

COLIN MCGINN, "EVOLUTION, ANIMALS, AND THE BASIS OF MORALITY", INQUIRY 22 (1979), PP. 81-99.

Colin McGinn argues that "[w]hat makes morality possible--namely, the cognitive character of moral reasons--involves no restriction of its scope, either to the family or to the group or to the species." (p. 98) He begins by exposing an ubiquitous misunderstanding of evolutionary theory; he argues that genes, rather than groups, are the units of natural selection. McGinn then poses the following question: If the mainspring of morality is sentiment that develops in accordance with the principles of natural selection, how can the upsurge and continuance of altruism that is independent of kin relations be explained? He argues that such altruism, and hence "genuine morality", can only be explained by rejecting the view that morality is founded on sentiment in favor of the view that morality is founded on reason. Altruism that is independent of kin relations persists because it is part and parcel of rationality, and rationality is to the advantage of an organism's genes. In McGinn's words, "[m]orality, which jibs at the ruthless ways of natural selection, is the price the genes pay for intelligent survival machines." (p. 93) This implies that there cannot be creatures who are both rational and amoral. The final step in McGinn's argument is that since morality is founded on reason, and since reason requires the recognition of the reality of other beings and their interests, "morality recommends the extension of human concern beyond the bounds of our own species." (p. 98)

One could respond to this argument in a number of ways. One could quarrel with McGinn's distinction between sentiment and reason, or his distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism, or deny that reason requires as much as McGinn believes. I will sketch two different lines of attack that one might explore.

When McGinn argues that "cognitivism" is the only explanation of the upsurge and continuance of altruism that is independent of kin relations, he assumes that such altruism is not in the interests of the altruist's genes. Yet recent work by Robert Trivers and John Maynard Smith has been directed towards showing that some kin-independent altruism is in the interests of the altruist's genes. (See, for example, the article by Smith in the September, 1978 issue of Scientific American.) If Smith and Trivers are right, morality may be explainable by sentiment developed in accordance with natural selection after all.

Alternatively, one could argue that morality is not directly linked to biology. One of the central differences between humans and most other animals is the relative openness of our programs. It is this relative openness that permits the development of social practices that are not directly genetically determined. Morality, to put the point crudely, might well be a matter of "convention" rather than a matter of biology. If this is so, then there will be no explanation of morality forthcoming in the terms that McGinn envisions.

McGinn's argument is quite ingenious. I have been unable to do it justice in this short review. It is worthy of careful attention from all those concerned with the foundations of morality or the moral status of animals.

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