Embedded and Embodied Moral Life

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Evolutionary biology and other fields presupposing humans as products of natural selection (cognitive semantics, for example) have much to contribute to philosophic inquiry. This seems especially true for American philosophy in a broad “pragmatist” or “naturalist” tradition. I examine sociality as a precondition of being human (including the infant/mother dyad), embodied cognition, and culture as a product of ecological niche construction. I then make some suggestions, with Dewey in mind, as to the shape of our thinking about our moral lives once we recognize humans as squarely within the field shaped by evolutionary forces.

1.

Certain sciences have long played an important role in philosophic inquiry. Mathematics, astronomy, and physics in particular have served not only as models for the kind of rigor expected of philosophy, but are taken as exemplars of the kinds of knowledge worthiest of pursuit. Taking as our model for philosophic rigor these sciences, though in many respects helpful in clarifying our philosophic ideas, can also be an impediment to analysis. These modes of inquiry are predicated on elimination of contingency, history, and situatedness. It doesn’t matter if the concrete block is blue or red, on the surface of the earth or the moon, dropped today or in the last century – the law of gravity works in precisely the same way. And it does not matter that from our earthly perspective the sun moves across the sky – taking up a neutral perspective allows us to understand that the earth revolves around the sun. But these sciences, when taken as the exemplars of human knowing, either construct a false foundation for understanding the moral dimension of life (very broadly speaking) or deny satisfactory knowledge in the sphere of human conduct.

Is there an alternative to these scientific models of rigor and exactitude? Much of contemporary philosophy, even in the American classical tradition, is deeply mistaken in not following research in several areas of current work in biology – particularly evolutionary biology, primatology, and ecology. We also ought to be taking seriously current work in neuroscience and cognitive science. In earlier incarnations, pragmatists insisted that the contents of the sciences, not
merely the mode of inquiry of the most successful sciences, ought to inform
philosophic work. This seems a rather obvious point, yet the grimaces that often
attend mention of the Churchlands’ neurophilosophy, for example, remind us
that not all philosophers find the wedding of contemporary life sciences and
philosophical inquiry compelling, or even palatable.

Evolution through natural selection is a profound challenge to the most
entrenched habits of human thought, including philosophical thought; and I
think it has not yet been absorbed in any deep way, even after more than 150
years since the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. Certainly many people
simply deny that we are products of natural processes, in any of our attributes.
Others may agree that our physical features are products of natural selection, but
are unwilling to take the further step and recognize that a wide range of
behaviors are similarly produced. Of those who admit a limited role to
evolution, some will defend a soul or something like it as the counterpart to a
naturally produced material self, others that cultural pressures are separate from,
and more important than, natural selection when speaking about human
behavior.

What I would like to present is a brief sketch of what can be said about a
few important human traits if we take evolution seriously and apply it
thoroughly.

2.

One persistent and universal feature of human habitats is other human beings.
As with any persistent habitat feature, those individuals most successful at
survival and reproduction are those who fit more closely the persistent habitat
features. Human beings, as products of natural selection, are social animals.
Humans did not become social; we became human (as individuals and as a
species) within an already established pattern of social relations. Even a cursory
look at contemporary work in primatology, especially studies of the behaviors of
chimpanzees and bonobos, indicates that our nearest common ancestor must also
have been intensely gregarious. Designing imaginary scenarios to discover how
we might have come to shrug off our initial solitary human existence and live in
groups is foolish. A more sensible exercise would be imagining the processes of
carving out separate selves from a social organism. Group life long predates the
appearance of whatever characteristics we take to be specifically human. We are
embedded creatures; each is born into a social organization that provides the
environment in which and through which a self with self-interests arises.

We can go further than this: along with saying that humans are
inerradically social/political animals, and that our humanity presupposes our
sociality, the stronger claim can be made that the basic unit of human being is a
dyad. Until about one hundred years ago, and in many areas of the world today,
the basic human unit is the infant/lactating caregiver pair. If the infant is not
literally attached to a milk-producing adult, that infant will die and the mother’s