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**From Biology to Normativity: Reconciling Evolutionary Ethics and Pragmatism
through Dewey**

Ph.D. Thesis

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Abstract

The genesis of morality has remained a subject of perennial debate, and philosophers have yielded variegated and irreconcilable accounts regarding its origins and application. The argument has been between rationalist-transcendental approaches (e.g., Plato, Kant) and naturalist-evolutionary accounts (e.g., Hume, Darwin). The former derive universal, objective and absolute moral principles from articulated rational theories, and de-emphasise the factors of empirical and biological conditions of human life upon ethical discourse. However, evolutionary ethics establishes a descriptive or biological account of our natural moral capacity, and never treats it as an external imposition or as pure rational discovery. Yet such a natural account of morality is challenged (as Hume, Moore and Street noticed) to corroborate how normative authority can be derived from biological and experiential origins. Unless this gap is resolved, we remain caught between the extremes of “ethical absolutism”, which maximises abstract normativity, and a “biological reductionism” that reduces complex moral reasoning to biochemical or genetic facts. Thus, I contend that the fact-value dichotomy, the biological reductionism and the moral absolutism or essentialism can be reconciled through the synthesis of evolutionary ethics and Deweyan pragmatism. Against the two extreme views, Dewey’s ethical inquiry (characterised by its experimental, practical, and context-sensitive nature) can provide normative justification for evolutionary ethics. Accepting the biological origins of morality and treating moral judgment as a problem-solving tool, Dewey proposes pragmatic alternatives that transform natural capacities into normative authority. This pragmatic evolutionary framework is then applied to the moral claims of transhumanism to demonstrate its efficacy in resolving contemporary dilemmas. Methodologically, I follow a critical-analytical approach and combine philosophical exegesis with conceptual reconstruction. Through engaging with key thinkers (Dewey, Darwin, Dawkins, De Waal, and Churchland), comparative analyses, and integrative argumentation, I construct a systematic account of moral origins and growth that is both empirically grounded and normatively strong.

Keywords:- *Evolutionary Ethics, John Dewey, Pragmatism, Moral Naturalism, Normativity, Ethology, Transhumanism, Veneer Theory, Social Instincts, Fact-Value Dichotomy*

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1. Introduction

Despite its long history, moral philosophy remains a field in which ethicists have not reached consensus on an absolute theory regarding the nature and origins of morality. Classical ethical theories (deontology, teleology, and virtue) are committed to “moral essentialism”, i.e., moral truth or principles are objective and universal, and are corroborated rationally, regardless of context, condition, or culture (Dewey 1998, 25). However, ethical naturalists proposed ethics grounded in human experience or sentiment. David Hume and Adam Smith rejected the mere rational justification or abstraction of moral sentiment. Hume argues that 'Morality is more properly felt than judged,' stressing that moral judgments arise from emotional sentiments rather than rational deduction (2000, 415). Smith substantiates Hume’s sentimental ethics through his concept of the “impartial spectator,” which shows how our experience (specifically, sympathy) enables us to engage in ethical reasoning (2010, 11).

Naturalists' attempt to ground ethics in the moral agent's emotional capacity became a philosophical point of departure for some biologists (Lamarck and Spencer, for instance) who categorised morality as a natural human behaviour. Lamarck proposed a theory of “acquired characteristics” that views moral quality as traits that can be cultivated through habit and passed on to future generations. Spencer, the main figure of social Darwinism, attributes a biological foundation to moral sentiment (1892). What was started by early naturalists and later associated with human evolution by pre-Darwinian thinkers was systematised by Darwin and post-Darwinian biologists. In *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin articulates evolutionary ethics and provides a biological foundation for morality based on empirical observations and the logic of natural selection.

There remains a gap between ethical essentialists (who dismiss biological factors in the rise of normativity) and naturalists (who deemphasise the cultural and societal dimensions of morality). Hence, to reconcile the claims of natural ethics, specifically the evolutionary ethics, to the normativity or the non-biological factors, I turn to Dewey’s pragmatic ethics that accommodates both claims. His “experimental ethics” directs us to treat morality not as fixed or externally imposed, but as the product of both nature and human experience.

2. Problems and Objectives of the Study

The genesis of morality has remained a subject of perennial debate, and philosophers have yielded variegated and irreconcilable accounts regarding its origins and application. The

argument has been between rationalist-transcendental approaches and naturalist-evolutionary accounts. The former derive universal, objective and absolute moral principles from articulated rational theories, and de-emphasise the factors of empirical and biological conditions of human life upon ethical discourse. However, evolutionary ethics establishes a descriptive or biological account of our natural moral capacity, and never treats it as an external imposition or as pure rational discovery. Yet such a natural account of morality is challenged (as Hume, Moore and Street noticed) to corroborate how normative authority can be derived from biological and experiential origins. Unless this gap is resolved, we remain caught between the extremes of “ethical absolutism” and “biological reductionism”.

While the trajectory of this study moves 'from biology to normativity,' it rejects a 'straight-line' derivation or a direct jump from biological imperatives to moral sentiments. Rather, it maintains that biological mechanisms or instincts turn into normative authorities through culture and rational reflection. Philip Kitcher (2011) and Michael Tomasello (2016) remind us that cultural or societal elements are a mediating force that enables the moral agents to transcend mere biological mechanisms. Against moral absolutism and biological reductionism, Dewey treats morality as an evolving human natural trait shaped by biology, culture, sentiment, and social adaptation. Dewey and some Darwinians prioritise contingency over fixity, experience over ideal principles and adaptation over universality (Dewey 2016, 5; Darwin 1871/2006, 383; and Spencer 1892, 212).

Thus, I follow Deweyan explanation of pragmatic naturalism to see the real nature of moral value, i.e., while the biological mechanism “survival machine” (foundation), it is the cultural and social matrix that shapes our biological mechanisms into governing moral codes. Doing so, I believe, enables us to reconcile our natural capacity for morality—its biological origins—with the normative imperatives—societal, cultural, and rational—that shape the process of moral development. The central inquiry of this dissertation (reconciling the chasm between the biological and the normative claims on human morality) finds its methodological and conceptual anchor in Dewey’s naturalistic pragmatism. His naturalistic pragmatist approach internalises the philosophical and methodological implications of Darwinism without accepting the claims of biological reductionism.

3. Structure of the Paper

I organise this dissertation into Six Chapters. In Chapter One, I outline the rationale and background of the inquiry, revisiting the long-standing debate between moral naturalism and

transcendental ethics. Here, I contend that neither ethical absolutism nor any form of reductionism can provide real insight into the origin and development of morality. In Chapter Two, I present the historical discourse through a study of pre-Darwinian naturalists, evolutionary biologists, and thinkers. Here, I examine the claims of early modern philosophers and naturalists for explaining moral sentiments and their progress in naturalistic terms. By revisiting their naturalistic arguments as intellectual bases, I moved to Darwin's evolutionary ethics. In Chapter Three, I turn to Darwin and outline his four stages of moral development: social instincts, memory and habit, language and social evaluation, and the emergence of conscience and ethical ideals. I also evaluated T.H. Huxley's critiques of evolutionary ethics, claiming that "ethical process" stands against the "cosmic process" that favours selfish traits to maintain survival. In the last part of this chapter, I draw insights from "evolutionary compatibilists" (e.g., Daniel Dennett) to address the tension between biological determinism and the freedom of rational moral agents. I conclude that although Darwin's evolutionary account gives a biological origin for morality, it requires philosophical or normative support to avoid reductionism. This normative gap, I think, can be filled by pragmatic ethics, particularly by Dewey's scientific ethical inquiry.

In Chapter Four, I examined Dewey's pragmatic and evolutionary ethics. By analysing his response to the philosophical challenges posed by Hume and Moore, I argue that Dewey's experimental approach to ethics provides a flexible and context-sensitive framework for addressing modern moral challenges. In Chapter Five, I further corroborate the evolutionary account of ethics by analysing ethological research findings that demonstrate the continuity between human morality and social propensity in primates. Against the "Veneer Theory," which views morality as a cultural innovation intended to "mask" inherent selfish human nature, ethology provides compelling evidence that pro-social dispositions are rooted in biology (De Waal 2006). Thus, in light of scientific studies by primatologists, moral qualities emerge not as a cultural invention but as a gradual, biologically grounded development that justifies evolutionary ethics. Finally, Chapter Six summarises the dissertation's arguments, recapitulates the findings, and discusses the main arguments.

4. Summary and Conclusions of the Main Chapters

4.1. Chapter 2: Pre-Darwinian Naturalism and Moral Thought

In this chapter, I examined the origins of moral sentiment from non-naturalist to early naturalist perspectives. While essentialists argue that morality arises from reason or divine will and is

independent of human experience, naturalists derive morality from social instincts and biological sentiments. In other words, while the former views moral value as objective and universal, the latter sees it as emerging from human nature, emotions, and subjective experience. This chapter explored the trajectory from searching for immutable, universal and unconditional moral principles to a more experiential, relational and human-centred account of ethics. In the pre-Darwinian world, classical moral philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant constructed moral systems that provide rational and theological corroboration and normative clarity. Yet their emphasis on reason, abstract thought and authority, overlooked the natural/biological, social, and psychological dimensions of moral life. Kantian ethics, in particular, rejects any ethical framework grounded in subjective interest, desire and context (1998, 25). Though his categorical imperative is logically justifiable, it is often criticised for its limitation to accommodate the messy, emotive, and situational aspects of real human life.

The naturalists, particularly Hume and Smith, replaced abstract moral reasoning with experiential and sentimental ethics. Hume's argument that morality is "more felt than judged" (2000, 415) and Smith's analysis of the "impartial spectator" (2010, 63) convince us that we humans have a natural capacity for empathy, compassion, and socialisation, which are the foundation for our ethical behaviour. Yet Hume and Smith's account faced a challenge from Moore, who contends that grounding ethics in biological feeling contradicts the ontological status of moral values, "good." His determination about the indefinability of "good" assumes a conflict between descriptive facts and normative claims. Yet Moore's conclusion that "good" is a simple, non-natural property (2000, 280) again distances moral understanding from the empirical world or our biological nature. Then, I propose a resolution for the problems of the indefinability of the good from Hartman's axiology that differentiates three levels of value: generic, concrete, and singular. His axiology reconciles the gap or rigid duality of fact vs value, and conceptual vs experiential. His perception of the good as the fulfilment of the "intention of the concept" establishes a connection between concepts and reality.

The effort of earlier naturalists to establish the foundation of sentimental ethics gets biological corroboration from Lamarck (1809/1984) and Spencer (1892), who started to see morality not just as experiential but as biologically rooted and shaped by evolution. Lamarck and Spencer, as pre-Darwinian thinkers, offered different yet complementary insights into how moral sentiments can arise and evolve through natural processes. Lamarck's theory of "acquired

characteristics” treats morality as a physiological and behavioural adaptation, i.e., repeated actions and environmental conditions shape not only the organs of the animal but also its habits and character. In this regard, moral traits are not exceptional; rather, like intellectual faculty, they are developed through habitual exercise and inherited across generations. His biologized account of ethics regards morality as a natural product of evolving life, shaped by the use/disuse faculty and environmental pressures (Lamarck 1984).

Spencer extends Lamarck’s naturalism and views morality as a natural quality governed by biological law. Spencer draws moral principles from the “law of life” that is behind the function and structure of life (1879: 29-30). Thus, moral conduct, according to Spencer, is evolutionarily significant for it “sustains life” by promoting adaptation and facilitating social cooperation. His evolutionary ethics can be seen as a biological version of classical utilitarianism, though he integrates the feeling of pain and pleasure into the goal of evolution. He gives a deep biological explanation for pain and pleasure. For him, these feelings are not arbitrary or immediate but biological indicators of what “supports or undermines survival. His statement that “every pleasure raises the tide of life; every pain lowers the tide of life” captures this evolutionary utilitarianism (1892, 33). Together, Lamarck and Spencer extended and solidified ethical naturalism that was pioneered by Hume and Smith. Without reducing moral sentiments to mere instincts and impulses, Lamarck and Spencer show that ethics evolves as life itself evolves.

I conclude that the biological justification we see with pre-Darwinian evolutionists and the sentimentalists' approaches to ethics not only deepens our understanding of moral development but also becomes an issue for contemporary discussions among evolutionary biologists, primatologists and behavioural scientists.

4.2. Chapter 3: Defending Evolutionary Ethics: Contemporary Biological Perspective

In the previous chapter, I traced the gradual development of naturalistic moral theories from pre-Darwinian thought. I showed how rationalist and theological ethics were replaced by sentimentalist or naturalist perspectives (through thinkers like Hume, Smith, Hartman), and by early evolutionary ideas from Lamarck and Spencer. However, these sentimental, natural, or biological approaches are more philosophical or speculative.

Therefore, in this chapter, I aim to support the naturalist or sentimental approaches by drawing on ideas from contemporary advocates of evolutionary ethics, who incorporate biological

science into ethical theory or respond to longstanding critiques, revitalising moral philosophy through empirical evidence.

Parts of the analysis presented in this chapter build upon my previously published work in *Pragmatism Today* 14, no. 1 (2023): 34-44, where I explored the biological root of morality. By integrating insight from classical and contemporary biologists and analysing their justification for the validity of evolutionary ethics, I defend the idea that though moral sentiment has a biological origin, it cannot be reduced to a mere genetic or biological level. I emphasise that evolutionary ethics takes into account the biological (instinctual), cultural, rational (reflection) and normative factors in the process of moral development. Darwin, through his four stages of moral evolution (social instincts - memory and habit formation - language and reason application - conscience) (Darwin 1871, 394), shows the evolution of moral sentiment. His determinations to evolutionary ethics give biological justification for ethical naturalists, though faced critique from his contemporaries, specifically, Huxley, who viewed the ethical domain as standing in opposition to evolutionary processes (1894, 81). Against this direct rebuttal to evolutionary ethics, Dawkins argues that we can derive moral materials from nature—i.e., behaviour arises from gene-level strategies such as kin selection, reciprocal altruism, and reputation building (2006). Yet he also acknowledges the power of culture, experience, reflection, and normativity in general to shape morality. Dawkins (2006) corrects the common caricatures of evolutionary ethics, specifically, the mistaken belief that evolution by natural selection necessarily promotes selfish behaviour. He clarifies that selfishness is not an inherent quality of the organism itself, but a “metaphorical description” of how genes behave in evolutionary terms.

Thus, being selfish is the characteristic of a gene, not an individual’s organism. He claims that this genetic "selfishness" can give rise to complex, cooperative, and even altruistic behaviours in organisms; as such, behaviours increase the survival chances of shared genes. Churchland’s neurobiological approach to moral quality also justifies the claims of evolutionary ethics. She contends that the basis of morality (caring, fairness, and social learning...etc) is rooted in neurochemical processes shaped by evolution, particularly in the mammalian brain (Churchland 2011). However, she insists that these biological bases of morality are advanced through experience and cultural influences. Her argument that the capacity of “caring” arises first from self-preserving neural structures corroborates how neuroscience can explain the normative realm. Her attempt to resolve the fact–value dichotomy by grounding normativity in

brain evolution supports the naturalistic (but not simplistic or genetic determinist) account of modern evolutionary ethics. Arguing for evolutionary ethics leads to the philosophical conflict between “biological determinism” and “moral freedom”. Thinkers like Dennett and Heisenberg argued that free will and moral responsibility are evolved traits that emerge from complex cognitive and environmental influences.

Dennett’s proposal of evolutionary compatibilism reconciles evolutionary ethics and freedom of moral agents (2003, 154). It not only explains the biological origin of morality but also preserves the autonomy and responsibility necessary for moral life. Therefore, I concluded that evolutionary ethics can maintain both a scientific understanding of moral origins and a philosophically meaningful account of moral agency. This reconciliatory approach paves the way for pragmatic ethics, which will be explored in chapter four.

4.3. Chapter Four: Moral Growth as Adaptation: Deweyan Pragmatism and the Evolutionary Ethics

Dewey, against classical ethical theories, provides biological and pragmatic justification for the origin of ethics. He applies evolutionary thinking to his pragmatic definition of ethics; he treats it as a dynamic, adaptive, and experimental process (1898, 179). By challenging the rigid dichotomy between facts and values, Dewey employed a scientific inquiry or experimental approach to ethics. To entertain his scientific inquiry of ethics, I first explore his response to the “indefinability of the good” and the “fact–value dualism” raised by Moore and Hume, respectively. Through this analysis, I argue that Dewey’s ethics provides a flexible and context-sensitive framework capable of addressing the complex and evolving challenges of modern moral life.

For Dewey, ethical judgment, like the factual one, emerges from the “indeterminate situation” that is the point of departure for moral inquiry (1938/1991, 108). Such an inquiry rejects the rigid fact-value dualisms. Rather, it derives moral judgment from the integration of living context and experiences. This integrative view of ethics requires scientific inquiry or experimental method: observation, hypothesis, testing, reflection and revision. His critique of classical ethical theories—deontological, teleological, and virtue ethics—is based on their abstraction and rigidity, which prevent them from addressing the actual, complex, and contingent aspects of moral life (LM 14:179. Moral agents, in this sense, must not be passive followers of abstract ideals but active participants in intelligent moral growth.

I further examined Dewey's evolutionary reinterpretation of ethics. His analysis of Huxley's dualism between cosmic and ethical evolution shows his determinations of natural ethics. Dewey discards biological reductionism without denying the biological root of moral sentiment. Thus, ethical development, like biological adaptation, involves intelligent adjustment, progressive modification, and reflection. A similar view is found in James's melioristic ethics, which requires effort from moral agents for the betterment of the human condition. I conclude that Deweyan pragmatic ethics can provide an effective framework for moral inquiry: that is, experimental, context-sensitive, and responsive to change. This scientific inquiry of ethics is appropriate to address the ethical challenges of the ever-changing world and social setting.

4.4. Chapter Five: From Animal Behaviour to Human Morality: Ethological Perspectives on the Origins of Moral Sentiment

Moral quality, identified as a unique human disposition, has often been studied as the result of either rational deliberation or cultural construction. In Chapter 2, I examined the philosophical foundations of this view. In contrast, in Chapter 3, I presented a counterargument from the views of Darwinian and post-Darwinian biologists and philosophers. There, I examined how thinkers such as Darwin, Dawkins, Churchland, and Spencer justified the biological origins of moral qualities. In this chapter, I continue that line of reasoning by substantiating evolutionary ethics in empirical data gathered from the study of primatologists. Thus, this chapter is intended to reconcile the ideas raised in Chapter 2 (philosophical tension between nature and morality) and Chapter 3 (theoretical integration of biology and ethics). Here, my focus shifts to the traits of nonhuman animals (primates that exhibit the basic elements of morality: empathy, reciprocity, conflict resolution, fairness, and consolation).

The evolutionary account of morality, as testified by various modern experiments, justifies that moral disposition is not an abruptly emerging quality but a gradual behavioural modification. Moral reasoning in humans does not occur in sudden leaps; rather, it evolves or builds incrementally upon existing traits to cope with changes in societal environments over time. Albeit morality in its advanced form appears to be a sophisticated cognitive discovery, like abstract mathematical truth, it is deeply rooted in the biological nature we share with animals, specifically, with primates. However, as ethnologists remind us, such an approach never overlooks the role of complex cognitive capacity in establishing and elaborating moral reasoning in human society. At the same time, they insist that qualities like empathy, reciprocity, conflict resolution, and fairness, which are the building blocks of moral sentiment,

have biological origins and have evolved into more accommodating systems. The fact that primates exhibit the capacity for empathy, reciprocity, conflict resolution, and fairness can enable us to argue that morality is neither uniquely human nor exclusively rational. As social behaviour, morality evolved primarily (De Waal 2006, Bonnie and De Waal 2004) to enhance group cohesion and cooperation. Against the veneer theory, which claims that morality is a thin cultural layer masking a fundamentally selfish human nature, the ethological and evolutionary studies and scientific experiments give more integrated biological counterarguments.

I argue that evolutionary ethics never rule out humanity and the uniqueness of human normativity; rather, it situates ethics within a broader natural history. This inclusive approach admits the fact that humans' quantitative ethical differences, or the ethical tower we occupy at the top of the moral pyramid, rest on foundations built by nature, emotion, and social interdependence.

5. Conclusions

In this dissertation, I set out to explore one of the most debatable, if not controversial, questions in moral philosophy: the origin of moral sentiment in human beings and its relation to our biological mechanisms and cultures. The central claim of the project has been the conviction that morality cannot be adequately comprehended if we treat it as a set of fixed, immutable, and transcendent principles beyond experience or as a mere by-product of biological processes devoid of normative authority, i.e., neither ethical absolutism/essentialism nor biological reductionism can give a convincing explanation.

What is required, therefore, is an account that recognises the biological root of moral sentiment, and at the same time maintains the social, cultural, and experiential dimensions or factors that shape and guide its development over time. Thus, by deriving insight from evolutionary ethics and pragmatic philosophy, I sought to provide the integrated or third path between normative rigidity and biological reductionism.

Thus, I conclude that the appropriate ethical direction for our ever-changing human reality is neither biological determinism (which deprives moral agency and freedom) nor ethical absolutism (which disregards human experience and context), but an evolutionary pragmatic ethics that is scientifically informed and accommodates both natural and cultural factors in the development of ethics. By reframing morality as a form of 'social intelligence,' this Deweyan

approach provides a vital method for navigating the conflicting values of our diversified social reality through reflective inquiry rather than dogmatic assertion. In doing so, it ensures that ethics remains a dynamic, inclusive, and living process capable of evolving alongside the complexities of the modern world.

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