In the Long Cool Hour

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'THESE ENGLISH psychologists,' Nietzsche wrote in 1887, 'just what do they want?'

You always find them at the same task, whether they want to or not, pushing the *partie honteuse* of our inner world to the foreground, and looking for what is really effective, guiding and decisive for our development where man's intellectual pride would least wish to find it (for example, in the *vis inertiae* of habit, or in forgetfulness, or in a blind and random coupling and mechanism of ideas, or in something purely passive, automatic, reflexive, molecular and thoroughly stupid) – what is it that actually drives these psychologists in precisely *this* direction all the time?

Nietzsche's complaint is not that morality should be protected from explanation – this passage opens *On the Genealogy of Morality* – but rather that the 'English psychologists' appear to be driven by self-loathing. Under the cover of cool empiricism lies a 'secret, malicious . . . instinct to belittle humans', or a disillusioned idealism, or maybe just 'a bit of everything, a bit of vulgarity, a bit of gloominess, a bit of hostility to Christianity, a little thrill, and a need for pepper'.

Nietzsche would no doubt have been just as wary of those today who look for the ultimate explanation of morality – not to mention love, sex, religion and art – in brain scans and evolutionary just-so stories. 'It is increasingly evident that moral standards, practices and policies reside in our neurobiology,' the 'neurophilosopher' Patricia Churchland claims. 'Our moral nature is what it is because our brains are as they are.' Steven Pinker writes that the 'human moral sense turns out to be an organ . . . with quirks that reflect its evolutionary history and its neurobiological foundations.' Thus Daniel Dennett feels able to claim that Darwinism is a 'universal acid' that 'eats through just about every concept, and leaves in its wake a revolutionised worldview'. Some neuro-evo evangelists, especially those writing for a mass audience, take themselves not only to be explaining morality, but to be explaining it away. All talk of persons and character, just and unjust, the very idea of moral reasoning, should be given up: we must speak now only of brains, hard-wired through natural selection to serve the interests of selfish genes. John Gray declares that morality is a 'myth' obscuring the fact that our existence has 'no more meaning than the life of a slime mould'. David Brooks, author of the bestselling pop-science Bil-

dungsroman *The Social Animal*, explains that his fictional everywoman 'Erica' is slow to trust 'Harold' because 'while Pleistocene men could pick their mates on the basis of fertility cues discernible at a glance, Pleistocene women faced a more vexing problem,' since they had to choose a man 'not only for insemination but for continued support'.

The widespread belief that scientific explanation replaces morality and moral talk – and its corollary, that science must be rejected if morality is to be saved – labours under a confusion. Consider the question: 'Why does Sarah believe that it's good to keep promises?' It can be answered in two ways: by giving a causal explanation of Sarah's belief, or by listing the considerations Sarah might reasonably cite in support of her belief. When we answer the question in the first way – for example, by saying something about the evolutionary origins of promising – we inhabit the world of cause and effect. When we answer it in the second way – for example, by talking about the special duties that are incurred when one makes a promise – we inhabit what Wilfrid Sellars called the 'space of reasons'. The mistake is to think that living in a world of causes precludes our also inhabiting the space of reasons. We are indeed creatures of cause, living within and as part of the natural order; but at the same time we are creatures of reason. Our capacity to justify ourselves to each other, to persuade without coercion, is constitutive of our personhood, and as important for the scientist as for anyone else.

In *The Ethical Project*, Philip Kitcher attempts to show that there is adequate room for moral reasons in a causal world. As a philosopher and historian of science, Kitcher is wedded to Naturalism, the doctrine that philosophy should posit nothing that cannot be found in our best science. Like many Naturalists, he is convinced of the power of Darwinian theory to explain not only biological but also cultural development, and wants to draw on it to elucidate morality. But he is also a humanist – he has written in the past about political philosophy, the history of early modern philosophy, and the aesthetics of Wagner and Joyce – and wants to do justice to the texture of our moral lives. His goal is to provide a meta-ethics – an account of the nature of ethical truth – that respects the demands of both Naturalism and humanism. This isn't an easy thing to do. Most attempts to reconcile ethics with evolutionary theory offend against humanism by equating what is morally good for persons with what is evolutionarily adaptive for organisms – a mistake Kitcher himself criticised in *Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature* (1985).

Kitcher's attempt to devise a scientifically and philosophically cogent meta-ethics draws inspiration from Pragmatism, the American philosophical tradition developed by William James, C.S. Peirce and John Dewey. Pragmatists urged philosophers, and culture as a whole, to let go of their preoccupation with truth. Do not ask whether beliefs or theories are true, they suggested, but whether they are useful. Truth is a secondary matter; progress, understood as the more efficient satisfaction of human needs, is the fundamental concern. What makes a

given belief true, according to Pragmatism, is that it survives progressive transitions in human development, proving itself useful before the court of history. Kitcher augments Pragmatism with the conceptual apparatus of 21st-century evolutionary theory, and then applies it specifically to ethics. The result is a view according to which ethical beliefs are true if they survive the course of human evolutionary and cultural development. Moral truths evolve along with us, and because of us: the space of reasons is an evolutionary product of the world of causes.

Kitcher's case for this view, which he calls Pragmatic Naturalism, begins with our early hominid ancestors roaming the savannah fifty thousand years ago. He argues that psychological altruism – acting in the interest of another, in virtue of its being in the other's interest to do so – evolved as an adaptation that allowed our ancestors, like present-day bonobos and chimpanzees, to live in co-operative communities.* (This may seem obvious, but many evolutionary theorists insist that displays of altruism among our primate cousins are really just instances of Machiavellian self-interest. Some of these theorists like to argue that the same goes for humans.) However, our ancestors' altruism had its limits. There was always a temptation to cheat or defect when the pay-off was big enough. Resulting snags in the social fabric had to be repaired through painstaking sessions of mutual grooming. (Chimpanzees spend up to six hours a day huddled together in moments of group stress.) A new psychological adaptation was needed, which Kitcher calls 'the capacity for normative guidance'. This allowed our ancestors – unlike our primate cousins – to check the selfish dispositions that interfere with altruism, first through the fear of socially regulated punishment, then through more refined mechanisms like respect for authority (including divine authority), the setting up of moral exemplars – saints, heroes and the like – and, ultimately, fully-fledged moral codes transmitted through language and social institutions. The moral truths, according to Kitcher, are those beliefs, for example in the importance of keeping promises, that both resulted from and made possible this progress towards increased social harmony.

In evolutionary accounts of human psychology, much hangs on how strong we take the connection between ourselves and our prehistoric ancestors to be. Once it is conceded that we are far more complex creatures than they were, and that culture is not exhaustively determined by biology – Kitcher insists on both things – it's reasonable to ask what we stand to learn from evolutionary history. Can our contemporary moral concerns – the trade-offs between liberty and security; the injustices of global capitalism; clashes of values and beliefs; the negotiation of desire; the formation of identity – really be said to resemble anything that went on in the savannah fifty thousand years ago? And if our problems are essentially different from those of our ancestors, why should we care what innovations they came up with to solve theirs? They would presumably be in no better position to deal with climate change or gender politics than chimpanzees are today.

Anticipating this worry, Kitcher proposes

that we think of ethics as a technology we have inherited from our hominid ancestors. Technologies are refined over time the better to discharge their original function. In the process, new problems arise, whose solution requires further refinement of the technology, which turns up more new problems, and so on. Ethics, Kitcher argues, was invented as a technology to overcome failures of altruism, but as it was refined, new problems – new desires, new sources of social tension – arose, which themselves required further ethical refinement. It is this dialectical process, which Kitcher calls the 'ethical project', that links our contemporary ethical concerns, however distantly, with those of our hominid ancestors.

Kitcher ends his book by proposing that a much needed renewal of the ethical project could be achieved by emulating its earliest phases, when, as he pictures it, bands of our ancestors gathered together in the 'long cool hour' to work out how best to get along, without deferring to the supposed moral authority of priests or philosophers. The primordial goal of ethics – overcoming failures of altruism in order to ease social tension – is not, Kitcher thinks, being adequately met in contemporary societies. Poverty and inequality are allowed to persist because of our attachment to moral codes and institutions that we should treat not as immutable, but as provisional solutions to social problems – solutions that can now be seen to have failed. What is needed is a renewed attention to the original function of ethics, and a return to the deliberative principles used, if his hypothesis is right, by the early hominids, but

adapted to facilitate the participation of everyone in the global community. Kitcher's is a utopian vision according to which everyone would enjoy not only material equality but also an equal opportunity to contribute to the ethical project.

IN ITS INSISTENCE that ethics is created rather than discovered, Pragmatic Naturalism is directly at odds with Moral Realism, the ascendant meta-ethical view among contemporary philosophers. Realists maintain that there are universal, timeless, mind-independent truths about what is right and what is wrong. In no sense is ethics 'up to us'. Kitcher, like most Naturalists, thinks that a commonsensical, scientifically informed worldview rules out Realism. Clearly, there is no place for transcendent moral facts in a world of blind particles and brute forces. To hold otherwise, as the Realist does, is to traffic in suspect metaphysics, perhaps to indulge nostalgia for an exiled God.

In bringing these charges, however, Kitcher hasn't been watching his opponents closely enough. The most prominent defenders of Realism today – Thomas Nagel, T.M. Scanlon, Ronald Dworkin and Derek Parfit – explicitly deny that Realism carries the heavy metaphysical burden Kitcher is worried about. According to the Naturalist, all genuine truths correspond to states of affairs of the spatio-temporal world. Ethical statements like 'keeping one's promises is good' either reduce to such states, or they aren't true. The New Realists reject this opposition. Of course, some truths – like 'Mount Kilimanjaro is a dormant volc-

ano' – correspond to states describable by science. Others – 'two plus two is four,' 'the world financial markets collapsed in 2008' or 'Agamemnon's downfall was his pride' – are not (obviously) reducible to such states, yet seem to be true nonetheless. So too with ethical statements: they can be true without corresponding to any fact 'out there', either in the spatio-temporal universe or in some imagined Platonic sphere. The Naturalist's mistake, the New Realists argue, is to think that all truths must finally be accounted for in the ledger of science. The Naturalists, they believe, are actually the ones suffering the theological hangover: they yearn to replace God with science.

Even if one remains unconvinced that a metaphysically unburdened Realism is tenable, there is something compelling about the New Realists' refusal to ground the space of reasons in the world of causes. For Naturalists, even when they are as sophisticated as Kitcher, can sometimes appear to be making category errors. Consider Kitcher's account of the emergence of feminism:

> What was discovered? Factual knowledge advanced: people learned that, under different conditions of socialisation, women wanted things traditionally denied to them; that they found satisfaction in attaining some of these things; that fulfilment of the wishes did not thwart desires previously seen as central to female nature – public life combined more or less satisfactorily with family life.

This may or may not be a sound account of how the feminist movement originated, but the point is that Kitcher interprets the question 'Why do we believe that women and men have equal rights?' as a request for causal explanation, not as a demand for justification. Feminism is justified not because women want to be treated like men and because it so happens that granting them equality doesn't cause too much damage to family life: it is justified because of the equality of men and women. Similarly, writing about the liberalisation of attitudes towards homosexuality, Kitcher argues that 'accepting same-sex preference rests on establishing facts about the prevalence of homosexual desires and about the consequences of expressing them.' No doubt cultural attitudes towards homosexuality have shifted in tandem with the greater visibility of gays and lesbians and with the deepening of public understanding of sexuality. But the question 'Why should we be accepting of homosexuality?' isn't satisfactorily answered by observing that 'homosexual desires are widespread and their expression is non-disastrous for society.' Questions about what justifies claims of equality, rights and obligations must be answered within the space of reasons.

The ambition, central to the Naturalist programme, to ground the space of reasons in the world of causes always runs the risk of leaving all cause and no reason. But this doesn't mean that we should give up on reconciling science and morality. What if, instead of the theoretical reconciliation which Kitcher and many other philosophers chase after, we were to take a more practical approach? This would involve showing, by example, how to speak in the languages both of science and of morality, without anxiously translating the one into the other. In a culture increasingly seduced

by scientific discourse, a demonstration of such bilingualism would be one of the more useful things philosophy has to offer.

DOES AN UNWILLINGNESS to reduce reason to cause require us to be Realists? That is, does it require us to believe that ethics is a body of eternal, objective, mind-independent truths? Realists, unsurprisingly, say that it does. They argue that when we deliberate about ethics, when we seek to justify ourselves and convince others, we tacitly adopt a Realist framework. When we condemn torture, say, we do so as if it were objectively wrong, and not wrong just as a matter of taste or convention. Besides, the alternative is unpalatable: a world in which the permissibility of torture is negotiable is one in which nothing is forbidden. The Naturalist's refusal to go along with the Realist leaves him open to the accusation that he has nothing to say in the face of moral atrocity. How would Kitcher respond to the proposal that we might continue the ethical project – that is, the easing of social tension – not by overcoming failures of altruism, but through genocide or fascism? If ethics is an adaptable technology that we use to deal with social instability, isn't it possible that our ethical experiments could lead just as easily to a dystopia of systematic oppression as to Kitcher's utopian democracy? The worry is not that our collective future might turn out to be ugly – no meta-ethical theory, Realism included, will stop would-be perpetrators of evil – but that according to Pragmatic Naturalism, evil might turn out to *be* good.

Kitcher tries to defuse this problem by arguing that the method he proposes for ethical decision-making – that is, mutual deliberation – is one that leads to utopian, not dystopian outcomes. By contrast, dystopian proposals cannot furnish a self-reinforcing method of moral adjudication. Only such proposals as Kitcher's – those that favour radical equality both of life-chances and of participation in ethical decision-making – have the coherence necessary for a viable ethics. There are two difficulties here. First, there is no assurance that mutual deliberation will save us from dystopian outcomes: fascists are sometimes democratically elected, and fear and false consciousness are an effective means to produce consensus on bad ideas. Kitcher is forced to invoke perfectly rational agents making decisions in ideal conditions, but this brings him closer to the Realism he wants to reject: if ethical progress involves pursuing an objective ideal, then ethics is not so 'up to us' after all. Second, it isn't hard to see that some methods of moral decision-making do effectively reinforce a dystopian status quo. Deferring to the will of the Führer or Dear Leader might not enjoy the sophistication of Kitcher's method of mutual engagement, but as a model of social coherence it can hardly be faulted.

And yet the question posed by moral evil – how to vindicate the intuition that it exists not as a matter of convention, but as a matter of objective truth – might in the end be a distraction. For there are other moral reasons to favour Kitcher's view of ethics. In his model of collective deliberation, moral experts – priests and philosophers –

give way to a democracy of ethical decision-makers. Those who think that Realism is the only morally sound meta-ethics are often motivated by the belief that the most important thing is to be able to condemn atrocities as always and everywhere wrong. Anti-Realists prefer to think that people are ultimately answerable, not to abstract principles or divine commands, but to each other. We should take this view seriously not because it is demanded of us by science, but because it is ethically attractive in its own right. □