



STATEMENT DC753

## MONKEY MORALITY: Can Evolution Explain Ethics?

by Gregory Koukl

### Summary

Some people argue that morality is the result of blind evolutionary forces rather than an omnipotent Creator. This view is flawed because (1) it assumes a morality that transcends evolutionary "morality," (2) it cannot explain motive and intent, (3) it denies rather than explains morality, and (4) it cannot account for the "oughtness" of morality. Given the existence of morality as well as the nature of moral claims, the existence of God seems to be the best explanation for morality.

Bongo is a chimp. He's being punished by other members of the chimpanzee band for not sharing his bananas. Bongo is selfish. Bad Bongo. Moral rule: Chimps shouldn't be selfish

One of the strongest evidences for the existence of God is man's unique moral nature. C. S. Lewis argues in *Mere Christianity* that there is a persistent moral law that represents the ethical foundation of all human cultures. This, he says, is evidence for the God who is the author of the moral law.

Not everyone agrees. Scenarios like that of Bongo the chimp have been offered as evidence for rudimentary forms of morality among animals, especially the "higher" primates like chimpanzees. This suggests that morality in humans is not unique and can be explained by the natural process of evolution without appeal to a divine Lawgiver.

This view of morality is one of the conclusions of the new science of evolutionary psychology. Its adherents advance a simple premise: The mind, just like every part of the physical body, is a product of evolution. Everything about human personality — marital relationships, parental love, friendships, dynamics among siblings, social climbing, even office politics — can be explained by the forces of neo-Darwinian evolution.

Even the moral threads that make up the fabric of society are said to be the product of natural selection. Morality can be reduced to chemical relationships in the genes chosen by different evolutionary needs in the physical environment. Love and hate; feelings of guilt and remorse; gratitude and envy; even the virtues of kindness, faithfulness, and self-control can all be explained mechanistically through the cause and effect of chance genetic mutations and natural selection.

One notable example of this challenge to the transcendent nature of morality comes from the book *The Moral Animal — Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*, by Robert Wright.

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## HOW MORALS EVOLVE

In his popular defense of evolution, *The Blind Watchmaker*, Richard Dawkins acknowledges that the biological world looks designed, but he asserts that this appearance is deceiving. The appearance of intelligent order is really the result of the workings of natural selection.

Robert Wright holds the same view regarding man's psychological features, including morality. The strongest evidence for this analysis seems to be the explanatory power of the evolutionary paradigm when dealing with moral conduct. The argument rests on the nature of natural selection itself: "If within a species there is variation among individuals in their hereditary traits, and some traits are more conducive to survival and reproduction than others, then those traits will (obviously) become more widespread within the population. The result (obviously) is that the species' aggregate pool of hereditary traits changes."<sup>1</sup>

Wright argues from effect back to cause, asking what is the simplest, most elegant solution adequate to explain the effects we see. To Wright, the evolutionary explanation is "obvious." In order to survive, animals must adapt to changing conditions. Through the process of natural selection, naturalistic forces "choose" certain behavior patterns that allow the species to continue to exist. We call those patterns "morality."

### Wired for Morality

An evolutionary explanation for all moral conduct requires that such conduct be genetically determined. Morality rides on the genes, as it were, and one generation passes on favorable morality to the next. Wright sees a genetic connection with a whole range of emotional capabilities. He talks about "genes inclining a male to love his offspring"<sup>2</sup> and romantic love that was not only invented by evolution, but corrupted by it.<sup>3</sup> Consider these comments:

If a woman's "fidelity gene" (or her "infidelity gene") shapes her behavior in a way that helps get copies of *itself* into future generations in large numbers, then that gene will by definition flourish.<sup>4</sup> (emphasis in original)

Beneath all the thoughts and feelings and temperamental differences that marriage counselors spend their time sensitively assessing are the stratagems of the genes — cold, hard equations composed of simple variables.<sup>5</sup>

Some mothers have a genetic predisposition to love their children, so the story goes, and this genetic predisposition to be loving is favored by natural selection. Consequently, there are more women who are "good" mothers.

What is the evidence, though, that moral virtues are genetic — a random combination of molecules? Is the fundamental difference between a Mother Theresa and an Adolph Hitler their chromosomal makeup? If so, then how could we ever praise Mother Theresa? How could a man like Hitler be truly guilty?

Wright offers no empirical evidence for his thesis. He seems to assume that moral qualities are in the genes because he must; his paradigm will not work otherwise.

### WRIGHT'S DOUBLE STANDARD

In a public relations piece promoting his book, Robert Wright says, "My hope is that people will use the knowledge [in this book] not only to improve their lives — as a source of 'self-help' — but as cause to treat other people *more decently*" (emphasis added).

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This statement captures a major flaw in Wright's analysis. His entire thesis is that chance evolution exhausts what it means to be moral. He sees morality as descriptive, a mere function of the environment selecting patterns of behavior that assist and benefit the growth and survival of the species. Yet he frequently lapses, unconsciously making reference to a morality that seems to transcend nature.

Take this comment as an example: "Human beings are a species splendid in their array of moral equipment, *tragic* in their propensity to *misuse* it, and *pathetic* in their constitutional ignorance of the *misuse*"<sup>6</sup> (emphases mine). Wright reflects on the moral equipment randomly given to us by nature, and then bemoans our immoral use of it with words like "tragic," "pathetic," and "misuse."

He writes, "Go above and beyond the call of a smoothly functioning conscience; help those who aren't likely to help you in return, and do so when nobody's watching. This is one way to be a truly moral animal."<sup>7</sup>

It's almost as if there are two categories of morality, nature's morality and a transcendent standard used to judge nature's morality. But where did this transcendent standard come from? It's precisely this higher moral law that needs explaining. If transcendent morality judges the "morality" that evolution is responsible for, then it can't itself be accounted for by evolution.

### **Social Darwinism**

Like many evolutionists, Wright recoils from social Darwinism. "To say that something is 'natural' is not to say that it is good. There is no reason to adopt natural selection's 'values' as our own."<sup>8</sup> Just because nature exploits the weak, he argues, it doesn't mean we are morally obliged to do so. "Natural selection's indifference to the suffering of the weak is not something we need to emulate. Nor should we care whether murder, robbery, and rape are in some sense 'natural.' It is for us to decide how abhorrent we find such things and how hard we want to fight them."<sup>9</sup>

Wright argues that the *reductio ad absurdum* argument from social Darwinism is flawed. Though life in an unregulated state of nature is, as 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes described it, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,"<sup>10</sup> we're not required to take the "survival of the fittest" as a moral guideline.

Evolutionists may be right when they argue that we're not compelled to adopt the morality of evolution. The threat of social Darwinism, though, is not that society is *required* to adopt the law of the jungle, but that it is *allowed* to do so. The exploitation of the weak by the strong is morally benign according to this view.

What Darwinists cannot do is give us a reason why we ought not simply copy nature and destroy those who are weak, unpleasant, costly, or just plain boring. If all moral options are legitimate, then it is legitimate for the strong to rule the weak. No moral restraints protect the weak, because moral restraints simply do not exist.

### **MONKEY MORALITY**

Recent studies have attempted to show that animals exhibit rudimentary moral behavior. In one case, a group of chimpanzees "punished" one "selfish" member of their band by withholding food from it. Apparently, the moral rule was this: Chimps shouldn't be selfish.

### **Conduct, Motive, and Intent**

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There are several problems with this assessment. First of all, drawing conclusions about animal morality simply from external behavior reduces morality to conduct. Why should we accept that morality is exhaustively described by behavior? True morality entails nonbehavioral elements, too, like intent and motive.

One can't infer actual moral obligations from the mere fact of a chimp's conduct. One might talk descriptively about a chimp's behavior, but no conclusion about morality follows from this. One can observe that chimps in community share food, and when they do they survive better. But one can't conclude from this that Bongo, the chimp, *ought* to share his bananas, and if he doesn't, then he's immoral because he hasn't contributed to the survival of his community.

Further, in fixing blame, we distinguish between an act done by accident and the very same act done on purpose. The behavior is the same, but the intent is different. We don't usually blame people for accidents, such as in the case of the boy who didn't intend to trip the old lady.

We also give attention to the issue of motive. We withhold blame even if the youngster tripped the old lady on purpose if the motive is acceptable: he tripped her to keep her out of a sniper's line of fire.

Motive and intent can therefore not be determined simply by looking at behavior. In fact, some "good" behavior — giving to the poor, for example — might turn out to be tainted if the motive and intent are wrong, as when a man gives to be thought well of but has no real concern for the recipient. Indeed, it seems one can be immoral without any behavior at all, as when a woman plots an evil deed but never has the opportunity to carry it out.

Morality informs behavior, judging it either good or bad, but it's not identical to behavior. Morality is something deeper than habitual patterns of physical interaction. Therefore, one can't draw conclusions about animal morality simply based on what one observes in their conduct.

### **Morality: Explained or Denied?**

This leads us to the second problem, which runs much deeper. When morality is reduced to patterns of behavior chosen by natural selection for its survival value, then morality is not explained; it's denied. Wright admits as much: "The conscience doesn't make us feel bad the way hunger feels bad, or good the way sex feels good. It makes us feel as if we have done something that's wrong or something that's right. Guilty or not guilty. It is amazing that a process as amoral and crassly pragmatic as natural selection could design a mental organ that makes us feel *as if* we're in touch with higher truth. Truly a shameless ploy"<sup>11</sup> (emphasis added).

Evolutionists such as Wright are ultimately forced to admit that what we think is a "higher truth" turns out to be a "shameless ploy," a description of animal behavior conditioned by the environment for survival. We've given that conduct a label, they argue. We call it morality. But there is no real right and wrong.

Does Bongo, the chimp, actually exhibit genuine moral behavior? Does he understand the difference between right and wrong? Can he make principled choices to do what's right? Is he worthy of blame and punishment for doing wrong? Of course not, Wright says. Bongo merely does in a primitive way what humans do in a more sophisticated way. We respond according to our genetic conditioning, a program "designed" by millions of years of evolution.

The evolutionary approach is not an explanation of morality; it's a denial of morality. It explains why we think moral truths exist when, in fact, they don't.

### **Why Be a Good Boy Tomorrow?**

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This observation uncovers the most serious objection to the idea that evolution is adequate to explain morality. There is one question that can never be answered by any evolutionary assessment of ethics. The question is this: Why ought I be moral tomorrow?

One of the distinctives of morality is its "oughtness," its moral incumbency. Assessments of mere behavior, however, are descriptive only. Since morality is essentially prescriptive (telling what should be the case, as opposed to what is the case) and since all evolutionary assessments of moral behavior are descriptive, then evolution cannot account for the most important thing that needs to be explained: morality's "oughtness."

The question that needs to be answered is: "Why shouldn't the chimp (or a human being, for that matter) be selfish?" The evolutionary answer might be that when we're selfish, we hurt the group. That answer, though, presumes another moral value: We ought to be concerned about the welfare of the group. Why should that concern us? Answer: If the group doesn't survive, then the species doesn't survive. But why should I care about the survival of the species?

Here's the problem. All of these responses meant to explain morality ultimately depend on some prior moral notion to hold them together. It's going to be impossible to explain, on an evolutionary view of things, why I should not be selfish, or steal, or rape, or even kill tomorrow without smuggling morality into the answer.

The evolutionary explanation disembowels morality, reducing it to mere descriptions of conduct. The best the Darwinist explanation can do — if it succeeds at all — is explain *past* behavior. It cannot inform future behavior. The essence of morality, though, is not description, but prescription.

Evolution may be an explanation for the existence of conduct we choose to call moral, but it gives no explanation why I should obey any moral rules in the future. If one countered that we have a moral obligation to evolve, then the game would be up, because if we have moral obligations prior to evolution, then evolution itself can't be their source.

Evolution does not explain morality. Bongo is not a bad chimp, he's just a chimp. No moral rules apply to him. Eat the banana, Bongo.

### WHERE DO MORALS COME FROM?

Darwinists opt for an evolutionary explanation for morality without sufficient justification. In order to make their naturalistic explanation work, "morality" must reside in the genes. "Good" — that is, beneficial — tendencies can then be chosen by natural selection. Nature, through the mechanics of genetic chemistry, cultivates behaviors we call morality.

This creates two problems. First, evolution doesn't explain what it's meant to explain. It can only account for preprogrammed behavior, which doesn't qualify as morality. Moral choices, by their nature, are made by free agents — not dictated by internal mechanics.

Second, the Darwinist explanation reduces morality to mere descriptions of behavior. But the morality that evolution needs to account for entails much more than conduct. Minimally, it involves motive and intent as well. Both are nonphysical elements that can't, even in principle, evolve in a Darwinian sense.

Where do morals come from? Why do they seem to apply only to human beings? Are they the product of chance? What world view makes sense out of morality?

We can answer these questions simply by reflecting on the nature of moral rules. By making observations about the effect — morality — we can then ask what are its characteristics and what might cause it.

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## Four Observations about Morality

The first thing we observe about moral rules is that, although they exist, they are not physical and do n't have physical properties. We won't bump into them in the dark. They don't extend into space. They have no weight. They have no chemical characteristics. Instead, they are immaterial entities we discover not through the aid of our five senses, but by the process of thought, introspection, and reflection.

This is a profound realization. We have, with a high degree of certainty, stumbled on something real. Yet it's something that can't be proven empirically or described in terms of scientific laws. From this we learn that there's more to the world than just the physical universe. If nonphysical things — like moral rules — truly exist, then materialism as a world view is false.

Many other realities seem to populate this invisible world, such as propositions, numbers, and the laws of logic. Values such as happiness, friendship, and faithfulness exist, too, along with meanings and language. There may even be persons — souls, angels, and other immaterial beings.

It becomes clear that some things really exist that science has no access to, even in principle. Some realities are not governed by scientific laws. Science, therefore, is not the only discipline that gives us true information about the world. It follows, then, that naturalism as a world view is also false.

Our discovery of moral rules forces us to expand our understanding of the nature of reality. It opens our minds to the existence of a host of new entities that populate the world in the invisible realm.

The second thing we observe is that moral rules are a kind of communication. They are propositions — intelligent statements conveyed from one mind to another. The propositions take the form of imperatives, or commands. A command only makes sense when there are two minds involved, one giving the command and one receiving it.

We notice a third fact when we reflect on moral rules. They have a force we can actually feel prior to any behavior. This is called the incumbency of moral rules, the *oughtness* of morality we considered earlier. It appeals to our will, compelling us to act in a certain way, though we may disregard its force and choose not to obey.

Fourth and finally, we feel a deep discomfort when we violate clear and weighty moral rules; an ethical pain makes us aware that we have done something wrong and deserve punishment. This sense of guilt carries with it not just this uncomfortable awareness, but also the dread of having to answer for our deed. Distraction and denial may temporarily numb the pain, but it never disappears entirely.

## Narrowing Our Options

These four observations provide us with a foundation from which to answer the question, "Where do morals come from?" We need only determine the possible options and then ask which option best accounts for our observations.

Faced with a limited number of options, we must choose something. When the full range of choices is clear, rejection of one means acceptance of another. At this point our discussion becomes personal, because the ultimate answer to our question has serious ramifications for the way we live our lives. We may be tempted to abandon careful thinking when we are forced to confront conclusions that make us uncomfortable.

Our options are limited to three. One: Morality is simply an illusion. Two: Moral rules exist but are mere accidents, the product of chance. Three: Moral rules are not accidents but are the product of divine intelligence. Which option makes most sense given our four observations about morality?

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Some argue that morals simply don't exist. They are nothing but illusions, useful fictions that help us live in harmony. This is the evolutionist's answer we've already found seriously wanting.

Some take the second route. They admit that although objective moral laws must exist, they are just accidents. We discover them as part of the furniture of the universe, so to speak, but they have no explanation, nor do we need one.

This won't do for a good reason: Moral rules without grounds or justification need not be obeyed. An example may help to illustrate. One evening in the middle of a Scrabble game, one notices the phrase "do not go" formed in the random spray of letter tiles on the table. Is this a command that ought to be obeyed? Of course not. It's just a random collection of letters.

Commands are communications between two minds. Chance might conceivably create the appearance of a moral rule, but there can be no command if no one is speaking. Since this phrase is accidental, it can be safely ignored.

Even if a person is behind the communication, one could easily ignore the command if it isn't backed by an appropriate authority. If I stood at an intersection and put my hand up, cars might stop voluntarily, but they'd have no duty to respond. They could ignore me without fear of punishment because I have no authority to direct traffic. But if a police officer replaced me, traffic would come to a halt.

What is the difference between the officer and me? My authority is not grounded. It doesn't rest on anything solid. Police, in contrast, represent the government, so their authority is justified. They are legitimate representatives of the state, appointed to carry out its will.

It's clear then that a law has moral force when an appropriate authority, operating within its legitimate jurisdiction, issues it. If people violate such a law, they could be punished. The same is true of moral laws. These laws have force if a proper authority stands behind them. Moral rules that appear by chance, in contrast, have no such grounding.

Our second option fails because it doesn't explain the three important features we observed about morality. Chance morality fails to be a communication between two minds and therefore cannot be imperative. It doesn't account for the incumbency of moral rules, nor does it make sense of the guilt and expectation of punishment one feels when those rules are violated.

### **One Remaining Answer**

Only one answer remains as a possible source of morality. If morality is neither an illusion nor the product of chance, then morals must be the result of an intelligent lawgiver. Universal moral laws that have genuine incumbency require an author whose proper domain is the universe, who has the moral authority to enforce His laws, and ultimately the power to mete out perfect justice.

What best explains the existence of morality? A personal God whose character provides an absolute standard of goodness. An impersonal force won't do because a moral rule encompasses a proposition and a command; both are features of minds. Ethicist Richard Taylor explains: "A duty is something that is owed. . . . but something can be owed only to some person or persons. There can be no such thing as a duty in isolation. . . . The concept of moral obligation [is] unintelligible apart from the idea of God. The words remain, but their meaning is gone."<sup>12</sup>

Only one option makes sense of each observation about morality: a personal God who created both the material and the immaterial realms. Moral laws suggest a moral lawgiver, one who communicates His desires through His laws. He expects His imperatives to be obeyed.

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The existence of God also explains the incumbency of morality. Ethics are adequately grounded because God is a proper authority for moral rules. The universe is His possession because He created it. He has the right to rule over it; His great power undergirds that right

Ethical pain — true moral guilt — also makes sense with this explanation. Morals are not disembodied principles but personal commands, and so a violation is not just a broken rule but an offense against the person who made the rule. Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard pointed out that a person could not have anything on his conscience if God did not exist.

Some attempt to argue that they don't need God to have morality. They can live a moral life even though they don't believe in a divine being. But no one denies that an atheist can behave in a way one might call moral. The real question is, "Why ought he?" Trappist monk Thomas Merton put it this way: "In the name of whom or what do you ask me to behave? Why should I go to the inconvenience of denying myself the satisfactions I desire in the name of some standard that exists only in your imagination? Why should I worship the fictions that you have imposed on me in the name of nothing?"<sup>13</sup>

A moral atheist is like someone sitting down to dinner who doesn't believe in farmers, ranchers, fishermen, or cooks. She believes the food just appears, with no explanation and no sufficient cause. This is silly. Either her meal is an illusion, or someone provided it. In the same way, if morals really exist, as we have argued, then some cause adequate to explain the effect must account for them. God is the most reasonable solution.

### The Final Verdict

Atheistic evolution cannot make sense of morality. Neither can monistic ("all is One") Eastern religions. If duality is an illusion, as they hold, then the distinction between good and evil is ultimately rendered meaningless. Something like the Judeo-Christian idea of God must be true to account for moral laws adequately.

Morality grounded in God explains our hunger for justice. We desire for a day of final reckoning when all wrongs are made right, when innocent suffering is finally redeemed, and when the guilty are punished and the righteous rewarded.

This also explains our own personal sense of dread. We feel guilty because we are guilty. We know deep down that we have offended a morally perfect Being who has the legitimate authority to punish us. We also know we will have to answer for our own crimes against God.

In the end, we must accept one of two alternatives. Either we live in a universe in which morality is a meaningless concept and thus we are forever condemned to silence regarding any moral issue, or moral rules exist and we're beholden to a moral God who holds us accountable to his law. There are no other choices. As Francis Schaeffer put it, "These are not probability answers; [these] are the only answers. It is this or nothing."<sup>14</sup> If one is certainly false, the other is certainly true.<sup>15</sup>

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### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal — Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 23.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 59.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 88.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 377.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, edited with introduction and notes by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 76.

<sup>11</sup>Wright, 212.

<sup>12</sup>Richard Taylor, *Ethics, Faith, and Reason* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985), 83-84.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Phillip Yancy, "The Other Great Commission," *Christianity Today*, 7 October 1996, 136.

<sup>14</sup>Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, from *The Complete Works of Francis Schaeffer*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 303.

<sup>15</sup>This article is adapted from the forthcoming book, *Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air*, by Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998). It can be ordered online at [www.str.org](http://www.str.org).