

PLENARY LECTURE

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The Rules Of Morality Are Not The Conclusions Of Our Reason

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THE RULES OF MORALITY ARE NOT THE CONCLUSIONS OF OUR REASON

by F.A. Hayek

I have chosen the clumsy title under which this lecture was announced in order to make it clear from the outset that in discussing morals I shall not transgress the sound principle that science cannot produce value judgments. But it would have been much better if from the discussion in which, two centuries before Max Weber, David Hume had established this truth, I had picked out the brief sentence in which Hume in effect expressed the central theme of this lecture, or the idea around which all I shall have to say turns. It is that "The rules of morality are not the conclusions of our reason."*I hope to show you that the significance of this concise statement has over the years become greater than even Hume could have foreseen. Although not the conclusion of our reason, the traditional rules of morality are nevertheless an indispensable condition of the very existence of present mankind which we cannot alter at will to please our tastes, and which we can at most endeavor gradually to develop or improve within a framework which is given to us.

It must now be a quarter of a century or so since I first recognized that what I then called the twin concepts of evolution and spontaneous order had provided the key to the explanation of those complex phenomena that had not yielded to the endeavors of the monocausal or nomothetic approaches which had so triumphantly conquered the world of relatively simple or mechanical phenomena. We call the latter the physical world and within it our powers of prediction and control have reached a height which has led man to the fatal conceit that

* "The Origins and Effects of Our Morals: A Problem for Science"

these powers of construction may enable him to shape also his human surroundings in a manner in which it will serve his pleasures more satisfactorily than they now do.

It became also clear to me that, although Charles Darwin's successful application of the idea of evolution to account for the origin of the different organic species was the first grandiose success of this line of thought (due to a careful documentation we cannot enough admire), its intellectual source in turn lay not in the study of nature, but in the study of the even more complex phenomena of human interaction. It was in the study of the formation of language and law that already scholars of ancient Rome, quite aware of the kinship of their efforts, were led to develop the concept of evolution. And it was again the students of the law of nature and of the common law in modern times and the students of language who revived these ideas, which then Bernard Mandeville and the Scottish moral philosophers of the Eighteenth Century extended to the explanation of morals and such economic phenomena as money, exchange and the market.

The dominant figure in this development was unquestionably David Hume through that most profound insight at which he arrived two-and-a-half centuries ago that "the rules of morality are not the conclusions of our reason." This raises at once in acute form the question of what else can be the source of our morals. To this it might seem he gave no explicit answer, particularly as he had of course made himself notorious by denying any explanation by a supernatural origin. But it was also a gross misunderstanding of his thought to see in him the founder of utilitarianism, which is precisely the kind of rationalist explanation of morals which he explicitly denied in the statement I have quoted.

The answer was given some twenty years ago in a work which has not received the notice it deserves, C. Bay's The Structure of Freedom (Stanford, 1959, p. 33), who justly maintained that "Hume may be called a precursor of

Darwin in the field of ethics." Indeed, he was this not only in the field of ethics. The suggestion of a general theory of evolution in his posthumously published Dialogues on Natural Religion laid the foundation not only for the theory of social evolution, which his Scottish successors Adam Smith, Adam Ferguson and Dugald Stewart based on it. It is clearly also no accident that, as the study of Darwin's notebooks has recently shown, Darwin formulated his theory in 1838 just as he was reading Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations.

I have recently come across yet another piece of evidence confirming my old contention that the concept of evolution derives from the study of society which I might briefly mention here. It is that the term "genetic", which only seventy years ago was made a technical term for biological evolution by the title of William Bateson's Problems of Genetics, derives from the German literary use of the word by Herder, Wieland and Friedrich Schiller in the Eighteenth, and Wilhelm von Humboldt in the Nineteenth Century. It was still used in this sense in the 1870s and 1880s in this social meaning by the founder of the Austrian School of Economics, Carl Menger.

It was, of course, very misleading when about that time students of the structure of human cooperation borrowed from the biological theory not only the general conception but also the account of the mechanism of the process of evolution. "Social Darwinism" was mostly a silly imitation of the biological application of the general conception, which however is at least as indispensable for, and even more characteristic of, all social phenomena. What biological and cultural evolution have indeed in common are two things: firstly, the principle of selection of those properties which helped most efficiently to assist the proliferation of the species by adaptation to the environment. This excludes, and this is the second point they have in common, the possibility of any "historicist" laws of evolution

a la Hegel, Marx or Comte, since it operates by adaptation to what we do not know beforehand, which means it is of necessity unpredictable.

The much more important and numerous differences between the two kinds of evolution are chiefly:

1. The first and most obvious is, of course, that while modern theory of biological evolution excludes entirely any inheritance of acquired characteristics, cultural evolution rests wholly on it: we pass on what we have learned.

2. Secondly, while biological evolution rests wholly on the transmission of physiological attributes from parents to children, we can inherit intellectual and moral qualities from large numbers of "ancestors" to whom we are not related by blood.

3. Apart from several other differences which follow from these, and particularly that cultural evolution is very much faster than biological evolution, the most important for our purposes is that cultural evolution proceeds mainly by the selection of groups rather than selection of individuals. It is at the moment the predominant view among biologists that such group selection is at least not important in Darwinian evolution. I am not wholly convinced by this, but this is a matter for biologists to decide. All that matters to me is that, in the explanation of cultural evolution, group selection is of crucial and central importance. It accounts for its most distinctive and least understood effect: the very fact expressed in Hume's statement that man has neither designed nor does understand his own morals. This fact accounts for the crucial division of opinion among present mankind on most political issues.

The cause of this is that the philosophy of rationalism which dominates modern thought since the Seventeenth Century, has succeeded progressively to discredit all beliefs which are not based on intellectual insight, including the moral tradition which, because "the rules of morality are not the conclusions

of our reason," make our moral heritage an autonomous endowment, a treasure distinct from, and in some respects even superior to reason. This is due to the fact that it allows us to take account of effects of our actions of which our senses and therefore our individual reason could not take account of. In short: it was men's un-understood moral traditions, and not their rational knowledge, which enabled them to form that extended order of individual interaction which enables us today to sustain something like 200 times the number of human beings that existed 5000 years ago.

I am convinced that this expansion of humanity, and of what we call its civilization, was made possible, at least as much if not more than by the growth of knowledge or intelligence, by some moral beliefs that asserted themselves, not by men increasingly understanding their advantages, but simply and solely by the selection of those groups which by adhering to them becoming able to build much better than they knew and succeeding to "be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the world and subdue it" as already the book of Genesis describes the destiny of mankind.

3.

The two fundamental moral principles for which those human groups were selected, by enabling those who practiced them progressively to multiply by means of cultural evolution - yet against which both human innate sentiment and man's rational understanding have again and again revolted - were the rules which define the institutions of individual property and those of the family. I shall have neither time, nor am I competent, to discuss the very real problems, which changes of knowledge have in modern times raised with regard to the institution of the family, and must confine myself to the institution around which the present

political divisions of mankind chiefly turn, the institution of private or several property, especially in the means of production. Or more precisely, as David Hume put it, those which secure "the stability of possession, of its transference by consent, and of the performance of promises."

When we look for it, we find the significance of this basic conception for the understanding of the formation of the extended order of human interaction already clearly stated in the work of Hume's greatest pupil, Adam Smith. The phrases are so familiar (or at least ought to be) that one is almost ashamed to quote them, but I cannot resist stating the next steps of my argument in Adam Smith's words.

You will remember: "Nobody ever saw one animal by its gestures and natural cries signify to another, this is mine, that is yours, I am willing to give this for that." In other words, it is with property and exchange that the distinctly human aspects begin to guide cultural evolution. Smith's great contemporary, Adam Ferguson, made the meaning of this fully explicit by defining the savage as one who is "not yet acquainted with property." But to return to Adam Smith: "The division of labor ... is not originally the effect of any human wisdom" and "as it is the power of exchanging that gives occasion to the division of labor, so the extent of this division must always be limited by the extent of this power, or, in other words, the extent of the market."

And "the most decisive mark of the prosperity of any people is the increase of the number of its inhabitants."

And then at first, apparently unconnected but really most profound: "Religion, even in its crudest form, gave a sanction to the rules of morality, long before the age of artificial reasoning and morality."

What Adam Smith here evidently saw clearly was that man had never adopted

the morals of property and exchange because he understood the benefits he would derive from them. It had been mystical or supernatural beliefs that made groups stick to the traditions of certain practices long enough to give natural selection time to pick from the great variety of groups those with customs which most effectively assisted the growth of their numbers.

This provides really the answer of Hume's problem on Humean lines. If "the rules of morality were not the conclusions of human reason, " what were they then due to? The Humean answer given by Smith is selective evolution. And the result is the crucial insight that the greater part of present humanity owe their very lives to the observation of traditional rules - rules which they did not like because they consisted of restraints on their innate instincts, and were beyond their capacity intellectually to justify.

4.

Morals as a distinct capacity between instinct and reason, even as an endowment equivalent or perhaps superior to reason, because they enabled man to take account of circumstances beyond the range of his perception, were accepted by religious men who believed in a superior power like the human mind but of greater penetration, that had arranged things. But this belief became unacceptable to Seventeenth Century rationalists and their descendants and with this the respect for traditional morals dwindled. The Enlightenment was intended precisely to free us from all such traditional beliefs in the truth -- not to speak of a possible superior wisdom -- of moral rules which man could not intellectually justify. Such submission to the non-rational was wholly irreconcilable with the rationalism of a Thomas Hobbes or Rene Descartes and their successors through the French Enlightenment down to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the Eighteenth, or Hegel, Marx and Comte in the Nineteenth Century.

And it is still unacceptable to their contemporary followers. Let me test this by some of the definitions of rationalism, positivism or hedonistic utilitarianism which we find in a representative recent Dictionary of Modern Thought (named after its respective English or American publishers, either Fontana's or Harper's) and in either case written by the English philosopher Antony Quinton (now Lord Quinton). For a rationalist who "denies the acceptability of beliefs founded on anything but experience and reasoning," or a positivist believing that all "true knowledge is scientific, in the sense of describing the coexistence and succession of observable phenomena," or even for a believer in "the usual form of hedonistic ethics, utilitarianism [which takes] pleasure and pain of everyone affected by it to be the criterion of an action's rightness," traditional morals must be rejected as irrational. It could not but produce generations of intellectuals of whom we might well regard Lord Keynes as the prototype when, some fifty years ago, he publicly announced: "I remain, and always will remain, an immoralist."

These intellectuals who imagine that they can invent for us a better moral which will secure for us a more pleasant, more beautiful, and more just world, of course not only ignore how much we owe to traditional morals as guides of how to form an extended order of human interaction far exceeding the local and temporal boundaries of human perception. They did not understand that group selection could preserve and spread practices which were beneficial to the group as a whole but could not be discerned by the several individuals. They also fail to understand that without the guidance which the market order provides we should not even be able to feed the present population of the world. On this point I can only wholly agree with Karl Marx's contention that it is capitalism which has created the proletariat: but of course not by expropriating or taking from anyone possessions which they had, but by enabling those to survive who had none. Capitalism did spread

because wherever a population could avail itself of its services, population multiplied and initiated a cumulative process in which increased density of the occupation of the land opened ever new opportunities for a division of labor, specialization in the search for information and, at least for a time, possibilities for still further increases of population.

5.

It is significant that at least to some modern philosophers David Hume's theory of morals has become wholly unintelligible. To Hume the institution of property was the prototype of moral institutions to which he devoted the greater part of his Treatise on this subject. Hume still believed that "no one can doubt that the conventions for the distinctions of property and for the stability of possession, is of all circumstances the most necessary for the establishment of human society, and that after the agreement for the fixing and observing of this rule, there remains little or nothing to be done towards the settling of perfect harmony and concord."

But a modern Oxford philosopher (B.M. Barry) could, some twenty years ago, comment on this that "although Hume uses the expression 'rules of conduct' to cover such things as property rules, 'justice' is now analytically tied to 'desert' and 'need', so that one could quite properly say that some of what Hume calls 'rules of justice' were unjust." Thus, by redefining moral concepts, modern intellectuals manage to make them appear as tools for the satisfaction of our desires; but at the same time, they deprive them of the power to guide us beyond the reach of our conscious aims.

What this attitude of a modern rationalist philosopher shows is nothing less than that their aim is to replace private or several property as one of the

chief moral foundations of evolved ethics, by a constructivistic morals with communal ownership and the political direction of the use of the means of production as its aim. But this is no longer a moral conflict in the sense of a conflict within a coherent system of morals, but a conflict between two wholly different systems of morals which, because of their different origins and aims, have little in common: a system of grown traditional morals, formed by the group selection of cultural evolution and serving remote effects of human action of which our reason cannot be aware, but the adaptation to which is necessary if we are to preserve the existing numbers of mankind, and an invented or constructivistic system of morals intended to serve individual pleasure, that is, satisfying primitive instincts, yet incapable of achieving even this. We encounter here what on an earlier occasion I have called the atavistic roots of socialism.

Man dislikes what made him great because this was restraints on his inmate instincts, restraints to which, we must admit, he was induced to submit by false assertions of fact. Yet we cannot really doubt that the restraints on the instinct to grab what he likes were what made the evolution of civilization possible.

But I believe I am not exaggerating when I claim that it is the general, I would say defining, characteristic of the contemporary intellectual that he refuses to concede to traditional morals (or "conventional wisdom") a legitimate or autonomous standing side-by-side with reason -- certainly not as something in some respect superior to reason. He believes that it was man's intellect which enabled him to design his morals, and therefore also, where the results do not satisfy his desires, to replace them by better ones. It is this belief that

Man Made Himself , as the title of a famous book by a socialist anthropologist expresses it, and which some socialist economists accept as their guideline, which ultimately constitutes that Fatal Conceit that has led so large a part of the intelligentsia to socialism.

6.

What I have said so far amounts to the assertion that socialism is in the last resort the product of a demonstrable philosophical error that has dominated the intellectual development of the last few generations and to which only practical sense but little rational argument has resisted. If you want to test this assertion, try to find a positivist who is not a socialist. I have tried and almost always failed. Indeed, socialism is the logical consequence if you assume that only that is true which you can rationally prove. But the recognition that the tradition which rests on group selection has equipped mankind with moral rules which enabled them to adapt to circumstances their senses cannot perceive, reinstates these morals as a second autonomous power on which we are as dependent as upon our reason.

The fact that socialism is a logical result of rationalism does, thus, not prove, as many believe, that socialism is right, but rather that rationalism is wrong. To recognize that there are limits to the powers of individual reason was at all times the result of the meditations of the profoundest thinkers. The insight that there are other indispensable sources of guidance which made man's successes possible was long confined to religious beliefs which through this often came into conflict with scientific beliefs. It seems to me that the scientific analysis of the evolutionary process of group selection forces us to recognize that religious beliefs have preserved for us invaluable rules of conduct which have enabled mankind to achieve its present size and powers, and whose significance science -- and particularly economics -- can now retrospectively discover but

which human reason could never have invented, and, which it long refused to recognize.

What has equipped us to form the astounding order of human cooperation far exceeding our perception, or capacity of direction, was a system of restraints on our animal instincts which we sentimentally dislike and whose functions transcended our intellectual comprehension. This system of moral restraints has prevailed only by its success. But man's conceit now threatens to withdraw his support. The consequences of this might well be not only a progressive and steadily accelerating decline of our civilization, but the numerical decimation of humanity to a size in which all its scientific knowledge would be of little use to it. That's why it seems to me ever more important to make it clear to people at large that the seductive theories of socialism are intellectually not even half right but all wrong.