisms lives, a heritable phenotype (or manifest property of an organism) gives groups which contain organisms with that phenotype a reproductive advantage in comparison to those groups in the environmental niche who lack members with that phenotype. Because of this reproductive advantage, the trait is manifested in a growing proportion of the population living in that niche (as the disadvantaged group diminishes or disappears and its remaining members are assimilated or absorbed) until the trait becomes species (or population) typical.

Note 1: Darwin considers cultural transmission through books and teaching a form of heritability. This means that there are heritable traits that are not “genetically encoded” in any substantive sense. (Though the “learning mechanism” may have genetically encoded components.)

Note 2: What is commonly called “kin selection” is a form of group selection where the groups in question are families. Kin selection is often used to explain fitness diminishing physiological traits like the sterility of worker bees because sterility cannot evolve via individual selection (a sterile individual having 0 fitness).

Now let's focus on the use of these concepts to explain morality. First consider all the components of a person's morality or conscience. (Consider your own morality and the differing moralities of the other people on Earth right now.) According to Darwin the components of our moralities include sympathy, the capacity to understand other minds,

pro-social instincts, a sense of justice or fairness, retributivist sentiments, and a host of other things.

Questions: Which of the components of your morality evolved via individual selection? Which evolved via kin selection or non-kin group selection? Which aspects of a person's morality have some explanation that does not involve either of these forms of natural selection?

Further Questions: What is the relationship between a person's morality (or her conscience) and her assertions? For instance, if you *assert* that something is wrong, does that entail that you *believe* that it is wrong, where that belief is a component of your morality? Or might you fail to believe what you say if the purported belief fails to manifest itself in other components of your interactions with other people? Consider, as an interesting and important example, Locke and Jefferson. Did they really believe in the natural rights of all men? How does this square with their involvement with slavery?

2. Veneer Theory

Veneer Theory is a skeptical conception of morality that has four component theses.

Morality is coercive: the main function of moral discourse and behavior is getting other people to behave in ways the speaker or actor desires, where the audience in question is not predisposed to act in the desired manner out of prudence or self-interest.

Morality is deceptive: moral discourse and behavior could not play their coercive function were this function advertised (or made explicitly known) to the audience at which it is aimed.

Morality is psychologically superficial: a typical human's default motives are immoral or amoral—genuinely moral behavior is invariably or at least typically the upshot of the coercive and deceptive uses of moral language or behavior referenced above.

Morality is biologically superficial: most (if not all) of those aspects of our psychology that we owe to our evolved biology are either immoral or (at least) non-moral.

Initial Questions: If we think that our minds evolved from the minds of our ancestors via natural processes of selection, does that commit us to veneer theory or some similarly skeptical conception of moral language and practice? Is veneer theory or moral skepticism of some other form the natural consequence of applying Darwin's theory of evolution via natural selection to our moral psychologies?

3. De Waal's Theses

De Waal's 1st Thesis: Huxley was a veneer theorist in the above sense.

“One school views morality as a cultural innovation achieved by our species alone. This school does not see moral tendencies as part and parcel of human nature. Our ancestors, it

claims, became moral by choice. The second school, in contrast, views morality as a direct outgrowth of the social instincts that we share with other animals. In the latter view, morality is neither unique to us nor a conscious decision taken at a specific point in time: it is the product of social evolution. The first standpoint assumes that deep down we are not truly moral. It views morality as a cultural overlay, a thin veneer hiding an otherwise selfish and brutish nature. Until recently, this was the dominant approach to morality within evolutionary biology as well as among science writers popularizing this field. I will use the term ‘Veneer Theory’ to denote these ideas, tracing their origin to Thomas Henry Huxley (although they obviously go back much further in Western philosophy and religion, all the way to the concept of original sin)” (de Waal 2003: 6–7).

Questions: Discussion of veneer theory as defined above allows us to frame our questions about the relationship between biological theory and moral practice in a pointed way: Does the acceptance of Veneer theory make someone less moral? If someone is convinced of this view of morality’s genesis and function, is she therein less likely to act in identifiably moral ways or less prone to judge people in moral terms? Does embracing this view of morality’s origins and function somehow “commit” one to paying less attention to injustice, or undeserved suffering, or the rest of what one had previously conceptualized as one’s more pressing moral concerns?

Note that some critics of Darwin said that acceptance of his biology would lead to a breakdown of morality. But Darwin denied this.

De Waal’s 2nd Thesis: Contemporary studies of non-human primates show that Veneer Theory is false.

The primate species from which the earliest humans, bonobos and chimps evolved had capacities for empathy and sympathy, a sense of fairness and gratitude, a non-derivative concern for the wellbeing of their kin, and a proclivity to experience anger at perceived injustices. Confronted with the manifestation of these traits by non-human apes and other primates, we must conclude that a contemporary human’s moral compass is largely a biological phenomenon, the outgrowth of a genetically inherited “core morality” that emerged long before the evolution of our species. Whatever one makes of the *metaphysics* of morals and the epistemological standing of moral judgments and experiences, morality is *biologically* and *psychologically real*. Since so much of morality existed before the evolution of human language (and thus human religion and human politics), morality today is much more than a story we tell to elicit behaviors that accord with our reproductive and pecuniary interests.

We are not subduing the proverbial wolf within us or hypocritically fooling everyone around us when we act morally: we are taking decisions that flow from social instincts far older than our species, even though we add to these the perhaps uniquely human complexity of a disinterested concern for others and the society at large. (de Waal 2003: 33)

Clearly, de Waal finds some connection between the origins of our moral psychology and its current status; some relatively deep connection between: (a) the innateness of those

psychological faculties operative when we judge one another good or bad, fair or unfair, virtuous or vicious (or behave in ways that elicit these judgments), and (b) the biological reality (or “depth”) of the traits we express or ascribe. After all, if de Waal didn’t perceive a connection of this sort, he would not argue from the empathy, sympathy and sense of fairness exhibited by the chimpanzees he has studied to the optimistic conclusion that morality is much more than a veneer.

Question: Let us agree with Darwin, Huxley and De Waal, and against Locke, that our natural morality or “moral sense” is not the voice of reason implanted in us by an intelligent, morally good creator who intends for us to live in harmony with one another. Let us agree that we inherited core components of our moralities from our primate ancestors. Still, we can ask, **how much morality and what kind of morality have we inherited from our primate ancestors?** Surely, our answers to this question must be shaped by an assessment of our current moralities. Which moralities have humans enacted over the course of known history? Which moralities do humans enact today?

Note: The other primates aren’t exactly saints. Though chimpanzees act benevolently and reconcile with one another after disputes in the ways de Waal so vividly describes, chimps are also prone to deception and domination (Byrne and Whitten 1988). Mightn’t chimps engage in pretense with the aim of getting conspecifics to observe rules the pretenders have no intention of observing? And mightn’t we have inherited from our primate ancestors a proclivity to engage in these tactics and a concurrent susceptibility to their deployment by others?

4. What is the Relationship between Social Contract Theory and Veneer Theory?

At times, de Waal casts a wide net, calling Hobbes and several other theorists of the social contract “veneer theorists” because they posit “a rational decision by inherently asocial creatures” to explain the formation of civil societies (2003: 4).¹

1st Criticism: This is a misunderstanding of social contract theory. Hobbes and Locke allow that there is morality within the family and morality within the tribe prior to the formation of civil societies. The social contract does not create morality. The social contract creates government to provide a neutral means of resolving disputes between families or tribes.

2nd Criticism: Huxley is famous for delivering a particularly harsh *critique* of social contract theory. Indeed, after observing that Rousseau wisely deploys the social contract as an ideal rather than a description of mankind’s past (1893a: 298–299), Huxley goes on to reject the ideal in question: “The political lantern of Rousseauism is a mere corpse candle and will plunge those who follow it in the deepest of anarchic bogs” (Huxley 1893a: 301).² If Huxley conceptualized morality as a veneer, it was not because he thought of it as a

¹ Cf. de Waal’s (2003: 4–6) criticism of Rawls.; de Waal (2003: 4–6).

² Huxley says that conceiving of the social contract as ideal rather than real was wise on Rousseau’s part because Rousseau employs a “vicious method of a priori political speculation” which bears little connection to scientific biology and anthropology (Huxley 1893b: 336).

“choice.”

5. De Waal's Interpretation of Huxley

According to de Waal, Huxley inferred the biological superficiality of morality from a mistaken interpretation of natural selection. In a break with Darwin, Huxley is supposed to have ignored reciprocal altruism, kin selection and (non-kin) group selection, and because of these oversights he (i.e., Huxley) is supposed to have mistakenly concluded that evolution favors selfishness:

Evolution favors animals that assist each other if by doing so they achieve long-term benefits of greater value than the benefits derived from going it alone and competing with others. Unlike cooperation resting on simultaneous benefits to all parties involved (known as mutualism), reciprocity involves exchanged acts that, while beneficial to the recipient, are costly to the performer (Dugatkin 1997). This cost, which is generated because there is a time lag between giving and receiving, is eliminated as soon as a favor of equal value is returned to the performer... It is in these theories that we find the germ of an evolutionary explanation that escaped Huxley. (de Waal 2003: 10–11)

Why did evolutionary biology stray from this path during the final quarter of the previous century? This is probably due to the conviction of some prominent figures, inspired by Huxley, that there is no way natural selection could have produced anything other than nasty organisms. No good could possibly have come from such a blind process. This belief, however, represents a monumental confusion between process and outcome. Natural selection is indeed a merciless process of elimination, yet it has the capacity to produce an incredible range of organisms, from the most asocial and competitive to the kindest and gentlest. If we assume that the building blocks of morality are among its many products, as Darwin did, then morality, instead of being a human-made veneer, should be looked at as an integral part of our history as group-living animals, hence an extension of our primate social instincts. (de Waal 2003: 34)

An Interpretive Question: Did Huxley really deny the existence of group selection? Did he really overlook the possibility that competition between groups might select a population of cooperators?

6. Huxley's Use of Group Selection to Explain European Morality

De Waal is wrong. Huxley explicitly hypothesized that competition between groups selected for what we might call “in-group” cooperativeness: the kind of *selective* good will manifested by those Europeans colonizing the New World.

There is no doubt of the result, if the work of the colonists be varied out energetically and with intelligent combination of all their forces. On the other hand, if they are slothful, stupid, or careless; or if they waste their *energies in contests with one another*, the chances are that the old state of nature will have the best of it.

The native savage will destroy the immigrant civilized man. Of the English animals and plants some will be extirpated by their indigenous rivals, others will pass into the feral state and themselves become components of the state of nature. In a few decades, all other traces of the settlement will have vanished. (Huxley 1895: 17, *emphasis added*)

(1) Note the *partial* nature of the cooperative motives that will emerge if group selection brings some change to the biological state of American nature. The distribution of phenotypes in the New World will remain largely unaltered unless the colonists cooperate with one another against the natives and other components of the natural order they found there. As we now know, the colonists did cooperate with one another, and did bring about a change in the distribution of phenotypes in the Americas. Like Darwin (1871/1982), Huxley viewed the history of colonization as a process of group selection. So de Waal is wrong to accuse Huxley of ignoring every evolutionary mechanism save individual selection. It's just that Huxley didn't indulge in the absurd suggestion that group selection had yielded populations of pure altruists.

(2) According to Huxley, competition for resources between groups of humans (and other animals) had left a highly *parochial* form of altruism in place: in-group solidarity rather than solidarity simpliciter (cf. Livingstone Smith 2011). According to Huxley, the groups that had won in the battle for reproductive resources and therein persisted over time contained a higher proportion of what he called "cooperative intelligence." Holding all else equal, the members of less cooperative groups were outbred, extinguished or assimilated.⁴

I see no reason to doubt that, at its origin, human society was as much a product of organic necessity as that of the bees. The human family, to begin with, rested upon exactly the same conditions as those which gave rise to similar associations among animals lower in the scale. Further, it is easy to see that every increase in the duration of the family ties, with the resulting co-operation of a larger and larger number of descendants for protection and defence, would give the families in which such modifications took place a distinct advantage over the others. And, as in the hive, the progressive limitation of the struggle for existence between the members of the family would involve increasing efficiency as regards outside competition. (Huxley 1895: 26)

Question: Is cooperative intelligence, as Huxley conceived of it, a component of "deep" (i.e. psychologically real or pre-linguistic) morality? In one sense of the question, the answer is

⁴ It may be that Huxley joined Darwin in thinking that the colonists were more cooperative than the natives. And Huxley may have thought this advantage central to an explanation of colonialism's "success": i.e., the drastic evolution of phenotypes in the New World. "A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage, and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection. At all times throughout the world tribes have supplanted other tribes; and as morality is one important element in their success, the standard of morality and the number of well-endowed men will thus everywhere tend to rise and increase" Darwin (1982, 157-8; cf. 162-5). The texts with which I am familiar don't address Huxley's stance on these issues.

“yes,” but in another it’s probably “no.”

On the Yes Side: Huxley thought of cooperative intelligence as a biologically evolved extra-linguistic or psychologically real phenotype.

On the No Side: Huxley pointed out that the tribal morality that has evolved via group selection is a far cry from the theory of universal human rights Locke grounded in his creationist biology.

So de Waal is wrong to claim that Huxley ignored group selection, equated human existence with the struggle of each individual against the rest, and was therein led to equate moral speech with a disguised attempt to coerce essentially self-interested agents into cooperative endeavors. Huxley rejected that conception of morality whole cloth when he claimed, “that, at its origin, human society was as much a product of organic necessity as that of the bees.”

Did Huxley claim the English were competing for survival and reproduction and so subject to the force of individual selection? Did he label his neighbors’ calls for kindness, justice and patriotic solidarity a ploy used by them to gain advantage in their competition for greater progeny? Again the answer is “no”:

I think it would puzzle Mr. Lilly, or any one else, to adduce convincing evidence that, at any period of the world’s history, there was a more widespread sense of social duty, or a greater sense of justice, or of the obligation of mutual help, than in this England of ours. Ah! but, says Mr. Lilly, these are all products of our Christian inheritance; when Christian dogmas vanish virtue will disappear too, and the ancestral ape and tiger will have full play. But there are a good many people who think it obvious that Christianity also inherited a good deal from Paganism and from Judaism; and that, if the Stoics and the Jews revoked their bequest, the moral property of Christianity would realise very little. And, if morality has survived the stripping off of several sets of clothes which have been found to fit badly, why should it not be able to get on very well in the light and handy garments which Science is ready to provide? (1895: 145)

Of course, the call to war is often diagnosed as a hypocritical bid for the choicest mates, especially when it is loudly trumpeted by those who refuse to join in the fray. But one of Huxley’s central conclusions in *Ethics and Evolution* was that natural selection had not affected the population of England over the course of the “four or five centuries” prior to his writing that work (1895: 40). In particular:

During these three centuries, from the reign of Elizabeth to that of Victoria, the struggle for existence between man and man has been so largely restrained among the great mass of the population (except for one or two short intervals of civil war), that it can have had little, or no, selective operation. As to anything comparable to direct selection, it has been practised on so small a scale that it may also be neglected. The criminal law, in so far as by putting to death, or by subjecting to long periods of imprisonment, those who infringe its provisions, prevents the

propagation of hereditary criminal tendencies; and the poor-law, in so far as it separates married couples, whose destitution arises from hereditary defects of character, are doubtless selective agents operating in favour of the non-criminal and the more effective members of society. But the proportion of the population which they influence is very small; and, generally, the hereditary criminal and the hereditary pauper have propagated their kind before the law effects them. In a large proportion of cases, crime and pauperism have nothing to do with heredity; but are the consequence, partly, of circumstances and partly, the possession of qualities, which under different conditions of life, might have excited esteem and admiration. (1895: 39)

7. Huxley's Brand of Veneer Theory: The Theory of Universal Human Rights Functioning as Veneer

The “veneer” Huxley sees is not morality as a whole, but the expression of universal moral principles that are supposed to guide revolutionary political movements toward a truly egalitarian world order. What was pretense in Huxley's eyes was not a mother's “natural affection and sympathy” for her sick child or the Englishmen's quite genuine concern for the property rights of Englishmen wherever they may roam. These feelings are indeed both biologically and psychologically real (1895: 37).⁵ But then so is our drive to dominate, our will to power:

The propounders of what are called the “ethics of evolution” when the ‘evolution of ethics’ would usually better express the object of their speculations, adduce a number of more or less interesting facts and more or less sound arguments, in favour of the origin of the moral sentiments, in the same way as other natural phenomena, by a process of evolution. I have little doubt, for my own part, that they are on the right track; but as the immoral sentiments have no less been evolved, there is, so far, as much natural sanction for the one as the other. The thief and the murderer follow nature just as much as the philanthropist. (1895: 79–80)

What is mere pretense, according to Huxley, is not our evolved in-group morality, but the cosmopolitan idea that *we are all in the in-group*.

Though Huxley characterizes group selection as the main source of “the ethical progress” (1895: 35), he insists that ethical progress has a dark side: while it strengthens the loyalties, friendships and pro-social concerns of in-group members, it concurrently augments their hostility to members of various out-groups, who are in consequence conceptualized as “the enemies of the ethical”:

Even should the whole human race be absorbed in one vast polity, within which “absolute political justice” reigns, the struggle for existence with the state of nature

⁵ In fact, Huxley endorsed Adam Smith's “impartial spectator” analysis of the sentiments that constitute an in-group's morality and the more neutral, abstract judgments of propriety, virtue and vice to which these sentiments give rise (1895: 31); and de Waal classifies Smith as a paradigmatic *opponent* of veneer theory (2003: 12).

outside it, and the tendency to the return of the struggle within, in consequence of over-multiplication, will remain; and, unless men's inheritance from the ancestors who fought a good fight in the state of nature, their dose of original sin, is rooted out by some method at present unrevealed, at any rate to disbelievers in supernaturalism, every child born into the world will still bring with him the instinct of unlimited self-assertion. He will have to learn the lesson of self-restraint and renunciation. But the practice of self-restraint and renunciation is not happiness, though it may be something much better (1895: 43–44).

Natural selection has not yielded wholly self-interested individuals who mask their wholly selfish motives in the course of their daily interactions. But the kind of biologically and psychologically real in-group solidarity that emerges from group selection is *inevitably* tied to out-group hostility on Huxley's account: the kind of "othering" described by contemporary social theorists. As Hume so thoroughly argued, people tend not toward love of humanity itself but love of those humans with which they identify, however flexible the identities in question.

An Englishman in Italy is a friend: A European in China; and perhaps a man wou'd be belov'd as such, were we to meet him in the moon. But this proceeds only from the relation to ourselves; which in these cases gathers force by being confined to a few persons. (T 3.2.1.12)

8. Is Huxley Right?

Question: Is it true that we must hate others to love one another? (Think here of Locke urging humans to have solidarity with one another by setting us apart as superior to the other animals.)

Huxley's View: History shows that we are "naturally" competitive. We stop competing for resources with our brothers and sisters to help our family dominate the neighbors. We stop competing with the neighbors to help our village beat the next. And when all Englishmen have what they need to survive and reproduce without fear, when selective pressures fail to operate within the nation, "the struggle for existence, as between man and man, within that society, is ipso facto, at an end" (1895: 36). But the competitive drives of the English were not *eliminated* during this period of social harmony. They were *displaced* or transformed into those that drove British imperialism.

(1) "Unconscious Othering": In the first quote above Huxley describes colonization as a battle between civilization and *wilderness*, a battle he likens to a gardener's attempts to keep the weeds from choking off the plants of greater beauty and utility he has selected for himself. The natives are conceptualized as weeds rather than domestic animals; the results of natural rather than artificial selection. And this habit of thought wasn't unique to Huxley (Mills 1997).

(2) Locke profited from the slave trade and was instrumental in writing inegalitarian (viciously inhumane) provisions into the slave code of the Carolinas (Bernasconi and Mann 2005). And that Jefferson "lived large" off his many slaves and failed to free them in his

will (Cohen 1969, Berlin 1998). So Locke and Jefferson enslaved men while arguing loudly for the natural injustice of slavery. It is fair to say, then, that the universalist moral language employed by Locke and Jefferson were components of a discursive façade they employed to hide their real lives.

Conclusion: What Locke and Jefferson were hiding in words was not amorality or immorality, but a *partial morality* limited to the wealthy Anglo-American clan of which they were both members. They didn't accept a social contract but what Charles Mills calls a "racial contract." It is reasonable to suppose that Huxley knew of these instances of historically grand hypocrisy—and many others besides—and that this knowledge led him to conceptualize the revolutionaries' cosmopolitan ideology of universal human rights as pretense.