

GUEST EDITORIAL

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Naturalistic accounts and histories of morality, based on the Darwinian theory of evolution, are widespread today and are gaining increasing influence. The question they raise is identical to that posed by the naturalistic accounts of mind. What are they aiming at? Do they intend to demonstrate that the complex phenomena, named by folk psychology “morality”, consist of nothing more than a series of genetic, biological, and cognitive processes that favor the adaptation to the environment and the survival of individuals, groups, and species?

In this case, naturalistic accounts of morality would have the paradoxical consequence of eliminating morality. In the same way that talking about the mind makes sense only if our speech refers to beliefs, intentional contents, and qualitative experiences, which are distinct from the physical events to which they are related, so, too, talking about morality only makes sense by referring to deliberate actions, choices oriented toward good or evil, personal responsibility, all things distinct from the genetic, biological, and cognitive processes to which they are related. The mental does not seem reducible to the physical, and morality does not seem reducible to what promotes adaptation and survival. To the human being, morality is not merely functional but also meaningful. Are naturalistic accounts, which raise the behavior of animals to the level of “morality” and lower the human search for morality to the level of adaptation and survival, able to grasp this meaning?

An answer to this question depends on the willingness of naturalistic accounts of morality to seriously consider notions such as “right” and “wrong” (understood in an objective sense), “obligation”, “intention”, “purpose”. On a merely descriptive level, there is an evident continuity between the prosocial attitudes of animals, especially of higher mammals, and human cooperative attitudes. Maybe, in some cases, empathy offers the causal explanation of both animal and human behavior. However, cooperation and morality are

not identical, as evidenced by the fact that it is possible to express a moral judgment on cooperation: right, if it is aimed at good ends and wrong, if it is aimed at bad ends. Moreover, empathy is not a moral phenomenon but a psychological one. Ethical norms are universalizable; empathy isn't.

So, may we accept the evidence of similar behavior between animals and humans, by agreeing with the thesis that such a similarity depends on the biological continuity between them, and, at the same time, also accept the evidence that human morality is qualitatively different from the animal one? In this case, if biological continuity is the cause of similarity, what is the reason for dissimilarity?

On this point, the naturalistic account of morality inevitably confronts the religious one. This confrontation is usually conflictual, but this need not be the case. If the naturalistic accounts of morality do not imply the option in favor of metaphysical naturalism, there is room for a dialogue that can be oriented in different directions. The biological theory of evolution is not the same from Darwin's time, and, nowadays, it can also be supported in a form that is no longer Darwinian. To reintegrate the concept of "purpose" and "design", in the explanation of biological change and structures, would be a promising way to overcome the gap between naturalism and theism, as well as to develop an adequate view of the contribution that religious beliefs have offered to the evolutionary history of the humanity. In the end, the primacy that human beings continue to ascribe to themselves in comparison with other living forms, also through the search for naturalistic explanations of morality, has much to do with religion in the varieties of its forms.

The following special issue of the *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* faces many of these questions. Most of its contributions come from the Workshop *Is Evolutionary Research Relevant to Theological Ethics?*, held at the Department of Economics, Society, and Politics of the University of Urbino (Italy), 23-24 October 2018. The Workshop was the final event of a biennial research project on this topic by a group of Italian (or based in Italy) scholars coordinated by Daniele Bertini. It benefited from the generous financial support of the University of Innsbruck within the research project "Analytic Theology Cluster Groups". I want to thank Georg Gasser for supporting the research project and accepting the proposal for a special EJPR issue, Daniele Bertini for having coordinated the project and the editorial care of this volume and all those who have contributed to it.