Can evolution explain ethics? Can “goodness” and “badness” be deduced from biology? Can Mother Nature—mixing genetic mutation with natural selection—supplant Father God as morality’s maker? In this issue of Solid Ground I answer that question decisively: No, it can’t, not even in principle. In fact, though Darwinists have been chanting the slogan “good for goodness’ sake,” evolution actually renders the phrase meaningless. My case, though, requires a precise understanding of the basic concepts involved, and a willingness to see a line of thought through to the end. And that’s what I give you this month in “God, Evolution, and Morality.”
Dear Friend,

C.S. Lewis launched his well-known case for Christ, *Mere Christianity*, with this argument. I closed *Relativism—Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air* with it.

Not only does it provide compelling basis for belief in God, it demonstrates that evil is actually evidence for God instead of against Him.

I’m referring, of course, to the moral argument. Put simply, if there is no God, there is no objective morality. However, objective morality exists (the problem of evil proves this). Therefore, God exists. The defense rests.

Not so fast, Darwinists say. You’ve stumbled coming out of the gate. Your first premise is false. Millions are moral with no belief in God at all, and many are doing a better job at it than religious folk.

No, God is not necessary for goodness. Darwinism can accomplish the task all on its own. The “blind watchmaker” is also the “blind moral-maker.”

Can evolution explain ethics? Can “goodness” and “badness” be deduced from biology? Can Mother Nature—mixing genetic mutation with natural selection—supplant Father God as morality’s maker?

In this issue of *Solid Ground* I answer that question decisively: *No, it can’t, not even in principle.* In fact, though Darwinists have been chanting the slogan “good for goodness’ sake,” evolution actually renders the phrase meaningless.

My case, though, requires a precise understanding of the basic concepts involved, and a willingness to see a line of thought through to the end. And that’s what I give you this month in “God, Evolution, and Morality.”

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Prayerfully consider a gift of any amount this month to sustain our important work that is impacting you and many others.

Thanks for your partnership.

For the truth,

Greg Koukl

*Greg Koukl*
In my 2010 national radio debate with American atheist Michael Shermer, the Skeptic magazine editor repeatedly denied he was a relativist and insisted that evolution was adequate to explain morality. New atheist Christopher Hitchens’s position was the same. Natural selection and social contract were sufficient to make sense of his objective ethics.

Oddly, while much of the culture shifts increasingly towards relativism (“It’s wrong to push your morality on others,” “Who are you to judge?”), there’s a trend in atheism moving in the opposite direction.

And for good reason. Support for subjective morality means surrendering the most rhetorically appealing argument against God: evil. Indeed, in a relativistic realm, Richard Dawkins would be denied his famous flourish against the Bible’s God in The God Delusion:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty, ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

Clearly, to Dawkins, God is not just “unpleasant,” but wicked. The professor is not simply emoting, but judging. That requires a real morality, not merely a morality-according-to-me.

Can’t a materialistic scheme do this, though? Can’t natural selection acting on genetic mutation produce substantive ethics? Surely, right and wrong are obvious to most people, even “godless” ones. Mere belief in the Divine doesn’t seem to add anything. Morality helps us, as a species, get our genes into the next generation. Nature selects the survivors. Moral genes win. Simple.

Two thoughts, quickly.
First, it’s tempting for evolutionists to think that any trait conferring reproductive advantage must have evolved. They tell a natural selection story, wave their Darwinian wand, and the conversation is over. This is dangerously close to being circular. Simply telling a tale about, say, the survival benefits of altruism is not enough. Exactly how does this work? How does a mechanistic process produce a moral obligation? In what sense is goodness or badness a physical quality? Genes might determine behavior, but how do they determine beliefs about behavior when it comes to right and wrong?

Second, the materialist account of morality starts with the assumption that the truth of evolution—in the technical, neo-Darwinian-synthesis sense—is unassailable. However, in the last decade even nonreligious thinkers have raised serious doubts about the program’s actual capabilities. A host of secularists are having significant misgivings, and for good reason. In 2008, a group of evolutionary biologists, now known as the “Altenberg 16,” met in Austria “united in their conviction that the neo-Darwinian synthesis had run its course and that new evolutionary mechanisms were needed to explain the origin of biological form.” Noted philosopher Thomas Nagel, himself a committed atheist, stunned the academic world with his recent book, Mind and Cosmos—Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False.

Let’s set those issues aside for now, though. I want to look at a different problem: Even if Darwinism were true—even if “good” and “bad” somehow identified genetically transferable, physical traits—evolution still could not account for objective morality (“Good for goodness’ sake”), not even in principle.

To defend this claim, however, I must be clear on terms. It makes no sense to try to explain morality unless we’re clear on what kind of morality we have in mind. In common parlance, there are two varieties: subjective and objective. When it comes to the question of God, evolution, and morality, the difference is critical. But what, exactly is that difference?

*In the Mind or in the Matter?*

When I tutor students on objective truth, I start with a statement, then ask two questions. I make a dramatic display of placing a pen on the podium, then say, “The pen is on the podium.” Next, I ask if the assertion is true. When the students nod, I ask the critical question: “What makes the statement true?”

Hands shoot up. “Because I see it there,” one student says. But if you didn’t see it, I ask, wouldn’t it still be true that the pen is on the podium? Seeing might help you know the statement is true, but it isn’t what makes it true.

“Because I believe it,” offers another. If you stopped believing, I challenge, would the pen disappear? No. And would believing really hard make a pen materialize atop an empty podium? Probably not.

“The thing that makes the statement ‘The pen is on the podium’ a true statement,” I tell them, “is a pen, and a podium, and the former resting on the latter. It doesn’t matter if anyone sees it. It doesn’t matter if anyone believes it. It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks at all. It is completely independent of any subject’s thoughts—a ‘subject’ here being any person or any group of people. It is, in other words, completely mind independent.”
This is an object lesson on the meaning of objective truth. If the “truth maker”—the condition that makes the statement true—is something about the object itself, then the truth is an objective truth, that is, the statement accurately fits some feature of the world “out there,” regardless of anyone’s opinion about it.

By contrast, think of my daughter, Eva, at five years old, amusing herself with a book beyond her reading ability. As she tells the tale, out tumbles the dramatic details. She turns each page at proper intervals, yet her yarn bears no resemblance to anything on the page. It’s purely a product of her own imagination. The story is in her head, not in the book.

Put another way, the “truth” spoken is in the subject (Eva), not in the object (Fancy Nancy). It is mind dependent (a five-year-old mind, in this case). Therefore, it is a subjective, or relative, truth.

**Real Bad or Feel Bad?**

These same distinctions apply in exactly the same way to morality. It’s the difference between real bad and merely feel bad.

Moral objectivism is the view that moral claims are like the statement, “The pen is on the podium.” Philosophers call this “moral realism” because moral qualities are as real as the pen, though not physical. The “truth maker” is an objective fact, not a subjective feeling.

So, for example, when an objectivist says, “Rape is wrong,” he means to be describing rape itself, not merely his own belief, feeling, opinion, point of view, or preference about rape. In objectivism, something about the object (an action, in this case) makes the moral statement true. If rape actually is wrong, it’s because of something about rape, not something about a person, his culture, or his genetic conditioning. Objective moral truth is mind independent.

By contrast, moral relativism is like little Eva’s story. The “facts” are only in her head, not in the world. No act is bad in itself. The words “evil,” “wicked,” or “wrong” (or “good,” “virtuous,” or “noble,” for that matter), never actually describe behavior or circumstances. Rather, they describe a judgment in the mind of subject—an individual or a group—who has either expressed a preference or felt an emotion.

In relativism, the subject—her beliefs, tastes, or preferences—is the “truth maker.” In a relativistic world, then, no belief can actually be false. Instead, it is true for the person who holds it. It is true for her; even though it might not be true for others who have different beliefs. That’s because in relativism moral truth is mind dependent.

Moral relativism is also called “moral non-realism” because moral statements do not describe real properties of actions. Transcendent, objective, moral obligations are fictions. Behaviors can be distasteful (individuals dislike them), or taboo (cultures forbid them), but they cannot be wrong in any ultimate sense. Rape is only wrong if someone believes it so, not because anything is questionable about the act itself.
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Does Objective Moral Truth Exist?: A Debate – $12.95
Gregory Koukl & Sabina Magliocco, Two Audio CDs with PDF Study Notes (CD278)
Also available as an MP3 download

Does objective moral truth exist? Are there moral principles that apply to all people, in all places, at all times? Moral realists like Greg Koukl say yes, moral truths are real, objective features of the world. Moral relativists disagree. Moral rules may be real as customs or as cultural conventions, but they are not objective truths in themselves because there are no moral absolutes of any kind. Dr. Sabina Magliocco, professor of Cultural Anthropology at California State University, Northridge, defends this view.

In this debate, taped only a few days after 9/11 at the Cal State campus in Northridge, California, each participant gives a 20-minute opening argument, an 8-minute rebuttal, and a 5-minute closing statement, followed by a Q&A session.
Put most precisely, objective morality is when the words “moral” or “immoral” describe an act, not someone’s opinion about the act. It is mind independent, matching some feature of the external world. Nothing inside a subject’s mind makes moral claims true.

Subjective, relativistic morality does not describe acts, but beliefs. It is mind dependent, tied to the opinion or belief of an individual or group. Nothing outside a subject’s mind makes moral claims true.

In an objective statement, moral facts make a claim true. In a subjective claim, a subject’s moral feelings make the claim true. In moral realism, morality is a property of behaviors. In moral non-realism, morality is a property of subjects. They are beliefs subjects hold, not properties objects have.

Objectivism is the view that morality is like gravity. Relativism is the view that morality is like golf. The facts of physics are features of the world, not a matter of personal whim, individual taste, or cultural convention. Golf, on the other hand, is man-made. The rules are up to us.

Notice, I am not here saying objectivists are correct and relativists are incorrect. I am simply clarifying the differences between the two. I am defining terms, not defending a view.

But why all this tedium about definitions?

Explaining the Explanation

It is axiomatic that for an explanation to be a good one, it must explain what needs explaining. If evolution is capable of explaining one kind of thing, and morality turns out to be something else, then the evolutionary explanation fails. The critical question is this: Does the kind of morality evolution is capable of accounting for fit the morality that actually needs to be explained?

Atheists say that purely natural processes are adequate to produce the kind of morality central to the moral argument for God—objective morality, goodness for its own sake, in their words.

Relativistic morality is utterly useless to this task. Only a successful Darwinian account of moral realism will succeed. Nothing else will do. That’s the crux. Can evolution rise to this task? Let’s see.

The Blind Moral Maker

Most of us know the basic Darwinian story. Simply put, natural selection chooses among genetic variations (mutations), selecting those traits best suited for survival and reproduction. This process mimics design so well, Richard Dawkins famously dubbed it “the blind watchmaker.”

In Descent of Man, Darwin argued that every human faculty—including the moral one—is the result of the same mindless process that governs all the rest—the blind moral maker, if you will. Note atheistic philosopher and committed Darwinist, Michael Ruse: “We are genetically determined to believe that we ought to help each other.” My radio debate opponent, Michael Shermer, explains:

Evolution generated the moral sentiments out of a need for a system to maximize the benefits of living in small bands and tribes. Evolution created and culture honed moral principles out of an additional need to curb the passions of the body and mind. And culture, primarily through organized religion, codified those principles into moral rules and precepts.

By a moral sense, I mean a moral feeling or emotion generated by actions…These moral emotions probably evolved out of behaviors that were reinforced as being bad either for the individual or for the group.

The codification of moral principles out of the psychology of moral traits evolved as a form of social control to ensure the survival of individuals within groups and the survival of human groups themselves.

Moral sentiments…evolved primarily through the force of natural selection operating on individuals and secondarily through the force of group selection operating on populations.

Shermer identifies two factors he thinks form “moral sentiments,” or “moral feelings,” in humans: moral traits determined genetically by evolution, and codes enforced culturally for
the good of the group—a combination of nature and nurture. This is a standard evolutionary characterization of the naturalistic origins of morality.

I want you to think very carefully about the implications this Darwinian explanation of morality has for our question about goodness and God. Atheists want to undermine the force of the moral argument for theism by accounting for morality in purely naturalistic terms. No God needed. The morality evolutionists must explain to successfully parry the moral argument, though, is objective morality since it’s the only kind of morality relevant to the argument. As I said earlier, relativism won’t do.

Recall that objective morality (moral realism) is mind independent, based on facts outside the subject, the object being the truth-maker, while relativistic subjective morality (moral non-realism) is mind dependent, based on feelings or beliefs inside a subject (an individual or cultural group), the subject being the truth-maker.

BEHAVIORS ARE PHYSICAL, BUT WHETHER ANY BEHAVIOR IS MORALLY GOOD OR BAD IS NOT IN ITS CHEMISTRY OR PHYSICS.

So here’s my question: What kind of morality did Shermer describe in his Darwinian account above, objective or subjective? Note the phrases “moral sentiments,” “moral feeling or emotion,” “the psychology of moral traits,” and ethics that “culture… honed…and codified.” In each case Shermer describes a morality that is mind dependent, grounded on feelings in the subject, with the subject being the truth-maker. Relativism, in other words.

Atheists like Shermer and Hitchens claim to be objectivists (and seem convinced they are), yet consistently ground their “morality” in entirely subjectivist ways. Michael Ruse, however, is not so confused: “Ultimately, morality is an illusion put in place by our genes to make us social facilitators.” He explains:

Substantive ethics, claims like “Love your neighbor as yourself,” are simply psychological beliefs put in place by natural selection in order to maintain and improve our reproductive fitness. There is nothing more in them than that… We could easily have evolved a completely different moral system from that which we have.

As a Darwinist, Ruse explicitly rejects objectivism, labeling his view, appropriately, “moral nihilism” and “moral non-realism.” In this, he is being doggedly (and refreshingly) consistent. Indeed, he adds, even one’s conviction that morality is objective is part of evolution’s clever deceit.

Consider, in support, Robert Wright’s characterization of evolutionary morality in The Moral Animal:

The conscience doesn’t make us feel bad the way hunger feels bad, or good the way sex feels good. It makes us feel as if we have done something that’s wrong or something that’s right. Guilty or not guilty. It is amazing that a process as amoral and crassly pragmatic as natural selection could design a mental organ that makes us feel as if we’re in touch with higher truth. Truly a shameless ploy.

I’m not denying here that evolution can account for the “shameless ploy” of our sense of morality (though I am deeply skeptical). That’s a different issue. I’m arguing that if it does, it can only give subjective morality, not objective.

Matter in Motion

But there’s a second problem.

Darwinism is a strictly material process by definition—as one put it, “clumps of matter following the laws of physics.” How can a completely materialistic process (natural selection acting on genetic variations)—even if true—produce genuine, objective moral obligations? How can a mere reshuffling of molecules cause an immaterial moral principle to spontaneously spring into existence and somehow attach itself to behaviors? It can’t.

Behaviors are physical, but whether any behavior is morally good or bad is not in its chemistry or physics. Right and wrong, virtue and vice, values and obligations, are not material things.
No Darwinian process can make rape wrong. It can only—even in principle—make people think rape is wrong. Indeed, no biological process can tell us anything about the morality of rape at all.

**Darwin, No Exit**

These are intractable problems for evolutionists. The difficulties are so deep, it’s impossible for them to rescue their moral project.

No, Darwin will not help the atheist here. Since evolution is a materialistic process, it can only produce physical merchandise. No stirring and recombining of molecules over time will ever cause a moral fact to pop into existence in the immaterial realm.

At best, Darwinism might account for behaviors or beliefs human beings falsely label objectively “moral” because nature’s deception accomplishes some evolutionary purpose. But it is deception, nonetheless. Evolution might be able to explain subjective moral *feelings*. It can never explain objective moral *obligations*. It can never make an act wrong in itself.

This is a fatal challenge. On a Darwinian view, there can be no such thing as “goodness for its own sake”—goodness for the inherent good of goodness—because “good” can only exist in the evolution-deluded minds of its subjects, and that’s relativism.

The moral argument for God stands. Darwinism can’t touch it.
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Dawnielle@str.org for Alan, Brett or Jim, or Melinda@str.org for Greg.
Endnotes
1. The other three are the cosmological, teleological (design), and ontological arguments.
2. This form of argument is called modus tollens.
6. Philosopher Michael Ruse begins his naturalistic account of morality with, "The matter of scientific fact with which I start this discussion is that evolution is true." R. Keith Loftin, ed. *God and Morality—Four Views* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2012), 54.
9. This is called the "correspondence" view of truth.
10. He may have beliefs, feelings, etc., about rape, but that's not what he's describing.
11. Moral relativism, then, is a kind of subjectivism since judgments of right and wrong are completely up to the subject—the individual person or group—to decide.
12. Loftin, 60.
14. Ibid., 56.
15. Ibid., 64.
16. Ibid., 19.
17. Curiously, these are two entirely distinct processes: an event cause (mechanistic, evolutionary forces acting on the genetic code), and an agent cause (cultural norms—a type of human intelligent design).
18. Though some evolutionists focus solely on the genetic contribution.
19. Clearly, there can be objective criteria for, say, human flourishing, but that is not the same as objective morality. If human flourishing is itself an objective moral good, that must be established separately.
20. Loftin, 69.
21. Ibid., 65.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 68.
Goodness by Gallup

By Greg Koukl

I often argue for the existence of God on the basis of the observation that it seems clear that there are moral things that exist in the universe. There are moral rules that are immaterial things, but they are still real. I often give as an example the moral rule that torturing babies for fun is wrong. That strikes me as reliable moral rule. In other words, torturing babies for fun seems to be a moral fact that is not tied to culture in any way, shape, or form. It’s a moral absolute.

If there is even one moral absolute, one has to ask the question, What kind of thing is it? Clearly, it is not physical. If it is not physical, then it is non-physical. If it is not material, it is immaterial. What we have determined, then, is an immaterial thing exists, which means that the immaterial world must exist to possess that immaterial thing. This opens up the possibility of a lot of other things existing in that immaterial world other than just single moral absolutes—possibly, the existence of God in that immaterial world.

It also invites the question, Where does such a thing come from? I have argued that the best explanation for where a moral rule comes from is a moral Rule-Giver. The Giver here would be a capital G because I’m referring to a Personal Being who gives moral rules to His creation. Therefore, if moral rules exist, it seems to be a good argument for the existence of God. That is the way the moral argument for God’s existence goes. My modus operandi here is to try to get the inference to the best explanation. It seems that there are moral truths, and it seems that the fact of moral truths imply the existence of a moral Rule-Giver. That seems to be the best explanation.

There are counters to this. When I ask what best explains the existence of any moral rules, and then I say a moral Rule-Giver—God—others can say that this is simply a convention of society. Morality was invented to help civilization to survive. Virtually every single time that I give a talk on this issue, I get this question. I believe that morality does help civilization to survive, but I don’t think that is what morality is. Nor does that explain where morality came from. I think it is an inadequate explanation.

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