

**Drago Djuric**

### *MORAL SENSE BY CHARLES DARWIN*

*SUMMARY: At the beginning of this paper Darwin's approach to science will be presented. This will be illustrated with his own modality of his main claims and modesty he had shown in evaluating the worth of his theory. Then we shall present his four suppositions important for preservation and evolution of moral sense. After that we will consider the issue of relation between inherited and acquired moral properties and main characteristics which, according to Darwin, make difference between social instinct in lower animals and moral sense in man. At the end some we shall present some arguments for thesis that in evolutionary scientific approach to ethics there is no room for unbridgeable gap between facts and values, "ought" and "is", and some arguments for thesis that from the point of view of the theory of evolution we can have descriptive ethics, but not any prescriptive or normative ethics, except predictions that some moral beliefs and behaviors can be evolutionary successful.*

*KEY WORDS: Darwin, ethics, naturalization, moral sense.*

### **Historical place of the theory of evolution**

„Man is a part of nature“. This is today almost part of the folk psychology, a usual point of view. As far as the traditions of philosophy and science are concerned however, Greek atomists were the first to take this stand. But back then, as in European modern times, that view was more of a bare metaphysical claim, a fruit of speculation, without devised argumentation or explanation based on scientific methodology and facts. Many historians of thought, for example, feel obligated to remind of Spinoza and his thesis that „it is impossible, that man should not be a part of Nature“ (Spinoza 1997, part 4, prop. IV), as well as of his criticism of teleology, especially the way he elaborated it in the *Appendix* to the first part of his *Ethics*, where he writes that „there is no need to show to at length, that nature has no particular goal in view, and that final causes are mere human figments“ (Spinoza 1997, part 1, Appendix). It wasn't until the naturalists of the 19th century that someone took an effort to systematically substantiate that thesis. One of the major preconditions for that was sudden development of natural sciences.

At the turn of the 18th century great effort was invested into description and classification of natural phenomena, especially those of the organic nature. It seemed impossible to many, though, that biology would ever accomplish what physics already appeared to have succeeded. Even Kant, for example, didn't believe that „Newton“ would emerge who would be able to explain organic world through the laws of nature—for example, „creation (Erzeugung) of the leaf of grass.“ (Kant 1977, B 338/A 334) Note that Darwin himself, as we will show later, didn't think he could explain origins and creation of life, but only its diversification—the origin of species through natural selection.

Ernest Haeckel was among the first to claim that „new Newton“ had appeared after all, in the shape of Charles Darwin. Since then, bulk of philosophers and scientists have valued highly Darwin's theory of the evolution of organic world through natural selection. Karl Marx wrote to Ferdinand Lassalle, after *The Origin of Species* was published in 1859: „Darwin's work is most important and suits my purpose in that it provides a basis in natural science for the historical class struggle. One does, of course, have to put up with the clumsy English style of argument. Despite all shortcomings, it is here that, for the first time, 'teleology' in natural science is not only dealt a mortal blow but its rational meaning is empirically explained.“ (Marx, Letter to Lassalle January 16., 1861) According to Sigmund Freud, Darwin is not a „new Newton“, but „new Copernicus“, since like Copernicus, who had established that the Earth is not a centre of the Universe but merely its part, Darwin showed that human race doesn't hold a privileged position in creation, since it originated from animal kingdom. The third major breakthrough, of course, Freud ascribed to himself.

Probably the highest praise to Darwin's theory was made by Daniel Dennett who wrote: „If I were to give an award for the single best idea anyone has ever had, I'd give it to Darwin, ahead of Newton and Einstein and everyone else. In a single stroke, the idea of evolution by natural selection unifies the realm of life, meaning, and purpose with the realm of space and time, cause and effect, mechanism and physical law.“ (Dennett 1995, 21) On the same page, beside stating that Darwin's idea is wonderful and dangerous, Dennett wrote that it represents a scientific and a philosophical revolution, and that one revolution wouldn't be possible without the other. Aside from his judgement about the place of Darwin's idea in the general history of ideas, which is always hard and unrewarding to substantiate, the rest of Dennett's statement seems quite convincing. One could argue that certain principles and models of thought developed by philosophy had influenced Darwin to formulate his theory, but tracing those influences would be difficult and complicated. According to Dennett, Darwin's theory is „a universal acid: it eats through just about every traditional concept“.

### **Darwin's approach to science**

In strong contrast to such high praises to his theory by significant thinkers, there is Darwin's extreme restraint in presentation and promotion of that idea. Although aware of his theory's worth, he used to judge its value without pomp, without unbalanced enthusiasm and egotism, so common for the majority of philosophers and scientists of modern times.

Let us document Darwin's modesty in self-evaluation. He is full of respect toward his predecessors. Credits to other scientists' contribution in interpreting some significant problems connected to certain segments of theory of evolution are woven through entire Darwin's work. He elaborated the role of his predecessors in formulating the theory perhaps most explicitly, and certainly most concisely, in the short chapter titled *An Historical Sketch* printed in the second edition of *The Origin of Species*. (Darwin 1962, 15-24) Even when he showed proofs for his point of view quite clearly, and proved his opposition wrong convincingly, his tone was not for a moment triumphant. Moreover, he was almost never categorical in his claims.

In spite of thorough and detailed argumentation, his tone is hypothetical in many places. Here are some citations to illustrate this. In his *The Descent of Man*, for example, he wrote: „In what manner the mental powers were first developed in the lowest organisms, is as hopeless an enquiry as how life first originated. These are problems for the distant future, if they are ever to be solved by man.” (Darwin 1871, 36) At the beginning of his preface to second edition (1874), he wrote that he had corrected many things according to suggestions of his readers and to latest scientific research, while at the end he predicts that it is „probable or even certain“, that many of his conclusions will eventually prove wrong. It is peculiar that almost none of Darwin's modesty and relaxed attitude survived in his passionate and aggressive followers and opponents.

Because of all that, it is not easy to systematize what we can call Darwin's ethics. His elaboration of ethical problems has all of the above mentioned characteristics. In the beginning of the chapter *Moral Sense* in his book *The Descent of Man*, he says: „This great question has been discussed by many writers of consummate ability; and my sole excuse for touching on it is impossibility of here passing it over, and because, as far as I know, no one has approached it exclusively from the side of natural history.“ (Darwin 1871, 71)

### **Darwin's evolutionary approach to the question of moral sense**

Right at the beginning we have to bear in mind few assumptions implied in Darwin's approach to the question of moral sense. As we have stated before, he

didn't know and didn't discuss origins of life, like he didn't know and didn't discuss origins of intelligence. He had left those matters to future researchers, with little hope for their success. One can say with much confidence that he didn't discuss the origins of moral sense, as well. He is interested, above all, in its preservation, development and mode of functioning. Darwin himself explained his method at the very beginning. He took the task to apply his theory of evolution, developed in *The Origin of Species*, to man. While fulfilling that task, as he wrote in the above cited work, he couldn't, because of its role in evolution, neglect the question of morality.

Darwin presumed that moral sense or conscience is the single most significant difference between humans and lower animals. But, of what kind this difference is? He doesn't regard this difference, however, as a difference of kind, but as a difference of degree. As a matter of fact, Darwin specifically stated: „Nevertheless the difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of the kind.“ (Darwin 1871, 105) If man is a part of nature, then he is a part of nature in a matter of moral sense as well. Consistent application of evolutionary method should show, hence, that moral sense has continuously evolved from lower animals to man. On the other side, researching of moral sense of lower animals can show us true basis of moral sense in man. This basis is of the same kind, it only evolved in degree. However, it could be more easily analyzed in its elementary condition. Because of that Darwin says: „The investigation possesses, also, some independent interest, as an attempt to see how far the study of the lower animals can throw light on one of the highest psychological faculties of man.“ (Darwin 1871, 71)

Darwin further searches, not for the way moral sense and conscience emerged, but for preconditions for its existence and preservation, and for the spot in which its presence in its simplest form can be detected. While characterising his thesis at the beginning, Darwin was more scientistlike patient and hypothetical than resolute. He wrote: „The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable—namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well developed, as in man.“ (Darwin 1871, 71-72)

Darwin develops this basic thesis through four observations important for preservation and evolution of moral sense.

1. The fact that animals feel pleasure in company, that they have a certain degree of sympathy for members of a group and that they do favours to one another. All these phenomena are founded, according to Darwin, on social instinct. Here Darwin already, politely, takes a stand opposite to J. S. Mill. Namely, in his *Utilitarianism* Mill, trying to determine naturalness of moral feelings, says that „if, as is my own belief, the moral feelings are not innate, but acquired, they are not for that

reason the less natural. It is natural to man to speak, to reason [...], though these are acquired faculties. The moral feelings are not indeed a part of our nature“ (Mill 1980, 28)

This is not the place to discuss if Mill’s analogy, or his attempt to define naturality, is good. Anyway, Darwin deems that the root of human morality lies in social instincts. Instincts are innate or inherited. Darwin bases his line of argument on the fact that „it can hardly be disputed that the social feelings are instinctive or innate in the lower animals; and why should they not be so in man?“ (Darwin 1871, 71)<sup>1</sup> Naturally, analogy has sense only if we suppose some common moral traits for man and lower animals.<sup>2</sup>

Hume has stated earlier that some animals have properties characteristic for morality. Regarding the presence of morality, Hume, like Darwin, makes the difference between man and lower animals in degree only. According to Hume, „every animal has sense and appetite and will, that is, every animal must be susceptible of all the same virtues and vices, for which we ascribe praise and blame to human creatures.“ (Hume 1966, 176)

Most rudimentary advent of moral sense Darwin illustrates by behavior of lower animals; in caring for young offsprings, in feeling of sympathy for members of immediate and wider community. Social instincts are, for example, present in birds (their offspring can not survive without parental social instincts), but not in amoebae. At the earlier stages of evolutionary history parental responsibilities are unnecessary (for example, in living beings which reproduce by division).

2. With the development of higher mind faculties (intelligence), human beings acquired capacity to reflect on their own past actions. Because of that, according to Darwin, had developed conscience which became monitor of this actions. He particularly emphasized the importance of memory through which „images of all past actions and motives would be incessantly passing through the brain of each individual; and that feeling of dissatisfaction which invariably results [...] from any unsatisfied instinct, would arise, as often as it was perceived that the enduring and always present social instinct had yielded to some other instinct, at the time

1 Ever since Lamarck the discussion has developed about the relationship between innate, i.e. inheritable, and acquired or learnt behaviors. Lamarck was too much of an optimist regarding inheriting of acquired behaviors, while Darwin was very cautious. Modern aspects of this discussion are clearly elaborated by David Papineau, on the example of so called Baldwin effect (see: Papineau 2006, 40-60).

2 Today this discussion essentially revolves around the dilemma whether some acquired or learnt moral traits could be inherited. Some authors are speaking of so called genetic and cultural co-evolution. Most common interpretation model of this co-evolution is based on the idea of Richard Dawkins, whom distinguishes between genes as units of natural evolution, and memes as units of cultural evolution. (Dawkins, 1989)

stronger, but neither enduring in its nature, nor leaving behind it a very vivid impression.“ (Darwin 1871, 72)

In this matter as well, Hume has a point of view similar to Darwin's, so much so that this concept of morality is often rightfully dubbed Humean-Darwinian ethics. Presence of intelligence is not the condition for appearance of moral sense or social instincts. The fact that lower animals don't have a higher degree of reason, doesn't mean that they have no morality. Reason, according to Hume, can not produce anything, because it is a passive and not an active power. Want of sufficient degree of reason by animals „may hinder them from perceiving the duties and obligations of morality, but can never hinder these duties from existing; since they must antecedently exist, in order to their being perceived.“ (Hume 1966, 176)<sup>3</sup> Darwin's standpoint is, as we will see, almost the same. In every case, according to Darwin, social instincts are different from other instincts because they are „enduring and always present“.

3. Darwin also emphasizes the role of common opinion in shaping of moral sense. The inception of speech made this possible. Nevertheless, though common opinion has a significant role, since it expresses the will of the community and exerts social pressure, directing the way members of a community should act for common good, at the basis of our approval or disapproval of our mates lies sympathy. It is, according to Darwin, the cornerstone of social instinct.

4. At the end, Darwin focuses on influence of habit in guiding the conduct of members of a society. All previous causes, including sympathy, are additionally amplified by habit.

### **Moral sense by men and lower animals**

Darwin was unusually indecisive about the nature of the difference in moral sense of man and lower animals. Although he, as we have already said, thinks that this difference is the difference in degree and not in kind, and on that assumption bases his analysis, he however first of all says that he didn't mean „to maintain that any strictly social animal, if its intellectual faculties were to become as active and as highly developed as in man, would acquire exactly the same moral sense as ours.“ (Darwin 1871, 73) Therefore, animal has a moral sense, but not „exactly same [...] as ours“, even if it has „intellectual faculties [...] as highly developed as in man“.

3 On the same page Hume writes: “All the difference is, that our superior reason may serve to discover the vice or virtue, and by that means may augment the blame or praise”. This is also very close to Darwin's point of view.

Later, in the same text, Darwin claims something what looks like contradiction. What is it? Moral action can be performed only by a moral being. Though animals „may be seen doubting between opposed instincts, as in rescuing their offspring or comrades from danger; yet their actions, though done for the good of others, are not called moral.“ (Darwin 1871, 88) Why? Beside that, Darwin claims that humans, if they did the same without deliberation or hesitation, which would be difficult to differentiate from instinct, would nevertheless be regarded as moral beings. As this actions we can not distinguish by motives, he says that we should rank as moral the actions „performed by a moral being“. What is a moral being? Darwin provides something like definition by saying: „A moral being is one who is capable of comparing his past and future actions or motives, and of approving or disapproving of them. We have no reason to suppose that any of the lower animals have this capacity“. (Darwin 1871, 88)

According to Darwin, even if some animals have capacity to deliberate, hesitate and doubt, their actions we can not call moral. It seems that for man he supposes some higher degree or different properties of intelligence, because deliberation, hesitation and doubting are not sufficient for comparison of „past and future actions and motives“ and for „approving or disapproving“ of them. If it is so, then this difference in intelligence between man and lower animals is not difference of a degree, but of a kind. But this is a question of minor importance. Essentially, it doesn't violate Darwin's general theoretical assumption and it could be resolved within it, with certain corrections.

### **Darwin's ethical naturalism**

Darwin and his theory was under great influence of Hume's philosophical naturalism. It is very well known that he systematically read Hume's philosophy. Hume firmly believed that moral values are the product of certain natural human desires. Providing to some degree modified Aristotelian way of reasoning, Hume argued that human passions set the ends or goals to behaviour. At this point of view, passions determine what is desirable or valuable for people. Hume thinks that humans have natural dispositions to act „in the common good“. According to that, Mackie, for example, says that „it is not for nothing that his work is entitled *A Treatise of Humean Nature*, and subtitled, *An attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects*; it is an attempt to study and explain moral phenomena (as well as human knowledge and emotions) in the same sort of way in which Newton and his followers studied and explained the physical world.“ (Mackie 1980, 6) From that point of view Hume's moral philosophy can be considered along the direction of a suggestion that „moral philosophy should begin with the

investigation of the moral passions and, as such, should be seen as a branch of biology, psychology or anthropology.“ (Curry 2006, 235)

As we have seen, Darwin attempts to investigate the question of moral sense and present it from „the side of natural history”. In Darwin's time term history and term science were almost synonymous. Therefore, he provided us with the scientific investigation of moral or ethical concepts.

For some interpreters, of greater importance is the question of Darwin's attitude toward central ethical concepts—the normativity concepts. At the level of so called descriptive ethics things are relatively clear. On this level ethical beliefs can be described as a result of evolution. From a point of view of survival, good is what, through natural selection and adaptation, contributes to survival. Darwin explains not how moral beliefs and behaviours emerged, but which conditions for their emergence are necessary, the matter we have already discussed to a point, and what is the destiny of groups and species that harbour moral beliefs.

In Darwin's work it is possible to find, explicitly or implicitly, his own moral beliefs. He too, as other people, had moral beliefs. It is not of crucial importance, as most of interpreters believe, if he is under influence of a kind hedonistic utilitarianism, or in other words, if he thought that an action can be judged as good if it leads to the greatest happiness of the greatest number, by either increasing pleasure or decreasing pain. From the point of view of the theory of evolution, his beliefs are the result of natural selection, as are beliefs of other people that are different from his. It is possible to conclude, of course, that the moral beliefs advocated by Darwin intimately proved to be evolutionary successful, but it is not necessary. We cannot *a priori* exclude some kind of personal invention or moral behaviour which is not evolutionary successful. Later contemplations and investigations show that it was most probably so called reciprocal altruism.<sup>4</sup>

When he, at the beginning of the chapter *Moral sense*, spoke that moral sense or conscience „is the most noble of all attributes of man, leading him without a moment's hesitation to risk his life for that of a fellow-creature; or after due deliberation, impelled simply by the deep feeling of right or duty, to sacrifice it in some great cause“, he didn't have to deduce that claim, specifically and indirectly, from the evolutionary theory. The proof for that is a mere fact that individuals and species with such moral beliefs are present today. These are products of natural selection and these have survived as result of a kind of moral sense of his ancestors.

However, men, as well as some lower animals, even when they are not under practical pressure of real-time decision-making, are unable to predict ultimate consequences of their own decisions. Sometimes we act without hesitation, and

4 The problem of successful evolutionary strategies was particularly developed in the second half of 20th century, in so called evolutionary game theory. This topic was most complexly elaborated in: Axelrod, R (1984) *The Evolution and Cooperation*, Basic Books, New York.

sometimes after deliberation, but in both cases we can not ignore „brute fact that we are all finite and forgetful“. (Dennett 1988, 123) As a result of deliberation, we have a decision, not a detailed calculation. This has been often used as an argument for the thesis that great part of our capabilities for behavior in specific situations is inherited, or based in habits. In everyday life philosophers and ethicists do so as well. They too have their own moral beliefs or habits and they too don't make broad metaethical considerations before concrete decisions or behaviours.

Darwin writes that the moral sense or conscience „is summed up in that short but imperious word *ought*“. But is that Humean *ought* or Kantian *duty* something supernatural or is it a product of natural selection? It has been frequently asked how evolutionary naturalism in ethics can resolve Humean problem or how it can justify move from *is* to *ought* and Moore's problem of the *naturalistic fallacy*? Can this theory bridge the gap between *facts* and *values*? General evolutionistic answer can be—that „justification“ or „move“ is needless. From the point of view of the biological naturalism there is no such a gap. Object of consideration is not a question of philosophical definition of good, as it is in Moore's case.

None of these problems is an obstacle for Darwinian scientific „meta-ethics“. *Values* and *oughts* are products of evolution. These are the facts, as all other facts of life. The solution for naturalistic fallacy in ethics, considered not in Moore's, but in scientific sense, depends on a standpoint taken in the general metaphysics' and the philosophy of mind. In evolutionary theory there is a kind of biological reductionism. Some authors think that at the bases of naturalistic fallacy, considered in a broader sense, there is an implicit reliance on so called analytic/synthetic distinction and that, by eliminating that distinction, Quine (1964, 20-46) cleared the way for naturalistic solution. (see: Casebeer 2003, 15-27) If analytical statements are not *a priori* statements which seem independent of empirical experience, but represent solidified synthetic experience, then they are synthetic statements which, to put it vividly, became a part of our „nature“. If our moral beliefs, and especially our basic social instincts, seem as something independent from our experience, they are the result of a longtime experience of natural selection.

Darwinian theory of evolution is not teleological, it has no final ends or values. My thesis is that evolution as general science or theory cannot provide people norms of behavior or moral beliefs. As Darwin didn't discuss how or when life, intelligence or moral sense emerged, he didn't discuss the purpose of the evolution, neither. If one is allowed to say so, evolution is a theory and science of process or of the middle. His theory provides best scientific explanation of the complexity of biological kingdom, but not the explanation of the beginning of the world itself and its complexity, in the way William Paley teleological argument for God existence does. Unusual for his approach, Darwin without hesitation states that main laws of biological kingdom are „impressed on matter by the Creator“. At the end of *Origin*

of *Species* Darwin sets simplest forms of life which are created by God at the beginning of all this complexity. Namely, there he says: „There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being evolved.“ (Darwin 1962, 484-485)

I could agree that „*evolutionary moral naturalist* [...] is a kind of moral naturalist who holds that the sort of scientifically respectable facts that ground moral values and obligations are facts about natural selection.“ (Joyce 2006, 145) That is why it seems to me that anything like prescriptive evolutionary ethics is impossible. All previous attempts to establish it have failed. Most often they ended in ideologisation and violence over the theory of evolution. Theory of the biological evolution can only determine how morality emerged and what were the effects of it, and to some degree predict consequences of future behavior based on certain moral beliefs, but can not prescript general moral recepies. But, can that make any ethical theory? Main concepts of Darwin’s theory lead to some kind of moral skepticism.

Drago Đurić  
Filozofski fakultet, Beograd

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### **Moralno osećanje kod Čarlsa Darvina**

(Apstrakt)

Na početku rada biće prikazan Darwinov pristup nauci. To će biti ilustrovano modalitetom njegovih osnovnih tvrdnji i načinom ocenjivanja vrednosti svoje vlastite teorije. Potom će biti prikazana četiri osnovne pretpostavke koje on smatra značajnim za očuvanje i evoluciju moralnog osećanja. Nakon toga će biti razmotreno pitanje odnosa između nasleđenih i stečenih moralnih svojstava i osnovnih karakteristika koje, prema Darwinu, sačinjavaju razliku između socijalnog instinkta kod nižih životinja i moralnog osećanja kod čoveka. Na kraju će biti ponuđeni neki argumenti za tezu da u evolucionom naučnom pristupu etici nema mesta za nepremostivi jaz između činjenica i vrednosti, „treba“ i „jeste“, i neki argumenti za tezu da sa tačke gledišta teorije evolucije možemo imati deskriptivnu etiku, ali nikakvu preskriptivnu ili normativnu etiku, sem predviđanja da neka moralna uverenja i ponašanja mogu biti evoluciono uspešna.

KLJUČNE REČI: Darwin, etika, naturalizacija, moralno osećanje..