MORAL NORMATIVITY IS (NATURALLY) GROWN

Kurt Bayertz

> *„I fully subscribe to the judgement of those writers who maintain that of all the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important. This sense… is summed up in that short but imperious word 'ought', so full of high significance."*
> *(Darwin 1879, p. 120)*

Darwin's thesis of the central significance of the short but imperious word 'ought' will be the starting point of the following reflections. As a matter of fact the phenomenon of 'ought' is no marginal phenomenon of morality, but the key to its adequate understanding. Still, what does it mean, 'somebody *ought* to do something'? Moral philosophy had its problems dealing with the subject. Besides a few exceptions it was marginalized or avoided altogether; hence, theoretical interpretations on naturalistic and non-naturalistic approaches alike remain in short supply and dissatisfying quality,. The former are troubled by the (meanwhile generally accepted) prohibition of concluding from 'is' to 'ought'. By this prohibition 'ought' seems to be radically cut off the real world and condemned to a mystical existence in some supernatural sphere. Some theoreticians have concluded that 'to ought' (if it can't be derived from 'to be') doesn't exist at all. In this article I should like to make a first argument by plausibly showing that this conclusion is premature: Normativity is a part of the real world. My second argument will be to illustrate to which part of the real world it belongs to.

1. From 'Volition' to 'Ought'

My thesis is that 'X ought to do something' means nothing else but 'Y wants X to do it', with 'X' and 'Y' being any individuals or groups of individuals with the only conditions that (a) they want something from somebody else and (b) they can understand that 'want'. Thus, the essence of what we mean by saying 'ought' seems identified: 'ought' is the 'complying to volition'; if Y *wants* X to do something, than X *ought* to do it.

Of course, this explication is incomplete; yet, its advantage lies in its independence of any supernatural instances. According to the explication, the 'ought' is a part of our common reality. Embedded in the context of evolutionary theoretical considerations it can be added that X and Y can also be animals, if they fulfil the previously stated conditions. The analysis of phylogenic connections between the 'ought' of primates and the 'ought' of human beings is not blocked by definitions; the explication virtually invites such analyses. According to Flack and de Waal "prescriptive rules" can also be found with primates, especially with chimpanzees, understood as "expectations about how others should behave", although this assessment seems to be controversial. (Flack & de Waal 2000, pp.

8-9) – Nevertheless there are serious objections to consider. The first says that ‘to ought’ is derived from a fact (the volition) and thus a violation of Hume’s Law. I will not address this objection directly; nevertheless a good part of my following remarks may be taken as an indirect response. Secondly, at first glance the connection with morality if Y wants X to do something is unclear. Even if it is correct that in certain contexts ‘X ought’ means nothing but ‘Y wants X to do something’, this would be no explication of the *moral* ‘ought’; and that is the problem we are dealing with, here.

This second objection is appropriate and leads us to the fact that an occasional or isolated ‘want’ by Y doesn’t suffice for a moral ‘ought’. We have to add further conditions. One of them is *generality*. We only speak of a moral ‘ought’ if it is not only applicable to certain occasions or individuals, but to all situations of a specific type. Hence: Whenever this situation occurs, Y wants X to do something specific. – Of course this condition isn’t hard to meet, so that we can assume for any individual (animal or human) living in groups, that they (a) want something from each other and (b) know about it. On this small basis there will emerge a relatively stable net of mutual ought-relations within the group, on which the individuals can orientate their actions. The advantages for all involved individuals are obvious, since such an orientation helps to avoid conflicts and to establish cooperation. Hence, it’s in all individuals’ interest that such a net of ought-relations exists and provides orientation.

The ‘ought’ thus belongs to the social reality: It is to be considered as a social relation between individuals of a group which on the one hand is (relatively) temporally stable and on the other hand is detached from ‘supporting’ individuals. If a new member enters the group (for instance by birth), the net is already waiting for him; likewise, if a certain individual leaves the group (for instance by death), the relation remains undisturbed. The relation surely depends on a *criticical mass* of individuals which stand in relation; nevertheless, it exists independently of *certain* individuals. To summarize: We’re dealing with a process that begins with volition ‘within’ the individuals and then leads to a relation ‘between’ individuals, which is partially detached from the individuals.

In the beginning, this ‘ought’ is implicit. It consists of ‘mute’ mutual behaviour expectations (note the normative/descriptive ambiguity of ‘expectation’). At a certain level of their development, human beings start to verbalize these expectations. By the means of language the implicit norms are turned into explicit ones, therewith important factors come into play to make possible the development of morality. On the one hand, the generality of ‘ought’ is enhanced, since it is one of the special abilities of language to provide *general* expressions (descriptive as well as normative). Linguistically expressed contents may have a (relative) independence of their respective contexts, as well as of the speaking individuals. The meaning of words or phrases doesn’t initially come into being in the context of its utterance; furthermore, we use expressions of our language according to their already established meaning within our community. Hence, this meaning remains beyond the utterance context as well as the immediately involved individuals. The situational independence of linguistic utterances gives the opportunity to talk about absent (for

instance past or future) as well as abstract subjects. Thus, the verbalization of abstract norms and values (for instance ‘justice’) becomes possible.

Secondly, it is one of the characteristics of verbal expressions that they can be uttered with a claim of correctness or validity; and that claim can be doubted, questioned or denied. Unlike the receivers of an implicit norm, the receivers of an explicit norm not only have the possibility not to comply, but have also the possibility to give their own opinion. Linguistically expressed norms invite to talk, to discussion, to dispute: to what’s nowadays characterized as ‘discourse’. – Within this discourse a second layer becomes evident because now there are *reasons* which inevitably come into play, for discourses don’t simply consist of allegations countered by other allegations, but of arguments (backed up by reasons) which are defended or criticized. Thus, from the beginning, norms exist in a dual space: on the one hand in a space of causes (as far as their genesis can be explained causally) and on the other hand in a space of reasons. The existence and validity of norms without a possibility to reason is unthinkable. At least partially, the discourse takes place on a meta-layer: while norms deal with actions, reasons deal with norms. Such questions about (rational) reasons for the validity of norms do not depend on the examination of their (empirical) causes.

If the practice of reasoning is sufficiently initialized within a community, it will develop beyond daily contexts and will be performed in a way of methodical reflection. So, philosophical texts can emerge, which home in on the rational reasoning of the currently valid norms. Even more: such theories can formulate reasons for or against the validity of norms and even ask for criteria of the adequacy of reasons.

2. Digression on Moral Reasoning

Talking about a ‘space of reasons’ might sound a tad/bit philosophical. In the real world, aren’t causes the only things that matter? In order to show that this is not the case that – when we start to discuss and try to convince somebody else of something – reasons become inevitable, I’d like to turn to a prominent protagonist of ‘evolutionary ethics’. In his book *The Biology of Moral Systems*, Richard D. Alexander proposes two theses, namely that (a) all moral and ethical questions derive from conflicts of interest and (b) ultimately, all interests are of a biologic nature.

“In terms of evolutionary history the ultimate interests of organisms, including humans, are in maximizing the likelihood of survival of their genetic material through reproduction; we expect organisms to find pleasure in, seek out, or be satisfied by activities that in the environments of history would accomplish this end.“ (Alexander 1987, p. 139)

This is a social biologic determination of the causes of human action and of the conflicts emerging within this action, which shall not be discussed here in detail. More interesting for our context is the fact that Alexander did not leave it with categorical and programmatic statements, but dealt with concrete moral problems of our times and proposed *solutions*. One of these problems deals with the rights of embryos and the moribund. Following Alexander’s point of view, even these problems emerge from conflicts of interests, for example between embryo and its parents. In the course of his

search for a biologically well-grounded solution, Alexander first draws out the prevalent positions of the abortion debate. In order to answer the question about the rights of embryos, he then reverts to a definition of brain death, previously drafted in the same chapter. A moribund person may be removed from life support systems and be committed to transplantation, if irreversible loss of all functions of the entire brain was diagnosed. Alexander now translates this principle of "postconsciousness" per analogy to the question of the moral status of embryos:
"Suppose we now take the same approach as appears to be currently adopted for determining the rights of the moribund - that of postconsciousness. We can ask if the offspring is conscious or preconscious – i.e. whether or not it has acquired any kind of self-knowledge equivalent to that we regard as existing in ourselves." (Alexander 1987, p. 208)
Since apparently this isn't the case, an absolute right for life of the embryo can't reasonably be defended.

An evaluation regarding the content of this solution and its implications can't be offered here. Yet, the kind of reasoning applied by Alexander is of interest. First, it's striking that he *doesn't* argue biologically or evolutionarily in a specific sense. As far as he refers to biological facts, he treats them as empirical constraints, which are not constitutional for the finally stated proposal for a solution. Alexander has acknowledged that himself. His answer to the question about the rights of embryos and moribund (on his own account) is
"disappointingly nonradical and (I hope) commonsense, distinguished only by some aspects of attitude in no way restricted to biologists, and by the weighting in of certain kinds of information, especially about conflicts of interest, that are usually not considered... My opinion stems not from some kind of direct application of biological knowledge, but from a playing of the question of the interests of one individual (or individuals) against those of another (in this case the embryo). Even if others disagree with how I have done it in this case, I can see no alternative to some kind of balancing of interests." (Alexander 1987, p. 212)
This biological abstinence of an evolutionary biologist is no coincidence. For it is unimaginable how such a balancing of interests could be performed on the basis of biological facts alone, i.e. without any assessment. Sound moral reasoning necessarily goes beyond biology and includes kinds of concepts, arguments, and principles which are – *horribile dictu* – non-empirical.

This is clearly recognizable in Alexander's considerations, for they are based on coherence arguments of the following form: 'If our arguments in one case are such-and-such, we have to argue in the same way in a (in all relevant aspects identical) second case and we also have to apply the same approach to a solution!' Such arguments are frequently used in daily ethical discussions and are wide-spread in moral philosophy. Although their premises may have empirical content, they still base their validity on non-empirical, i.e. rational principles. Like for instance the principle that equal cases are to be treated in the same way. This fact of equality of two cases serves as the *reason* to act the same way in both cases. So, Alexander *had to* enter the 'space of reason' while trying to convince his reader of the validity of his solution. There is no moral reasoning beyond this space.

3. Exteriorisation and Interiorisation

Let's turn back to the moral 'ought'. My brief draft should at least give an idea that a natural explanation of the moral ought is possible: 'natural' in the way that it doesn't need to revert to supernatural instances; but also 'natural' in the way that its phylogeny can be tracked back to the realm of animals. – Furthermore, this draft should have pointed out that the biological roots of normativity still are no conclusive argument for norms being 'nothing but biology'. Although the moral normativity emerges from biological causes, it grows beyond them. One characteristic mechanism rendering this possible has already been hinted at in my draft: the exteriorisation of interior functions or abilities.[1]
In order to clarify this important mechanism, I will first look at the example of the development of tools. The first 'tools' our ancestors had at their disposal were organs, extremities and parts of their bodies. For instance, they could dig with their hands. Later, they learned to perform this action with tools, like sticks, bones or shovels crafted especially for this purpose. These tools took over the functions which heretofore where executed by the hands; the function was translated to the tool. It's exactly this process of translation that can now be described in a double sense as 'exteriorisation': on the one hand we have a translation from the 'interior' to the 'exterior'; on the other hand we have a translation of biologically predetermined functions and abilities to external material, generally non-biological objects.

Of course, this exteriorisation is especially attractive because significant enhancements of effectiveness and efficiency of a given action become possible: even with a stick and even more with a shovel digging is easier than with bare hands. Again even more so, if in later stages of development a shovel is combined with an engine so that a dredger comes into being. In this way the separation of the practical function from the biological endowment is advanced. For the function of a shovel stays bound to an individual, who conveys his power. The dredger conveys the power automatically and only needs to be controlled; until even this function is assumed by a computer. Hence, each step of exteriorisation is a step towards the *de-biologisation* of the current function: biological mechanisms are replaced by technical mechanisms. Even if the dredger is ultimately employed for biological interests (for instance in order to build a water reservoir), it doesn't operate under biological but other laws, for instance physical. A conspicuous indication of this de-biologisation is the fact that the development of exteriorised functions (in this case: tools and their technology) take place in wholly different temporal dimensions as the development of non-exteriorised functions.

Not only material, but also intellectual functions and abilities can be exteriorised. The genesis of norms is one example. In the beginning of the process, there is a psychic condition: The volition of human or animal individuals. Other individuals of the same community perceive this volition and anticipate it, so that stable behaviour expectations emerge. Perhaps the genesis of independent ought-relations *between* individuals can already be seen as a first step of exteriorisation, for these relations result from a translation

[1] I adopt this term from André Leroi-Gourhan (Leroi-Gourhan 1980).

from the interior of an individual to an inter-individual level. At any rate, the verbalisation is such a step of exteriorisation: the linguistically formulated norm is the exteriorised volition. Within the verbalisation, the initially organism-internal function of influencing other's behaviour is projected outwards and objectified; it has left a biologically constituted space and entered a socially constituted one, in which the biological mechanisms indeed aren't disabled, but interfered by other mechanisms.

Anyway, the exteriorsation process is not finished, yet. A further important step is done by the genesis of scripture. By their recording, norms gain a new degree of independence of both the concrete situation, of which they initially emerged, and the individuals, who initially formulated them. Written norms can still exist and claim validity long after these situations and individuals ceased to exist. It can't be discussed here to what extent certain social institutions like religion, jurisdiction and states have to be considered as exteriorisations of 'ought'. Although these institutions can't simply be classified as 'moral', they still overlap more or less with morality. A comprehensive 'moral culture' originates, the development of which is – as the development of technology – not primarily ruled by biological determinants. The biological determinants do not disappear; instead, they define a corridor that is broad enough to allow space for many different developments.

Before we go on, the counterpart of exteriorisation should briefly be mentioned: the *interiorisation*. If human history consists of outward projections of initially interior biological functions and abilities in a considerable way; and thus, if these exteriorised functions and abilities gain a growing independence of their biological origins; then, by extrapolating this trend, the idea of a situation, in which all exteriorised functions and abilities have become *completely* independent of human beings as biological organisms becomes conceivable. Then, we would be dealing with a free-floating, absolutely autonomous culture (as Karl Popper's "World 3"). – I do not intent to speculate on the probability or even possibility of such a world; there's little room for it and there won't be any in the foreseeable future, anyway. The trees of de-biologisation don't rise up to the sky, so there's only one thing left to note: the last basis even of a relatively independent culture is and will be the human being as a biological organism. Yet, that means: those in the course of history increasingly exteriorised functions and abilities appear to individuals of each following generation as external, given reality and thus have to be adopted and internalised, i.e. 'interiorised'. Understanding and mastering technical artefacts isn't given to us by birth; we have to labour and learn in an ever-complicating process. There is no comparable growth of complexity with the moral norm systems; still, it applies: they are not given to us from the beginning in a biological way, but have to be learnt and adopted. So, human beings in the course of their ontogenesis have to (re-)internalise extra-biologically existing norms. In the long run, there can be no exteriorisation without interiorisation.

It is, therefore, no mere coincidence that human beings are biologically equipped in a special and unique way for this process of interiorsation. As a matter of fact, many empirical findings point out that the specific difference between human beings and

biologically closely related primates lies in their special ability to cooperate with other human beings. The crucial difference is
"an adaptation for participating in collaborative activities, involving shared intentionality – which requires selection during human evolution for powerful skills of intention reading as well as for a motivation to share psychological states with others. In ontogeny, these two components – the understanding of intentional action and the motivation to share psychological states with others – intermingle from the beginning to produce a unique development pathway for human cultural cognition, involving unique forms of social engagement, symbolic communication, and cognitive representation. Dialogic cognitive representations, as we have called them, enable older children to participate fully in the social-institutional-collective reality that is human cognition." (Tomasello 2005, p. 16)
It is not their superior intelligence, but their *social* competence that enables human beings to their unique achievements. By it, within an extraordinary short period of time, individuals have the ability to adopt the achievements of many thousand years of the human beings' cultural development, i.e. internalising the functions and abilities exteriorised in the course of history.

For the current argument it is crucial that interiorised norms are a part of the social world, which every new generation finds and will have to internalise (even if it will change them). Thus, norms will be interiorised as a part of cultural heritage. Yet, this means that it is characteristic and even essential for human beings to live in a dual world, already mentioned above: on the one hand this is the world of biological determinants of behavior, in which any other given animals live; and on the other hand this is a world of cultural determinants of behavior, with norms being a part of those determinants. By being interiorised, these norms become a part of a 'second nature', which to adopt human beings apparently are especially disposed. In a word: We're dealing with an extra-biological factor that individuals can let themselves be guided by.

4. Do norms matter?

At this point, at the latest, the objection may come up that moral norms are without effect. From a biological perspective, the thesis seems likely that human beings – as any other given animal – follow evolutionary evolved motives and impulses which serve to maximize fitness. Moral norms can either be congruent to those motivations or run contrary to them. In the former case, the actions comply with them; yet, they do so only because they command what human beings are determined to do at any rate. In the latter case, they are without effect, because the evolutionary evolved determinants will rule them out.

A weak variant of this objection states that in case of a divergence between moral norms and biological determinants, individuals have a *tendency* to prefer the latter. There is little to say against this variant, since it would indeed be illusionary to ignore the existence of biological determinants and/or the power they wield over our actions. Anyway, nobody who wants to be taken seriously will claim that we could lay down our biological constitution as we could remove our clothes. Even Immanuel Kant (to name an especially

stringent protagonist of anti-biological ethics) assumed that human beings like to follow "inclinations" born from their "sensibility". It's exactly for this reason that moral norms are necessary. A *purely* rational creature, having no possibly irrational and immoral 'inclinations', resulting from its 'sensible nature', would have no need for such norms. Hence, the normativity of morality is an expression of that tendency of sensible, yet rational creatures to follow their 'inclinations'. – Therewith Kant presumes that acting *against* these 'inclinations' is possible at least. Even if human beings are subject to a biological determination, they still have the possibility to deprive themselves of it, if the moral norms command so. Whatever the (biological) basis of this ability may consist of: at any rate it has expanded the human beings' bandwidth of actions compared to animal primates, "so that we human beings are equipped with a measure of flexibility and plasticity that is unequalled in the animal kingdom." (Voland 2007, p. 26) If this possibility is denied, we are dealing with the strong variant of the objection according to which biological determinants leave *no* room to individuals to follow norms if they diverge from the determinants. This thesis shall not be criticized here. It suffices to say: If this thesis applies, then there can be only one biology of human behavor, but no ethics, no 'evolutionary ethics', either.

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Abstract

This article suggests an approach to a 'naturalistic' explication of moral 'ought' which, at the same time, avoids reductionism. The central thesis states that 'X ought to do something' means nothing but Y wants X to do it, with 'X' and 'Y' being any individuals or groups of individuals with the only conditions that (a) they want something from somebody else and (b) they can understand that 'want'. Thus, normativity is a part of the

real world. This thesis goes beyond mere biological principles by understanding the moral ‘ought’ as a process of translating volitions that can be described as ‘exteriorisation’. By means of scripture, these exteriorised volitions are institutionalised by existing members of a community, thus outlasting the particular individuals. Since they become part of the cultural heritage, they can be re-interiorised by new members of the community. Interiorised norms are a part of the social world, which every new generation will find and will have to internalise (even if it will change them).

Contact

Prof. Dr. Kurt Bayertz
Philosophisches Seminar
Universität Münster
Domplatz 23
48143 Münster
bayertz@uni-muenster.de