The Evolutionary Roots of Morality

by Dan Levine
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DARWIN'S LOST THEORY: BRIDGE TO A BETTER WORLD
DARWIN'S 2nd REVOLUTION
by David Loye
Benjamin Franklin Press, 2010

When most people think of evolution, the first thing that comes to mind is either survival of the fittest or selfish genes. Yet the psychologist and system theorist David Loye argues this is a misreading of the gist of evolutionary theory and the intent of that theory’s founder. Moreover, misreading Charles Darwin has severe social consequences: it fosters the belief that the worst side of humanity is bound to win.

Darwin’s ultimate interest, Loye argues, was in the evolution of human moral sensitivity. He adds that Darwin’s celebrated principle of natural selection was just the first stage on the way to moral development. Loye founded the Darwin Project, with a council of over sixty natural and social scientists, to promote the view that moral development is at the heart of evolution.

Loye is familiar to Tikkun readers (his most recent article appeared in the November/December 2010 issue on Spirit and Science). He has written several books about partnership relations, worked as a pioneering television reporter, and served on the faculties of Princeton and UCLA. Yet despite his credentials he couldn’t get his work about Darwin published by a mainstream press because it violated academic conventional wisdom. This led Loye to start his own publishing company, Benjamin Franklin Press.

The two books reviewed here lack the “polish” of mainstream books: the printing is not easy on the eyes, and there are significant spelling errors. Yet the surface “roughness” of these books conceals the fact that they bear messages found, to my knowledge, nowhere else. The books are a must-read for anyone interested in reconciling science and spirit. They are also guideposts for tracing the origins of our society’s prevailing ethos of selfishness and replacing that with an ethos of caring.

Darwin’s Lost Theory details Darwin’s view of moral development, mainly from the 1871 book Descent of Man (with its unfortunate sexist title) and some unpublished notebooks. It explores connections Darwin drew between moral development and natural selection, the central theory of Darwin’s more widely read Origin of Species (1858). Darwin’s 2nd Revolution details the history of evolutionary theory after Darwin’s death. It traces the work of scholars who distorted the theory into a message of endless competition and ultimate meaninglessness, and the opposing work of other scholars who synthesized evolution with cooperation and meaning. I review Loye’s two books in succession.
Loye’s inquiry began with notebooks that Darwin had written in his early thirties and that later became accessible to scholars. He had returned from the voyage of the *Beagle*, which launched his evolutionary studies, but not yet settled into either a career or a marriage.

Darwin’s informal notebook holds the phrase, “May not the moral sense arise from our strong sexual, parental, and social instincts,” but his published work, Loye notes, never mentions the connection between morality and the sexual instinct. This, Loye believes, is because Darwin had enough trouble gaining acceptance for the idea that humans evolved from apes, and dared not offend his reading public further by associating sex with morality. Yet the other connections the young Darwin made, between morality and the parental and social instincts, was featured in *Descent of Man*.

Darwin told numerous stories about kindness in social animals. The kindness sometimes took the form of feeding a handicapped animal (e.g., pelicans feeding the blind pelican among them). Other times it involved saving other animals from predators or grooming them (e.g., monkeys extracting thorns from each other). He saw the evolutionary roots of our moral development in animal behavior. It is only because of our higher intellectual capacities that we, more than other animals, can extend concern for others to all of humanity and to other species.

Kindness can sometimes lead to actual or potential sacrifice of one’s own life or reproductive capacity for the benefit of others or the group as a whole. Loye’s other book notes that modern-day evolutionists still jump through hoops trying to explain altruistic or self-sacrificing behavior within the framework of maximizing fitness. Yet he cites Darwin himself stating clearly in *Descent of Man* that something beyond natural selection is needed to explain altruism:

> The bravest men, who were always willing to come to the front in war and who freely risked their lives for others, would on the average perish in larger numbers than other men. Therefore it hardly seems probable that the number of men gifted with such virtues, or that the standard of their excellence, could be increased through natural selection, that is, by the survival of the fittest.

If morality doesn’t come from natural selection, where does it come from? Darwin notes that our desire for good relations with other people impels us to behave in ethical ways. We inherited these tendencies from other mammals. But because our brains are more developed than the brains of other animals, only humans are, in his words, “capable of comparing our past and future actions or motives, and of approving or disapproving them.”

While Darwin doubted that natural selection favors the development of kindness, sympathy, and altruism at the level of individuals, he believed natural selection favors those qualities at the level of communities or groups:

> Communities that included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring.

There is constant debate among contemporary evolutionists between those who believe in group selection as well as individual selection, and those who believe only in individual selection. Yet the debaters rarely note that the founder of their field came down on the side of group selection.

**How Evolutionary Narratives Shape Political Visions**

The picture Loye presents of Darwin’s outlook is very different from the widespread view that evolution consists only of selection among random mutations with no purpose or direction. Loye believes Darwin pointed to another evolutionary principle — in addition to natural selection — which he did not name, but which Loye calls *organic choice*. That is, natural selection gives us, and other animals, various instincts, but we often need to choose between competing instincts (such as competition and cooperation). This, to Darwin, is the root of conscience.
Animals often act in solidarity to protect vulnerable members of their communities. Here, adult elephants create a circle to protect the entire herd’s calves from wild dogs. Creative Commons/Andy Withers.

Loye emphasizes that our take on evolution is important for the “story” of our culture, the narrative that powers our unconscious but self-fulfilling beliefs in what kinds of social, political, and economic arrangements are possible. If life is meaningless, if morality is just disguised selfishness, and if all our behavior is driven by the competition to survive and reproduce, no wonder we get endless wars, income inequality, and environmental destruction. By contrast, if we have biological motives to treat each other well, and if we can direct our own evolution to enhance cooperation, nations can learn to live together in peace with abundant, sustainable, and equitably shared resources.

Why has competitive struggle and not cooperative sharing dominated our story about evolution? Loye invokes the human desire to simplify. Before Darwin’s day, most mysterious occurrences were attributed to a single cause: God. Since Darwin upset the prevailing outlook, most of his readers have sought to replace God with another single cause. For academics, the one cause became natural selection. For the lay public, the one cause became survival of the fittest, a phrase originated not by Darwin but by the social scientist Herbert Spencer. Spencer verged on Social Darwinism, the belief that those who have the most money or prestige deserve their privileges because they are biologically the fittest. From a computer search of Descent of Man, Loye showed that “survival of the fittest” appeared only twice in the book, whereas “love” appeared ninety-five times. Darwin was no Social Darwinist!

Neo-Darwinian Dogma: Notes on Darwin’s 2nd Revolution

Loye’s second book traces the history of evolutionary scholarship after Darwin’s death. There are too many individuals and crosscurrents for me to review here. Yet most of the authors he reviews fall into one of two camps Darwin suggested. One camp emphasizes the acceleration of evolution through the extermination of others; the other emphasizes the acceleration of evolution through the improvement of others. These are, respectively, the scholarly wings of what Riane Eisler calls the dominator and partnership mindsets.

The first scholar whose work Loye reviews is George Romanes, Darwin’s designated heir. Romanes founded comparative psychology but died young before he could effectively combat the rise of dominator-oriented evolutionists, whom he called neo-Darwinians (a label that’s still used). At death’s door, in his book Darwin and After Darwin, he expressed frustration that many neo-Darwinians “represent as ‘Darwinian heresy’ any suggestions in the way of factors ‘supplementary to,’ or ‘co-operative with’ natural selection.” To this day many neo-Darwinians reject both moral evolution and group selection. Before the rise of feminism, some even rejected sexual selection, the notion (central to Descent of Man) that traits get passed on to offspring when the other sex finds them attractive in mates.

Loye then discusses such writers as Gregor Mendel, Julian Huxley, Teilhard de Chardin, and Theodosius Dobzhansky. But to capture the flavor of current debates, I will skip to his review of more recent writers.
Edward Wilson’s book *Sociobiology* (1975) was a manifesto for a new interdisciplinary science of behavior. Yet the field of sociobiology emphasized genetic causes for behavior and personality traits, often to the exclusion of environmental causes. Naturally this led to an outcry from political activists and social scientists, joined by progressive evolutionists like Stephen Gould and Richard Lewontin. Gould and Lewontin argued that belief in radical genetic determinism endangers society, and that human intelligence data refute genetic determinism.

The current descendant of sociobiology is called evolutionary psychology. The “bible” of evolutionary psychology is the 1992 book *The Adapted Mind*, edited by Jerome Barkow, John Tooby, and Leda Cosmides, which, Loye notes, gave a constructive critique of social scientists for neglecting the natural sciences, but then went overboard in dismissing social scientists’ legitimate contributions. He quotes statements by the book’s authors that are reductionist to the point of dehumanization. For example, the book dismisses morality under the heading “Conscience, Guilt, and Neurosis.”

Yet Loye notes the paradoxical fact that most neo-Darwinians are political and religious progressives. They see evolutionary biology as a counter-force to ignorance and superstition. So why do they fall into a trap that plays into the hands of reactionaries? Why, in fighting traditional religious dogma, do they create their own dogma? Again, this is an unfortunate byproduct of simplification.

In the final chapters of the book, Loye gives accounts of people from all walks of life (religion, politics, entertainment, and academia) that he sees as promoting positive human evolution. He calls these people, including himself and his wife, Riane Eisler, *evolutionary outriders*. The outriders’ life is captured by Hazel Henderson, an economist and Darwin Project Council member, in describing a gathering with two other like-minded women:

> We are, all three of us, trying to play midwife to the evolutionary growth processes, and in so doing we subject ourselves to almost intolerable levels of stress…. I’ve accepted the fact that the stress is going to be there until I die because I’m doing what I ought to be doing. I’m throwing myself into the stream of the process — and it’s okay.

### The Next Stage of Human Evolution

For all his focus on morality, cooperation, and love, Loye adds the caveat in both books that Darwin’s theory also includes natural selection and competition. He does not say the prevailing evolutionary paradigm focusing on natural selection is wrong, just that it is incomplete. Natural selection enabled us to get where we are now, but organic choice and moral development are more important for where we need to go.

Both *Darwin’s Lost Theory* and *Darwin’s 2nd Revolution* conclude with an urgent call to action. Both books call for progressive social scientists, natural scientists, lay writers, and activists to transcend their boundaries, work together, and help direct the next stage of human evolution. They ask us to abandon the unproductive conflicts between nature and nurture, between evolution and creation, and between science and religion. Instead we need to focus on the conflict between partnership and dominator approaches to understanding and acting on human nature. The future of our species, and our planet, depends on a story of human evolution with contemporary relevance around which visionaries can rally. And it depends on our living by that story.

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