A Dawkinsian World

Richard Dawkins claims that the world that science discovers has “no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference” (Dawkins, 1995: 133):

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won’t find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but a blind, pitiless indifference.

The bottom line of a Dawkinsian world: while the natural world, the world of physics, is replete with extension, duration, numbers, atoms, asteroids, quarks, and pains and pleasures, it is singularly devoid of good and bad. Give a complete scientific description of a bullet passing through the head of a young child—initial velocity, size of entry wound, size of exit wound, loss of blood—and you have nowhere found the evil.

The world that science presents, the sum-total of Dawkins’s world, is a world without good or evil. In the world of facts, value is nowhere to be found. Take God out of the equation and morality is hard to come by.

Plato needed the transcendent Form of the Good, and the prophet and priest needed the will of God to make room in the cosmos for objective good and evil. Some contemporary philosophers flee from God but run into the arms of a godlike but nonexistent Ideal Observer who transcends human contingency—those peculiar particularities and limitations that so prevent us less-than-ideal observers from seeing beyond our and our kin’s own gratification—to determine the Good for all and for all time. Expand the world to include the transcendent, and good and evil easily find their place. But cast your net into the natural world, the world of fact, and see if you can dredge up value.

Given these constraints, can we pull goodness out of the evolutionary hat (in a Dawkinsian world)? Can evolution, or better, evolution emptied of the eternal, provide the content and foundation of morality?
Moral Fictions

In a Dawkinsian world—a world with “no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but a blind pitiless indifference”—morality is, to borrow a quaint phrase from philosopher J. L. Mackie, “queer” (Mackie, 1977). Objective moral values would be “queer” in a Dawkinsian world because they are unlike everything else in the world (indifferent, nonmoral facts).

Queerness multiplies. We firmly believe that our moral judgments are objectively true—that when we claim that slavery is wrong or that we have a right to liberty and happiness, there is something that makes our judgments true. Such judgments are not simply matters of human preference, desire, convention or utility. If the institution of slavery were to maximize desire satisfaction or utility, it would still be wrong. Independent of human beliefs and desires, something makes it wrong. Let us call the something that makes things right and wrong, moral facts (be they God’s will, Plato’s forms, or an essential human nature). Since there is no objective value in a Dawkinsian world, it is a mistake to think of our moral judgments as objectively true. If there are no objective moral facts, none of our moral judgments is true. Our deeply held belief that our moral judgments are true is mistaken.

Moral judgments, judgments about what one ought to do, also have what Richard Joyce calls practical clout (Joyce, 2006). The practical clout of a moral judgment lies in the fact that moral judgments seem inescapable and authoritative. The practical clout of a moral judgment involves the idea of moral authority: a built-in reason to comply with the moral demand. This notion of authority distinguishes moral judgments from other principles, like rules of etiquette, (e.g., “You ought to use utensils” and “Wash your hands after using the restroom”). Moral judgments have an authority that rules of etiquette do not. Practical clout involves inescapability and authority, which captures how we view and use moral judgments.

Can evolution tell a convincing story of the development of inescapable and authoritative moral judgments? Kinship selection and reciprocity led humans to behave in helpful ways. To further lead people to act helpfully, natural selection may have favored the trait of making moral judgments. Morality provided humans with the idea that they ought to help others, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Prosocial emotions can motivate cooperative behavior; moral judgments add additional oomph by persuading humans that they ought to do so.

Joyce argues that this story is ultimately unconvincing because we are mistaken about moral judgments: in a Dawkinsian world, there are no moral facts. Evolution does not vindicate morality; it debunks morality.

Given a lack of moral facts, one might be tempted to abandon moral discourse altogether. Joyce rejects this option in favor of fictionalism. He believes that moral discourse cannot be gotten rid of without serious, perhaps even disastrous consequences and so maintains that moral discourse must continue even if there are no truths to hold the discourse together. The moral fictionalist recognizes the benefits of moral discourse, claiming