CHAPTER 9

SOCIIOBIOLOGY AND ETHICS

As soon as the *Origin of Species* appeared, indeed from before that date, there were scientists who wanted to argue that the only true moral philosophy is one firmly grounded on evolutionary theorizing. One thinks here specifically of Charles Darwin's contemporary, Herbert Spencer, who more than anyone drew tight bonds between evolution and ethics; although, given Spencer's present reputation, whilst philosophers think of Spencer as primarily a biologist, no doubt biologists think of Spencer as primarily a philosopher. (Perhaps the quickest way to achieve compromise is for both biologists and philosophers to agree that, essentially, Spencer was a father of social science.) However, despite the fact that Spencer's rather mushy ideas were countered with devastating rhetoric and logic by T. H. Huxley (1893), Darwin's 'bulldog' and in his own right an evolutionist at least as eminent as Spencer, various brands of 'evolutionary ethics' have kept appearing during the past hundred years. Amongst recent efforts along these lines, perhaps the best-known attempts have come from the pens of (of all people) T. H. Huxley's grandson, the late Sir Julian Huxley (1947), and that fascinating biological maverick, the late C. H. Waddington (1960) (in calling him a 'maverick' I mean no disrespect, rather the opposite).

These more recent attempts at evolutionary ethicizing have, in turn, been cut down, in the opinion of most people (*i.e.* most philosophers!) as effectively as T. H. Huxley cut down Spencer. (Flew, 1967; Quinton, 1966; Raphael, 1958.) Nevertheless, undaunted, the sociobiologists have decided to run a tilt or two in the lists. They feel that now, and only now, do we have the biology of humans clearly within our sights, but that since we do it is appropriate and proper to use our findings to explore at once all aspects of the human predicament, including the ethical. Indeed, so strong is this feeling by some sociobiologists that Wilson goes so far as to begin *Sociobiology* as follows:

Camus said that the only serious philosophical question is suicide. That is wrong even in the strict sense intended. The biologist, who is concerned with questions of physiology and evolutionary history, realizes that self-knowledge is constrained and shaped by the emotional control centers in the hypothalamus and limbic system of the brain. These centers flood our consciousness with all the emotions — hate, love, guilt, fear, and others

194
- that are consulted by ethical philosophers who wish to intuit the standards of good and evil. What, we are then compelled to ask, made the hypothalamus and limbic system? They evolved by natural selection. That simple biological statement must be pursued to explain ethics and ethical philosophers, if not epistemology and epistemologists, at all depths. (Wilson, 1975a, p.3.)

Taken literally, people like me ought to be put out of their jobs! (A sentiment, no doubt, upon which the sociobiologists and their critics will for once find agreement.) And even at his more conciliatory, Wilson rather thinks that we philosophers ought to take lengthy, enforced sabbaticals. “Scientists and humanists should consider together the possibility that the time has come for ethics to be removed temporarily from the hands of the philosophers and biologicized.” (Wilson, 1975a, p.563.)

As might be expected, like everyone else we philosophers have genes for self-preservation (Socrates notwithstanding), and no doubt matters will not seem quite so clear-cut to us. At least, stimulating and interesting though I find Wilson’s suggestions I do not find them overwhelmingly persuasive, either his suggestions about philosophy or about philosophers! Perhaps indeed: “Philosophers and humanists should consider together the possibility that the time has come for biology to be removed temporarily from the hands of the biologists and philosophized”. But enough of such tempting dreams. Let us, in this chapter, conclude this book by considering the possible relationship between evolution and ethics, paying particular attention to the work and the suggestions of the sociobiologists.

There seem to be at least three significant ways in which evolution and ethics might interact. (Munson, 1971.) First, evolutionary biology might throw light on the fact that we humans are ethical animals at all. Second, evolutionary biology might supply the theoretical foundation or justification for ethics. Third, ethics might help us direct evolution in the future. These three considerations are by no means entirely distinct, but for ease of exposition let us try to treat them as such and take them in turn. I should add that whether these considerations are ‘truly’ philosophical or ‘truly’ biological does not really interest me: for all of my desire to tease them for their presumptions, I share with the sociobiologists the conviction that these matters ought to be of concern both to philosophers and to biologists.

9.1. WHY ARE WE ETHICAL?

I trust that the reader will not think that in my sub-title I beg the all-important question: namely, are we ethical or moral at all? I think it will be generally