A BETTER APE
Victor Kumar & Richmond Campbell

Reviewed by Calvin Warner

Introduction

The theory of evolution by natural selection is likely the most revolutionary idea in the history of science. Arguably, Darwin's original thesis, and its fine tuning by evolutionary biologists since, has done more to transform mankind's understanding of our place in the world than any philosophical theory.

If philosophy is the analysis of concepts—especially human concepts like morality, self, mind, language, and emotion—then philosophers interested in the human condition have a duty to incorporate evolutionary theory into their work.

Darwin's famous observation was that a finch's beak could adapt to its environment given a grand time scale, heritability of traits, and a scarcity of resources. Just like a finch's beak, human traits are the product of aeons of natural selection. Not only are human bodies well equipped to conquer our physical environment, but our

behaviours are adapted for the complex social environment that humans inhabit. Morality, some argue, stabilizes large cooperative social groups, giving humans the unique ability to master their environment like no other species. Just as a finch with a stronger beak can crack a tougher shell, so a human with a willingness to cooperate can take down larger prey.

The Evolution of Morality

As Sharon Street ([2006], p. 114) observed, 'our system of evaluative judgments is thoroughly saturated with evolutionary influence'. In *A Better Ape*, Victor Kumar and Richmond Campbell weave a compelling narrative of why and how this is so. The thesis of the book is not only that evolution drives human morality, but that morality drives human evolution. Indeed, 'for hundreds of thousands of years, morality has been essential to the survival of humanity' (p. 252). But more than simply being one element of the human success story, *A Better Ape* argues that a primitive morality 'was vital to many other breakthroughs in human evolution' (p. xi), like our advanced intelligence and complex social structures. The book draws on literature from the natural sciences as well as philosophy to develop this argument.

The first argument of the book is that morality enhanced the evolutionary fitness of early humans. These ancient humans developed a basic set of moral capacities: sympathy, loyalty, trust, respect, guilt, and resentment. These basic capacities allowed early humans to develop more complex social bonds than other animals. Early humans could now collaborate. As the authors explain, two individuals could each catch a rabbit on their own, but together they could catch a stag. The ability to cooperate is an evolutionary 'superpower' because both parties benefit.

Of course, collaboration in hunting is hardly unique to humans. But early humans took cooperation to new heights: to defend against predators or invaders, divide labour, and share child-rearing obligations. For perhaps the first time, it was not raw strength or speed that offered the largest adaptive advantage, but the ability to collaborate made possible by primitive moral emotions. This basic set of moral emotions allowed early humans to 'self-domesticate', the first building block of a complex society.

These new-found moral capacities would trigger an arms race in intelligence. In a world with trusting apes, there is an incentive to deceive and become a free rider. Taking advantage of others could offer an adaptive benefit, but being recognized as a deceiver could carry consequences. Early humans evolved larger brains to solve the increasingly complex puzzles of intraspecies interactions, and with these larger brains came advanced behaviours and even technological innovation.

Kumar and Campbell explore this fascinating story in a crisp and concise narrative that welcomes those new to the topic as well as those with prior exposure to the field.

Moral Progress

In addition to telling the evolutionary story of morality, the authors also develop a framework for understanding 'moral progress'. But this approach is limited by setting aside the most interesting moral question posed by evolution: if morality has evolutionary origins, what does that mean for the truth value of any moral claims? My main criticism of *A Better Ape* (and a criticism I think the authors anticipated and decided to equivocate on) is that it gives moral scepticism only cursory treatment. But by dismissing this large body of literature, the authors are missing an important piece of the analysis.

Some philosophers have taken the view that since morality is a product of evolution, the actual content of moral beliefs is necessarily false or not truth-apt. The mere fact that a belief is advantageous to human survival carries no epistemic weight, and therefore the evolutionary origin of morality 'debunks' any realist theories of value.

This view has many permutations. Richard Joyce ([2006]) argues that the evolutionary story gives us a reason to think our moral judgements are not tracking anything at all, while Street argues that the evolutionary story gives us reason to think moral judgements are actually made true by our own attitudes. A third group (for example, Gibbard [1990]; Blackburn [1993]) would say that evolution fills in an interesting explanation of why humans spend so much time making moral assertions, but none of our moral statements were ever aiming at truth anyway.

Kumar and Campbell reject these views, arguing that morality's evolutionary origin is the starting point of the conversation, not the last word (p. 197). On their view, morality evolved and continues to evolve, and societies can and should strive for moral progress beyond our evolutionary roots.

The authors make the standard move of separating descriptive and evaluative theories of value (p. 11). That is, one body of literature seeks to describe the way that morality works or came to be, and the other seeks to evaluate whether some moral theories are actually true. The authors' view is that the theory of evolution helps us describe how morality evolved, but does not necessarily fill in the content of our moral beliefs. To the extent evolution has given content to human morality, it does not follow that such content cannot be questioned or improved.

The authors would no doubt agree that the human desire to alter our behaviour in line with a perceived external source of normativity is among the great wonders of evolution. It has enabled us to build complex societies and economies that span across the globe. But there is a dark side to human morality—it often leads to sympathy for and loyalty to one's own tribe, but hostility and mistrust towards those who are perceived as outsiders. Mistrust of strangers was a healthy trait in an older time where life could be nasty, brutish, and short. But in the last few hundred years, it has manifested in racism, homophobia, and religious intolerance.

A Better Ape makes the interesting argument that early moral capacities (fairness, reciprocity, loyalty) were only applied to one's immediate tribe, and those outside of this group were essentially non-moral entities. But the rise of religion increased the scope of one's tribe significantly, and played an important role in helping humans develop a broader network of moral relationships (p. 142).

On the authors' view, this broadening of the moral network is an improvement, but the attendant intolerance that religion often breeds is a sign of moral decay. By understanding the scaffolding of our moral psychology, we can diagnose the causes of our moral behaviours and root out the bad ones. Which components are good and which are bad? Science does not have this answer; we need 'independently plausible' evaluative ideas to lead the way (p. 11).

Kumar and Campbell suggest there are a few behaviours that we should unequivocally rule out as moral: slavery, eugenics, colonization, torture, racism, transphobia, religious intolerance, factory farming, and so on. Why? They think moral judgements can be vindicated through rational argumentation (p. 191), and from this basis we can build out ethical theories. Once we understand the moral psychology that would lead us to adopt backwards moral views, we can engage in introspection that will lead us to become better apes.

The authors acknowledge that many readers will want an ethical theory that 'explains why some changes are progressive and why others are regressive' (p. 189). The book argues that this structure is backwards. Instead, we should identify clear cases of moral progress (for example, that slavery is morally wrong) and move from this to a unified theory of moral progress. As they assert: 'We are extremely confident—and you should be too—that freedom from slavery is just, that men and women deserve equal moral consideration, and that sentient beings should not be tortured for modest and fleeting gains' (p. 192).

But what if a reader wants to push back, not on any of these examples, but on the way the authors frame moral discourse as a truth-seeking enterprise? 'The best response to skeptics is simply this: to show that moral progress is real because it is the outcome of rational change' (p. 197).

I happen to agree with the authors' moral views, and am happy to cheer from the sidelines while they dunk on the moral boogeymen of our modern times (racism, xenophobia, and so on). But couldn't my moral views just be 'post-hoc rationalization' of my 'gut reactions' (p. 13)? The authors don't think so because moral views are susceptible to moral reasoning and argumentation (p. 197).

On one theory of morality, my moral views are much like my allegiance to my favourite sports team. My allegiance is not based on rational argument: I am unlikely to go to the game and come home wearing the jersey of the other team because a visiting fan made a compelling argument. But moral opinions can and do change based on new information. Humans share a set of shared foundational principles (granting that the extent to which these principles are really universal is up for debate). Moral reasoning might occur when a novel scenario arises and two parties each believe a certain moral precept should apply.

Suppose we are deciding on the best method to distribute meat from the hunt. You might argue that the fairest way to distribute the spoils is that everyone should get an equal share. I say that is unfair, and that those who contributed most to the hunt should get more. We can make arguments based on our shared foundational principle of fairness, and one or the other may be convinced and change sides.

But none of this entails that anyone's moral arguments yield true conclusions, where 'true' here means that one has successfully described some metaphysical dimension of the world. For example, the human eye is very good at distinguishing the colours on the basic colour spectrum. This is a useful ability for a creature that spent hundreds of thousands of years facing the threat of large cats in lush forests. The human eye is useless, on the other hand, at detecting ultraviolet light, since such an ability would not have been adaptively advantageous. The fact that the human eye cannot detect ultraviolet radiation does not mean it doesn't exist, of course, which shows us that there is no necessary connection between the adaptive advantage of human traits and their epistemic value. For humans to detect the truth value of moral claims, as J. L. Mackie ([1977], p. 38) writes, 'it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of knowing everything else'.[1] At the risk of belabouring this point, suppose that belief in God were beneficial for human survival (and, indeed, it just might be). The mere fact that humans believe in God does not provide any evidence that God actually exists. Likewise, just because we can plug moral statements into sentences and make coherent arguments does not mean any of the discourse is actually true.

Surveying the literature on this topic may simply require too much runway for a book that is already quite long and I would be curious to see the next step of this project, defending moral progress against the sceptic.

Conclusion

No one should interpret my objections as a negative judgement of this book's potential for impact on the literature. It is a well-researched, well-written, and thought-provoking contribution to one of the most important and interesting discussions in all of philosophy (even if does not entirely placate the moral sceptic).

The strongest virtue of the book is that it takes a great deal of literature on a complex topic, synthesizes it, and makes it accessible to a generalist reader. It succeeds in adapting its content to its target audience, and any philosopher bewildered by the sprawling literature in moral psychology or evolutionary ethics could benefit from reading it. The weakness of the book, in my view, is that it glosses over one of the largest questions at the intersection of biology and philosophy: if morality has evolutionary origins, what does this mean for the truth of any of its content? Even so, this book is an excellent addition to any philosopher's bookshelf.

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Notes

[1] For this short review, I set aside the important question of whether there are other ways we might detect moral truth (for example, rationality, religious texts, and so on).

References

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