

How about Evolutionary Ethics?

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How the evolution of mankind can be linked to ethical behaviour.

Since ancient times, philosophers held that it is within the nature of the *Homo sapiens* that they hold moral values turning them into a *Homo moralis*¹⁰. The term moral refers to beliefs about what is good, better said the “right” and “wrong” behaviour such as how to treat people fairly⁷. Ethical thinking is the reassessment of a moral thought. In order to be able to conduct ethical behaviour is thought to be a consequence of the fact that we possess the three conditions for ethical behaviour: the ability to assess the consequences of our actions, the ability to judge values and the ability to choose our actions¹⁰.

Within this article, an attempt will be made to investigate an old question whether ethics are a product of human culture, of human nature or whether these are simply a product of biological evolution of mankind.¹⁰ To answer this question, it first has to be considered what is human culture, what is human nature and what is biological evolution.

To explain the importance of the above mentioned more clearly, the importance of moral thinking should be explained. Moral thinking is of importance within a society, as moral thinking results into the norms and values that a society should contain in order to maintain a certain balance within a society. For example, moral rules and their sanctions are made to hinder individuals within a society from conducting behaviors such as lying, cheating or stealing, which are considered to be selfish^{4,5,6}.

However, morals can differ per culture, as the set of moral rules can differ per culture and ethical thinking can be quite individualistic, individualistic in a sense that an individual can choose, has control of his own choices and can take responsibility for them⁸. Therefore, human culture can be considered as the way humans have developed our ethical thinking through experiences and through the environment that they reside in¹⁰. In contrast, human nature can be defined as a ‘common set of unbending, nowadays known to be genetically, specified behavioral predilections that are unlikely to be altered by circumstances’^{3,11}.

Finally, biological evolution can be described as the way the humans have evolved over time through natural selection, as formerly described by Charles Darwin³. Of which it is nowadays known to be due to genetics⁸.

Even though, the idea of natural selection has been scientifically proven to be successful as well as that inheritance of genes plays an important role in behaviour, there were social scientists that believed that human behaviour was not affected by genes such as Boas and Watson ^{2, 10}. There is variation within behaviour, which does not always need to have a genetic component and appears to be more a result of an interplay of genes and the environment ⁸. Another argument against the genetic involvement of our genes is that ethical behavior can develop and change as a consequence of our thinking. However, our thinking is directly promoted by natural selection as behavioural traits can be selected for, but are not necessarily promoted due to genetic adaptation. Moreover, we have multiple courses of actions that we can take which do not appear to be bound by genes, but appear to be due to the emotional and cognitive potential ¹.

Still, one could question whether human behaviour is influenced by a set of genes, as the central assumption of evolutionary ethics is that genes direct the construction of the body and the brain, therefore contribute to behavioural features ¹³. Moreover, there is a whole field of studies named behavioral genetics which studies the inheritance of behavioural phenotypes. Since, genes, genomes and epigenetics can be analysed and can attribute to certain behaviours, comparative behavioral genomics can be done. However, what remains unclear within this field is the interaction between genes and their environment, one could also refer to this as the nature, nurture and their interaction discussion ⁸.

To answer the old question, ethical thinking is a consequence of the combination of human culture, human nature and of biological evolution, as it is never due to solely one of the three aforementioned. However, ethics are developed and influenced by the three aspects but do not appear to evolve due to any of the three. From an evolutionary point of view, the development of an ethical thought is a consequence of our evolved capacity to reason and our how morality evolved, but it cannot provide us with the ethical arguments to decide whether we should do something or not.

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