

## Ethics Gets Real

The remarkable and essentially modern idea of environments, or even just non-human animals, having moral considerability has added layers of seemingly intractable complexity to the field of ethics. That said, we should not be under any illusions that prior to these developments ethics or moral philosophy was somehow easy or was achieving steady progress towards a rationally agreed consensus; inter-human ethics was and remains a minefield of conflicting positions and dilemmas. The addition of moral concern about the environment has, however, contributed more than just further (necessary) complexity. For example, in addition to the critique of anthropocentrism and the idea of non-human entities (animals, plants or ecosystems) possessing intrinsic value, environmental ethicists are at the vanguard of those bringing a significant shift in focus to bear on the very nature of ethical thinking. This shift in focus is being brought about by the recognition that we are situated – environed – beings and that our species has come into existence, like all other life forms, through a process of biological evolution. We have known this for some time and, once understood, the reality of our situation presents us daily with the evidence. However, the ethical import of these facts has been covered over for centuries by alternative stories of who we are, how we came to be and how we should live.

We can't just read off from the evolutionary story how we, as enculturated beings, should live, but the evolutionary story does present a starting point for how we need to think about ethics. Owen Flanagan presents a clear statement of this in his 'principle of minimal psychological realism' which states: 'make sure when constructing a moral theory or projecting a moral ideal that the character, decision processing, and behaviour prescribed are possible, or are perceived to be possible for creatures like us'.<sup>1</sup> This suggestion is not altogether new; we can look back to Aristotle and Hume for some interesting insights about the nature of ethics being drawn from the nature of human beings, as this was understood in their respective times. And, of course, there are Darwin's own insights into these matters.

The first two papers in this issue of the journal present a careful working through of specific ideas in Darwin's work, as they are presented by Darwin (rather than as they are often assumed to be), in order to develop an environmental ethic that recognises the role of humans as moral agents.

Robert Kirkman in his 'Darwinian Humanism' presents an account that blends a Kantian humanism, usually associated with a transcendental freedom, with a form of empiricist naturalism to forge an approach to ethics that fits both our experience of freedom and our experience of being intertwined with the world. Ben Dixon in 'Darwinism and Human Dignity' mines Darwin's work on conscience and then takes his ideas further by showing how conscience operates at the social level by enshrining the reflective products of conscience in the institutions we create.

As these authors show, Darwin's writings offer a rich source of insights that need not lead to a brutish form of sociobiology. Taking Flanagan's principle to heart, we can call on the plethora of information that is mounting from other academic fields that is relevant to ethical thinking. If we want ethics to have a bearing on how we live, what motivates us and, in the environmental field particularly, how to inspire the motivation to live in more environmentally conscious ways, then it makes sense to start with the reality of our situation: that we are evolved social animals, shaped by our contexts. To gain insights into how this evolutionary history and these social pressures have shaped and are shaping us we would do well to consult colleagues in other fields like anthropology, developmental and social psychology, cognitive science and neurobiology. This doesn't mean that normative ethics, as usually construed, drops out of the picture. It does mean that normative ethics can become more theoretically and practically powerful precisely because it is now proceeding on a more realistic basis.

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<sup>1</sup> Flanagan, O. 1991 *Varieties of Moral Personality: Ethics and Psychological Realism*, Boston: Harvard University Press, p. 32.