

# Darwin's Benevolent Idea

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**Abstract.** Darwin's device of Natural Selection, formalized in 1859 in *On the Origin of Species*, is well known across many disciplines distinct from the sciences. Less known, however, is his application of this device to a theory of morality—of what “moral sense” consists in. This paper is first an examination of Darwin's moral theory and his claim that in order to discover what “moral sense” is we must look in the realm of “instinct”. However, I immediately follow a brief account of Darwin's reasoning with a twofold challenge to his moral theory. One discovers, upon closer scrutiny, the limits of Darwin's Natural Selection, and cannot help but marvel at the question mark of what our instincts actually *are*, for they certainly do not consist in what Nature happens to deem most “useful”.

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Science is a magnificent force, but it is not a teacher of morals. It can perfect machinery, but it adds no moral restraints to protect society from the misuse of the machine. It can also build gigantic intellectual ships, but it constructs no moral rudders for the control of storm tossed human vessel. It not only fails to supply the spiritual element needed but some of its unproven hypotheses rob the ship of its compass and thus endangers its cargo.<sup>1</sup>

– William Jennings Bryan

In Darwin, perhaps we have *had* such a teacher of morals. If Bryan, early twentieth century American politician and lead prosecutor in the “Scopes Trial”, had been versed in the content of Darwin's theory on “Moral Sense”, perhaps he would not have objected so vehemently to science's moral infertility. However, pausing in the wake of Darwin's search for the “moral sense” in man—that supposed “refinement” in man which the lower animals lack—will it be a surprise if Darwin did not in fact find what he was looking for? If he found instead something entirely different from “moral sense”, namely, a “sense” for what is *useful*? And after this dangerous thought, if we were to recognize that he has not yet caught a glimpse of what the “moral” impulse actually consists in, aside from what we can observe in its *expression*? Perhaps that it could even be the case that Darwin's “moral sense” indicates much different impulses from those he would expect, namely, the ones which one “ought not” to have?

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<sup>1</sup> William Jennings Bryan's Summation, taken from the transcript for *The Trial of John Scopes for Teaching Evolution in Tennessee*.

Darwin's intellectual achievements broke with traditional thought along many disciplines, and at times this departure from tradition did not express itself fully until many years later. In Darwin's social and historical context and among his peers, "morality" was seized up by doctrinaires of Utilitarianism<sup>2</sup>. In his exposition on Natural Selection in *On the Origin of Species* and in the application of this conceptual device<sup>3</sup> to interpreting man's history and attributes in *Descent of Man*, Darwin proposes that *our* morality has historically *become* what it is for us today—that it is not now how it always has been. Darwin's effort in this respect is often understood as an attempt to "naturalize" morality, and it is this attempt which I want to examine closely. This paper will testify that Darwin's *moral* theory can be challenged philosophically—that despite the seemingly ubiquitous biological insight in the form of Natural Selection, the *logic* of Darwin's application of this device must be scrutinized, most of all in the matter of "morality".

I will endeavor to strengthen the possibilities mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper, and to motivate certain doubts on the robustness of Darwin's theory on "moral sense". I will attempt this in three basic parts to the paper:

In the first part, I recount Darwin's presentation of "moral sense" as the greatest gulf separating human beings from the lower animals. He argues for the existence of a lineage to "moral instinct", for, as with corporeal structure, instincts are indistinguishable from inherited *habit*, which is engendered by *need* determined antecedently by the conditions of life to which the organism is exposed. The *feeling* of sympathy and related sentiments are then *produced* by instinct, resulting in the culmination of "moral sense" in man.

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<sup>2</sup> Roughly, Utilitarianism is a moral theory which associates the moral worth of an action with the action's usefulness. Darwin's ideas taken as a whole do not clash with the claims of Utilitarianism, yet I would not go so far as to call Darwin himself a Utilitarian moral theorist.

<sup>3</sup> Heeding Robert Richards's suggestion in "Darwin's Theory of Natural Selection and Its Moral Purpose" that Natural Selection be referred to as a *device*, rather than a principle or theory.

In the second part, I challenge Darwin’s moral theory on the grounds that it cannot be applied unconditionally throughout Nature—the theory is itself probabilistic. I call into doubt Darwin’s conclusion that Natural Selection “chooses” *always* to preserve the group in which each of the members is possessed more strongly by a shared uniform instinct for sympathy (thus *sociability*, in Darwin’s vocabulary), as opposed to preserving the group in which each of the members is possessed *less* strongly by an instinct for sympathy. If the former is decidedly *not* the rule, but rather a matter of probability, then the soundness of Darwin’s conclusion may be called into question.

Finally, in the third part, I challenge Darwin’s moral theory on the claim that it is a case of mistaken genealogy. I first reiterate Darwin’s own claim that there is a difference between (inherited) *impetus* for the performance of an action and the “purpose” the action serves in the “struggle for existence” (i.e. Nature’s “purpose”). Next, I use this distinction to undermine Darwin’s notion of what “moral sense” consists in—in his mature theory Darwin presupposes a rather fixed and developed determination of what “moral” is, as if the he and the reader are already in *agreement* about what it means to call something “morally good”, let alone a “moral” matter at all. We shall be vigilant about not mistaking the *impetus*<sup>4</sup> of a performed “moral” action for its *efficiency* or *profitability*—in short, its *usefulness*. In permitting this error, we would lure ourselves into misinterpreting what the “moral” instinct fundamentally *is*, and what it means for us as “moral” creatures.

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<sup>4</sup> Here, I use *impetus* to convey the meaning of both *origin* (in maintaining Darwin’s presumption that something’s existence and growth is brought about *causally*), but also *force* (in which and from which the thing’s growth is carried out).

What, for Darwin, is “instinct”? And what could he possibly mean by “moral” instinct?

Darwin’s response to these two questions will lead us directly to what he takes to be “moral sense”—a *capacity* supposedly possessed only by man. But first, *instinct*:

An action, which we ourselves should require experience to enable us to perform, when performed by an animal, more especially by a very young one, without any experience, and when performed by many individuals in the same way, without their knowing for what purpose it is performed, is usually said to be instinctive.<sup>5</sup>

There are two components to Darwin’s definition here: First, “instinct” is defined through an *action* (not a possibility for action, but rather action which *is being or has been performed*—i.e. thinking, having spoken, etc.) performed by an animal without prior experience or knowledge that would be *necessary* for animals without the instinct to perform the action in question.

Second, “instinct” is defined through an action performed identically by a *number* of organisms without their knowing of the *purpose* for which it is performed. In the first case, we might call the tendency for ducklings to identify the first being encountered upon birth as what we would refer to as “parent”, an *instinct*. In the second case, however, it is not unreasonable to question Darwin’s use of the term “purpose”. Does an animal in any case “know” what the purpose of his or her action is?—that is, *simultaneous to* and *distinctly from* the performance of the action?

What would it look like for an animal to “know the purpose” of its action before or while it is performed, and what causal potency does this “knowledge” possess over the effect (the action itself)? Admittedly, though, Darwin’s task here is taxonomic—by “instinct” he wants merely to refer to the *class* of actions in which *purpose* is not “recognized” or “discovered” by the performer antecedently or simultaneously to the performance of the action. Though crudely, Darwin seems to be grasping at a notion of “unconscious”.<sup>6</sup> For our purposes, we will entertain

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<sup>5</sup> Darwin, Charles, *On the Origin of Species*, p. 207.

<sup>6</sup> In another paper I would argue that Darwin arrives at this notion of instinct in opposition to a Lamarckian mode of *willed* action. Thus, I would suggest that Darwin’s “instinct” is not a *positive* suggestion, but rather a *negative* concept that grew historically from a previous mode of interpretive biology.

Darwin's interpretation of "instinct" as the performance of an action without the animal's knowledge or experience.

However, we encounter different problems in Darwin's earlier efforts toward defining "instinct":

Reflect much over my view of particular instinct being memory transmitted without consciousness ((a most possible thing see man walking in sleep)).—an action becomes habitual is probably first stage, & an habitual action implies want of consciousness & will & therefore may be called instinctive.—But why do some actions become hereditary & instinctive & not other.—We even see they must be done often / to be habitual / or of great importance to cause long memory,—structure is only gained slowly, therefore it can only be those actions which many successive generations are impelled to do in same way.<sup>7</sup>

Immediately, I do not find it compelling that habitual actions (actions that have *become* habitual, and have thus been *acquired*) can cause a long "memory" to be preserved *trans-generationally*. It certainly remains *possible*, but only because we have not yet discovered the consistent mechanism by which actions *become* "habitual". In our common sense, a soldier who loses his or her right arm and is thus forced to learn how to write neatly with his or her left hand does not confer this "preference" to his or her progeny. Similarly, a person who learns how to play the trumpet will not pass on this ability in full form ("muscle memory") to his or her progeny<sup>8</sup>. The notion of inherited "memory" poses more problems than it solves, and is, frankly, unnecessary to Darwin's moral theory.

The above notion is unnecessary because the *prevalence* of "instincts" in animals—essentially thought of as mere behavior *itself*—can aptly be explained by the process of Natural Selection. It is enough for Darwin's purposes to claim that those actions which one performs *without* knowledge of purpose or experience are just as determinative of the organism's chances for reproduction and propagation as corporeal structure. This is to say that Natural Selection ought to act equivalently upon the non-corporeal "instincts" in comparison to how it acts upon

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<sup>7</sup> Darwin, Charles, *The Transmutation Notebooks of Charles Darwin*, C171.

<sup>8</sup> Although, this is *not* to suggest that the progeny will not potentially have the capacity to *learn* to play the trumpet just as well.

corporeal structures (wings, fur, fingernails). If, by *some* means of variation<sup>9</sup>, a *kind* of organism adopts a particular habitual action which is performed without the organism's knowledge of its purpose, and this habitual action is *hereditary* for the most part<sup>10</sup>, then it will just as easily confer a specific advantage (or disadvantage) to the organism in the "struggle for existence":

[Sympathy] seems now to have become an instinct, which is especially directed towards beloved objects, in the same manner as fear with animals is especially directed against certain enemies [...] With mankind selfishness, experience, and imitation probably add, as Mr. Bain has shewn, to the power of sympathy; for we are led by the hope of receiving good in return to perform acts of sympathetic kindness to others; and there can be no doubt that the feeling of sympathy is much strengthened by habit. In however complex a manner this feeling may have originated, as it is one of high importance to all those animals which aid and defend each other, it will have been increased, through natural selection; for those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish best and rear the greatest number of offspring.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note Darwin's implication here that animals which "aid and defend each other" are at an advantage in the "struggle for existence" in comparison to animals with whom this behavior is not observed. This seems to be no more than a consequence of Darwin's general theory of Natural Selection. But we must be clear: Darwin *presupposes* that a group of individuals in whom each of the members "aids and defends" the others is, *as a rule*, at a life-preserving and reproductive advantage to either individuals or differently functioning groups distinct from the group in question. In other words, Darwin presupposes that an individual or a group in which the members do *not* behave "sociably" or "sympathetically" toward each other is at a *disadvantage* in the "struggle for existence"<sup>12</sup>, relative to the group in which individuals "aid and defend each other". This presupposition will be discussed in the next section.

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<sup>9</sup> Darwin believes that variation is originated embryologically, and leaves this issue as something for embryologists of the future (geneticists) to resolve.

<sup>10</sup> The habitual action does not need to be hereditary in all cases, but only in *enough* cases that those animals which do pass on the habitual action to their progeny will at the same time confer to them a life-sustaining and reproductive advantage.

<sup>11</sup> Darwin, Charles, *Descent of Man*, p. 82.

<sup>12</sup> "Struggle for Existence" is a chapter in *On the Origin of Species* which lays the groundwork for Darwin's device of Natural Selection. Essentially, the "struggle" Darwin refers to is rather the *tension* which results from a community of varied organisms in which resources (space, water, food) necessary for subsistence are limited.

It is important to note that by “sympathy”, Darwin is referring to the expression of the instinct and not the instinct itself. In Darwin’s view, the instinct associated with “sympathy” as an expression of the instinct has brought human individuals—that is, individuals already as part of a *group*—to aid and defend one another. Darwin uses the term “sympathy” or “power of sympathy” to mean actual *activity*<sup>13</sup> toward other individuals in a group. In other words, “sympathy” here is not used to describe only a *feeling*, but, more precisely, a kind of *behavior* that culminates in an individual’s *actions* toward other individuals it comes in contact with in the group. Furthermore, in Darwin’s view the “*feeling* of sympathy” is separable from its actualization in habit or activity, and is nonetheless the *cause* of this habit or activity. Importantly, Darwin is equating the *feeling* of sympathy with the instinct which expresses itself socially as “sympathy”. Hence, just as he finds instinct and action to be correlated, Darwin finds feeling and action to be correlated—perhaps even *synonymous* with each other. We shall see later how this idea is misleading.

“Sympathy” for Darwin takes the form of *instinctive* behavior (in so far as it is an expression of an instinct), which, as we discussed above, participates in the organism’s “struggle for existence” as powerfully as do corporeal structures. More specifically, if the instinctive *activity* referred to by the term “sympathy” confers advantage to the group of organisms among whom it is shared, then they will as a result of performing the instinctive behavior produce, on the whole, a greater number of and more “successful” offspring (of course, *after* having been better able to flourish and reach a point where reproduction and propagation are less inhibited). Thus, for Darwin it is in *this* sense that “sympathy” is preserved through a process of Natural Selection—that, in the form of “moral” behavior, it *was* and *continues to be* useful to the group of individuals among whom it was originally rendered:

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<sup>13</sup> I use the word “activity” to further stress that Darwin means the *expression* of an instinct, not an instinct itself.

[The social instincts] have, however, certainly been developed for the general good of the community. The term, general good, may be defined as the means by which the greatest possible number of individuals can be reared in full vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under the conditions to which they are exposed.<sup>14</sup>

More precisely, the “general good” of the community has *developed* (in the sense of *conditioned*) the social instincts, rather than the social instincts being developed “for” the general good.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Darwin appropriately concludes that the social instincts, that is, instincts that prompt and determine behavior *among* individuals, have already *been* developed (by Nature) in such a way that the ones which are preserved are those which continue to be *useful* to the individuals among whom the behavior is rendered. The content of what is “useful” is, of course, determined by the particular conditions of life to which the organisms are exposed. For example, a bird’s brownish color is “useful” in the sense that it is less noticeable to predators in the brownish foothills, whereas a bird’s bright bluish color is “useful” in the sense that it is less noticeable to predators against the bright bluish sky, where it spends most of its time.

It is upon this analysis that Darwin makes a few key conclusions:

Finally, the social instincts which no doubt were acquired by man, as by the lower animals, for the good of the community, will from the first have given to him some wish to aid his fellows, and some feeling of sympathy [...] As man gradually advanced in intellectual power and was enabled to trace the more remote consequences of his actions; as he acquired sufficient knowledge to reject baneful customs and superstitions; as he regarded more and more not only the welfare but the happiness of his fellow-men.<sup>16</sup>

First, Darwin concludes that the *feeling* of sympathy, the *wish* to aid fellow-beings, is “given” to man after he has antecedently *acquired* social instincts. As was said before, it seems that Darwin would link sympathetic *feeling* inextricably to sympathetic *instinct*, to the point that we could not regard them as separate, or even distinct. Second, man has through the perpetual and ubiquitous process of Natural Selection obtained intellectual powers that have allowed him

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid p. 98.

<sup>15</sup> I include this provision to stress the fact that any trait of an organism develops not “toward” a general predetermined good, but rather that Nature (the infinitely varied and complex conditions of life) continually determine which traits will be preserved.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid p. 103.

to *sensibly* regard the welfare and happiness, not only of fellow-beings, but also of the lower animals. These conclusions having been aptly stated, Darwin finally describes what he thinks is the constitution of “moral sense”:

Ultimately a highly complex sentiment, having its first origin in the social instincts, largely guided by the approbation of our fellow-men, ruled by reason, self-interest, and in later times by deep religious feelings, confirmed by instruction and habit, all combined, constitute our moral sense or conscience.<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, we can understand Darwin’s conception of “moral sense” to be that of a *sentiment*, albeit a highly complex one *being produced by a feeling* of sympathy, which “grew out of” social instincts that were already present in the organism.

My first objection to Darwin’s theory of “moral sense” consists in a critique on the probability of Darwin’s account actually being the case. More specifically, I want to call into question what Darwin presupposes earlier: that it is a *rule* for groups wherein a *stronger* instinct for sociability possesses its individual members to be at a reproductive advantage to organisms or groups in whom the instinct for sociability is *weaker*. Fundamentally, we are questioning whether the more *social* group is *always* privileged in relation to the individual or the *less* social group throughout the process of Natural Selection.

Regarding the general trend toward sociability observable in animals, Darwin says:

It has often been assumed that animals were in the first place rendered social, and that they feel as a consequence uncomfortable when separated from each other, and comfortable whilst together; but it is a more probable view that these sensations were first developed, in order that those animals which would profit by living in society, should be induced to live together.<sup>18</sup>

In Darwin’s view, the sociability that we are able to observe in animals did not originate *before* it had proven to be “useful” in the “struggle for existence”. The exact opposite happened: throughout the “struggle for existence”, those animals which survived to such a condition that

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid p. 165.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid p. 80.

they were best able to reproduce and propagate are just those animals that tended toward, and still tend toward, sociability. Sociability, then, is “selected for”<sup>19</sup>. An instance Darwin gives of how sociability provides reproductive advantage is that it first acts through *life-preserving* advantage:

The most common service which the higher animals perform for each other, is the warning each other of danger by means of the united senses of all. Every sportsman knows, as Dr. Jaeger remarks, how difficult it is to approach animals in a herd or troop.<sup>20</sup>

This is central to Darwin’s moral doctrine—that Nature’s “preference” for sociability is explained by the life-preservative and thus reproductive advantage which one obtains in a group of highly sociable individuals. Sociability, then, is in this case brought about *through* sympathetic feeling (and thus, *instinct*) among members in a group. Still, the priority of *more sociable* organisms over *less sociable* organisms may be called into question. Does Nature, as we have seen, always tend in this direction? Is it the *rule* that the group in which each of the members is possessed by a more *expansive* “moral sense”—by a *greater* instinct for sympathy—is more apt than another group to “win” its own continued subsistence and thus propagation? If we can show that it is *not* the rule, Darwin’s moral doctrine effectively fails to apply universally, and *the probability that sociability is indeed selected for is thus diminished*.

Supposing in a northern region where the temperature is far below freezing during the winter—there is a canyon in the ice separating two packs of wolves from each other. In one pack, the members tend toward a greater instinct for sociability (a greater sympathetic *feeling*), which is to say that for food they divide evenly the meager corpse of a deer among them. The other pack, in which the few *strongest* members happen to be devoid of any instinct for sociability, also obtains only one meager corpse of a deer; however, in this pack, only the few

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<sup>19</sup> “Selected for” can be used ambiguously; here, it is used to convey a process by which a particular trait is preserved while others are not, if only because it confers more of a life-preserving and/or reproductive advantage to the organism in question.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid p. 74.

strongest members (and perhaps their family members) feed on greater portions of the corpse. Suppose, then, that the temperature drops ten more degrees and that most if not all of the first pack—the more *sociable* pack—perishes in an inability to sustain enough energy (thus heat) from feeding, while the strongest members of the second pack survive past the drop in temperature and end up reproducing nicely. In this case, Nature “prefers” quite the opposite of sociability, and at the root, sympathetic *feeling*.

There may be many such cases occurring throughout Nature’s expanse. There are different conditions of life in which *different* instincts are determined to be “useful”, because the conditions of life are particular to the organism in question. In my example, instincts *opposite* to sociability are deemed “useful”. Is Darwin’s privileging of sociability and thus sympathetic feeling *as a rule* not then less credible?

Robert Richards recognizes this difficulty in an essay dealing with Darwin’s moral theory:

One salient objection to any theory of the biological evolution of moral conduct points to the often very different standards of acceptable behavior in various cultures [...] In Darwin’s conception, then, evolution would have moulded the most primitive human beings to react altruistically to brothers and sisters; but over the ages, cultural learning, coupled with increased intelligence, would reveal just who those brothers and sisters might be.<sup>21</sup>

Aside from Richards’s claim that learning and intelligence could eventually lend a capacity to organisms to *determine* their respective groups<sup>22</sup>, his concession that there are different standards of behavior in different cultures is only in support of my challenge to Darwin’s presupposition. The absence of an overt “instinct for sociability” as forming the fabric of “moral sense” in some cultures urges even greater doubt.

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<sup>21</sup> Richards, Robert, “Darwin on mind, morals and emotions” in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, p. 106-107.

<sup>22</sup> And yet, this hypothesis can be challenged on the notion that in various cultures, people have arrived at different means of “calculatively” determining their respective groups (“brothers and sisters”). Even so, we are interested not in “morality” as a calculative activity, but rather “moral *sense*”, which Darwin expressly defines to *not* be calculative.

My second objection to a version of Darwinian “moral sense” runs upon a critique of the reasoning underlying Darwin’s moral theory. If an action is “useful” and instinctive—if it is performed *by way of an inherited impetus*—then it *still* does not arise *by way of Nature’s purpose*, that is, by the determination from conditions of life of what *best* allows for optimal survival and reproduction (i.e. what is most *useful*). That which Nature ordains to be “the most useful” is not the same thing as the individual’s internal (or external) *impetus* for performing a “moral” action.

Similarly, it is a mistake to think that a lower animal (one without the intellectual powers of man) does something *because* such a habit preserves its “existence”. This ‘because,’ even in Darwin’s view, is completely separate from *Nature’s*<sup>23</sup> selective tendency, which is to preserve and continue those *instinctive* behaviors which allow the group to optimally subsist and reproduce. Darwin says:

It is, therefore, hardly possible to exaggerate the importance during rude times of the love of praise and the dread of blame. A man who was not impelled by any deep, instinctive feeling, to sacrifice his life for the good of others, yet was roused to such actions by a sense of glory, would by his example excite the same wish for glory in other men, and would strengthen by exercise the noble feeling of admiration. He might thus do far more good to his tribe than by begetting offspring with a tendency to inherit his own high character.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, an action may remain *useful*, but may not remain “moral” (in Darwin’s sense of *sympathetic*) in the same sense.

Really, my challenge here amounts to a question about *what is preserved* through Natural Selection—what we *think* has been preserved. I fully agree with Darwin’s position that *certain* instincts are preserved over others through Natural Selection; namely, those instincts which prove *useful* in the “struggle for existence”. I proceed to challenge Darwin as soon as he insists

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<sup>23</sup> I am still using this term to refer to the infinitely complex conditions of life particular to each organism.

<sup>24</sup> Darwin, Charles, *Descent of Man*, p. 165.

that what becomes of these instincts (what *continues* to be “useful”) involves a *feeling* of sympathy. Supposing we *were* to accept the presupposition that I objected to earlier, that as a rule the instinct for sociability is privileged and *intensified* through Natural Selection—Darwin has not and *cannot* determine what it is that his instinct really is. He has only determined *that* the *expression* of the instinct, whatever it is, is *useful* in Nature’s eyes, and he has presumed that a social instinct is inseparable and perhaps non-distinct from sympathetic *feeling*. This presumption, as we will see, is not within the scope of the device of Natural Selection.

I would argue that ignorance of the *impetus* of a “moral” action betrays ignorance also of what the “moral” action really *is* (i.e. what makes the action “moral”). Darwin wants to make a distinction between “useful” and “moral”, but any theorizing concerning what is “moral” in an action amounts to speculation. Natural Selection only provides us with a lens for identifying which instincts are most “useful” to a group of organisms faced with *its* particular conditions of life. It does not afford us a view into what the instincts actually *are*, or even less what *our* instincts actually signify for *us*. In other words, we do not in the least bit understand the “forces” in the individual organism which culminate in an instinctive action. We do not thus understand how to interpret the action—what the action indicates *about* us.

But one might object, “We do know what an action means just by knowing that it has continually been ordained by Nature to be useful *in the same way*. In the same fashion, the *impetus* of that action is kept *constant* along with the unchanging usefulness of the action.”

That the right man might impulsively enter into politics—suppose this is what is preserved by Nature (the action’s usefulness is thus suited to the *group’s* present conditions of life—in this particular region, this community thrives off of pillaging surrounding communities). Could not the *impetus* (suppose he was born with the instinct and drive of a “fighter”, that is, of

the individual responsible for waging wars) be equivalently preserved by Nature as well? Given that we accept the *act* of entering into politics as instinctive *among individuals in the group*, the *impetus* of this act may indeed be kept constant along with the unchanging expression of the instinct (that this man and other men enter into politics). But this does not change the fact that the *impetus* of the instinct and the *usefulness* of the *expression* of the instinct are separate and distinct.

Darwin concedes that the *profitability* of a “moral” action and the *impetus* of a “moral” action in instinct lie inevitably apart, which thus would allow for an instinct to vary while the expression of the instinct in behavior stays the same:

Under changed conditions of life, it is at least possible that slight modifications of instinct might be profitable to a species; and if it can be shown that instincts do vary ever so little, then I can see no difficulty in natural selection preserving and continually accumulating variations of instinct to any extent that may be profitable [...] But I believe that the effects of habit are of quite subordinate importance to the effects of the natural selection of what may be called accidental variations of instincts;—that is of variations produced by the same unknown causes which produce slight deviations of bodily structure.<sup>25</sup>

Here there seems to be another potential flaw in Darwin’s notion of “moral sense”: that merely by positing a *heritable* (thus, *constant*) instinct which motivates “moral” action, he does not make room for the possibility that the actual “moral sense”, or *feeling* associated with the “performed” instinct, can change while the “moral” action itself stays the same. Suppose we were to accept the hypothesis that instincts are inherited just like in the case of corporeal structure: in the last example, the father who enters into politics may do so with a *feeling* of satisfaction in knowing that his peers will soon *depend* on him, and yet his son may enter into politics with a *feeling* of anxiety at simply not having appeased his overwhelming “desire” to *command* others. Surely, these two “complexes of feeling” differ dramatically from one another, while the “moral” action itself, even the instinct which expresses itself in the “moral” action, stays the same.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid p. 209.

If the “complexes of feeling” associated with instinctive behavior can thus be fluid, then it seems reasonable for the content of Darwin’s “moral sense” to be susceptible to change as well. Furthermore, Darwin’s thesis at best amounts to a claim that the “feeling of sympathy” *just is* the moral instinct. Yet if it is only the *expression* of this instinct that Nature acts upon, then we have no real reason to regard the feeling associated with the instinct as “sympathy”. Using the word “sympathy” presumes an understanding of *why* the “moral” action is performed—this is another way of presupposing an understanding of the *impetus* of a “moral” action (for instance, that the subject performs a particular action *in order to be* sympathetic)—an understanding of what the “moral” action actually *is*. We could just as easily label the same “moral” action as an expression of “anxiety” and invoke the same *interpretive* authority.

Darwin himself admits to “moral” development being historically variable:

As Mr. Bagehot has remarked, we are apt to look at progress as the normal rule in human society; but history refutes this. The ancients did not even entertain the idea; nor do the oriental nations at the present day. According to another high authority, Mr. Maine, “the greatest part of mankind has never shewn a particle of desire that its civil institutions should be improved.” Progress seems to depend on many concurrent favourable conditions, far too complex to be followed out.<sup>26</sup>

And yet, the *meaning* of “progress” is presupposed as well by Darwin. Is not the only *reasonable* notion of “progress” that through Natural Selection the conditions of life act upon organisms in such a way so as to distill the most *useful* traits suited the *those particular conditions of life*? Nature only cares about the way in which a habit expresses itself and, consequently, the “moral” *action* thus passed along. How could the organism’s internal “reasoning” even concern her?

Provided we do not really know what the “sympathetic” instinct *is*, because we do not know its *impetus*, this notion of “progress” is the only acceptable one at the moment—for, what Darwin may perceive as a “moral regression” in the savages who remain obscured to him amidst

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid p. 166.

their “superstitions”, is *in every case* actually a movement toward what is most *useful*. And Darwin’s “sympathy”, limited inherently by the unknown character of moral *origins*, can only be said to be the very same thing—only a very *particular* expression of what Nature deems, at that moment in that place, most “useful”.

Until now I have held a persistent intuition in check: that the content and *vocabulary* of Darwin’s moral theory; that in his theory he presupposes a moral *interpretation* of human behavior in the form of “benevolent”—perhaps we witness here something instinctive in Darwin *himself*. An instinct to *see* “morality” (or at least “morality” as the mature form in which the instincts *express* themselves) where it simply is *not*? Perhaps when Nietzsche said, “After having looked long enough between the philosopher’s lines and fingers, I say to myself: by far the greater part of conscious thinking must still be included among instinctive activities, and that goes even for philosophical thinking,”<sup>27</sup> he all at once lauded Darwin’s venture into the instinctive and looked down with contempt upon the moral presuppositions that Darwin carried along with him.

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<sup>27</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil*, §3.

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