Evolutionary Biology and Ethics

Introduction

In the last chapter an attempt was made to show that Scholastic principles regarding the metaphysics of modality in general and biological possibility in particular can be deployed to help evolutionary biology make good its claim to provide explanations for biological phenomena. In this final chapter I want to consider another aspect of the intelligibility of organisms. The question I have in mind is this: If one knows what possibilities are genuinely open to an organism, can truth-apt determinations be made as to which of these trajectories it would be in the best interests of the organism to realise? Another way of formulating what I take to be essentially the same question is to ask whether biology has anything to contribute to ethics. Can biology be the basis of ethics, as some have supposed? Or is it rather the case that ethics, and moral behaviour generally, are super-biological phenomenon which arrive on the scene when humans somehow rise above their strictly biological nature? These and related questions regarding the relationships that may or may not obtain between biology and ethics have been on the table ever since Darwin’s discussion of the origins of morality in chapter 3 of his Descent of Man. E. O. Wilson put them front and centre again in 1975 in his (in)famous final chapter of Sociobiology: The New Synthesis, and these questions continue to be a source of debate to this day. In this final chapter I want to consider some metaphysical questions arising out of the often tangled relationship of biology and ethics.
An initial puzzle is as follows: It is part of the very self-image of science to be ‘value free’. Furthermore, many argue that scientific facts can have no bearing whatsoever on the moral facts (if such there be) because to assume otherwise is to be guilty of the naturalistic fallacy. What is more, if one grants house room to the suggestion that biology does speak to ethics, the message seems to be entirely unwelcome, leading as it does to cynicism about the very possibility of ethical behaviour in organisms produced by the processes of natural selection. However, an ancient religious and philosophical assumption is that ethical values are grounded in human nature. This view is gaining currency again in certain circles, and some have sought to employ evolutionary biology to give this approach scientific respectability. Indeed it has been argued in these very pages that evolutionary biology has much to say about human nature inasmuch as the suggestion has been floated that biological essences are species specific developmental programmes. Moreover, biologists themselves, or at the very least those who take themselves to be informed by biology, are often found making statements which appear to go beyond merely reporting on or explaining the facts of biology. Valuing biological diversity per se, and the injunction to preserve habitats and ecosystems, commonplace commitments of conservation biology certainly appear to be moral in character. Indeed there is even an environmental and conservation ‘ethics’ which insists on the intrinsic value of species, habitats and ecosystems. How can this be if science is ‘value-free?’

It is necessary to be clear from the outset exactly which questions I am asking regarding the relationship of biology to ethics, for not all such questions are strictly metaphysical in nature. One of the most frequently discussed questions in this area is how evolutionary processes could give rise to organisms capable of moral judgments. Some, Ruse and Wilson (1986), and Ruse (2010) for example, maintain that evolutionary processes associated with kin selection and reciprocal altruism are responsible for the emergence of both our capacity to form moral judgments and for the content of at least some of these moral judgments – both capacity and content are considered adaptations. Others maintain that the capacity for moral judgment is at best an exaptation, and the content of moral judgments has more to do with culture than biology per se (Ayala, 2010). Another related debate concerns the