

Book Review

Natural Ethical Facts: Evolution, Connectivism, and Moral Cognition by William D. Casebeer, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003

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It is the claim of William D Casebeer, in *Natural Ethical Facts*, that we can give a naturalistic account of ethics. Not just a science-based description of what we do and think and feel that we ought to do, but in some sense a justification of these feelings of ought-ness or morality. One way to do this – a way suggested by the late John Mackie and supported by (among others) myself – is to argue for some kind of ethical non-realism. We deny that there are really ethical facts – we argue that, in some sense, a claim like “rape is wrong” is a fiction (perhaps a very useful fiction) in a way that a claim like “roses smell nice” is not. Casebeer will have none of this. Arguing from what he claims is an updated version of the theory of the great Greek philosopher Aristotle, using the findings of modern evolutionary biology, Casebeer thinks that he can go all of the way and provide a full-blooded, biology-based – that is, naturalistic – account of morality.

Let me give you an example of the difference between the way that Mackie or myself would go at things, and how Casebeer would tackle issues. It is generally thought that the big barrier to the naturalization of morality is the is/ought barrier, or as it is called in other circumstances, the Naturalistic Fallacy. (The first version is due to the eighteenth-century, Scottish philosopher David Hume, and the second to the early-twentieth-century, English philosopher G. E. Moore.) The objection is that there is a difference in kind between a factual claim like “I don’t like violence towards small children” and “Beating the hell out of small children is wrong.” The first is an “is” statement – a claim about fact, namely my feelings – and the second is an “ought” statement – a claim about obligation, about what we should do whatever our feelings. (In other words, even if I am a sadist and get a kick out of hurting small children, it is still wrong.) Hume and Moore said you cannot derive “ought” statements from “is” statements, and hence any attempt to put morality on a naturalistic basis is doomed to failure from the start.

Mackie and I agree with this claim. We want to do an end run around it. You cannot derive – justify – “ought” statements with “is” statements and, since this is the

only way that one could justify such statements, it means that they cannot have any justification at all! In other words, they must be fictions – interesting and important fictions, no doubt (and Mackie and I and others like E. O. Wilson spend considerable time saying in what sense we think they are interesting and important), but fictions nevertheless. What we argue is that evolution has not only given us a moral sense but a feeling that morality is objective, that is, that it does refer to something. Because of this, morality works as a social facilitator. In other words, although we do not think that morality is objective, we think that part of the moral sense is that morality is objective. If we did not have this added illusion, then we would all cheat and morality would just break down.

Casebeer's approach rather is to hack away at the is/ought distinction itself, arguing that there is no genuine difference here between the two. I won't try to quote him because, quite frankly, this is one of the most turgidly written books I have ever come across – in a discipline where turgidity is highly prized. But essentially this is his approach, drawing on recent analytic philosophy (especially that of the recently deceased W. V. Quine, who argued that we should be collapsing many types of statements into one).

So what is the alternative? What is the Aristotelian alternative? Basically, it is that doing good is what we ought to do as human beings. In some sense, it is all a matter of fulfilling the right functions for us. I suppose that in other language, doing good is doing what comes naturally. Casebeer is careful to distinguish his position from those whom he thinks have a crude understanding of what it is to be a human being. Thus, for instance, someone like David Barash apparently thinks that we are only good for reproduction, and hence doing good would be spreading genes far and wide. This is wrong (in Casebeer's view), because it is to omit the full and rich experience of being a human – a social entity with friends and goals and so forth. Doing good means exercising to the full our humanity. There is more to life as a human being than copulation. Relating to friends and developing ourselves as human beings (doing philosophy, presumably) is natural, and this is justification enough.

Needless to say, I am not convinced. On the one hand, I still think that there is call for justification in a way that Casebeer does not offer – and that people like Mackie and I realize should be offered, or at the very least a good reason should be given why justification cannot be offered. Thomas Henry Huxley put his finger on it in his great essay on evolution and ethics. Because something has evolved the way it has, it does not make it right. Aristotle thought that it was okay to endorse slavery – it was perfectly natural. I do not care whether it was natural or not. I mean, I don't even want to get into that argument. Slavery is wrong, period. The point (that Huxley appreciated and that Casebeer does not) is that what exists, even if (sometimes especially if) it exists because of evolution, it is not necessarily right.

On the other hand, I think Casebeer does a lousy job of critiquing others. This is not just sour grapes, but a general complaint. He praises E. O. Wilson for sensing that morality might have a biological basis, but does nothing to see how Wilson tries to make his case. Far be it from me to defend Barash in his lust to spread his genes

far and wide, but the brief quote (from Barash) that Casebeer gives does not seem to me to bear the crude interpretation he attributes to Barash. Barash says (and he is clear): “in short, there is no intrinsic, evolutionary meaning to being alive. We simply are. And so are our genes.”

What is wrong with that? He is arguing (as would I) that you cannot get “ought” from “is” – or you cannot (Herbert Spencer like) get meaning from the process of evolution. Barash may be wrong – as it happens I don’t think he is – but the point is that he is not saying that the only result is that we should copulate ourselves into the ground, spreading genes far and wide. Even that has no meaning. He is saying that this is the point at which we start to try to make our own meaning to our lives – whether it be religious or secular. Darwinian evolutionary theory does many things, but it does not give this ultimate meaning.

Natural Ethical Facts is not a bad book. But it is far too quick to make important points. And, as I have said, it is written in dreadful prose that seems to pass as the norm in too many books in the humanities, especially philosophy. I wish that Casebeer had worked out his ideas as articles first. Books take skill and experience, and Casebeer does not have this yet.