

NATURAL GOOD AND EVIL: BEYOND FITNESS TO SURVIVE

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Summary

This chapter unpacks the most dominant value principle of the contemporary world - competition to survive - and explains from G.E. Moore's original diagnosis of evolutionary ethics the underlying "deep naturalistic fallacy" governing global market capitalism. Critical explanation then develops the positive core concepts of "the Good" in Moore's canonical *Principia Ethica* - "beauty" and "personal affection", "duties" and "consensus" - beyond formal abstractions to life-grounded meaning. Ethics, moral philosophy and ruling value system are explained as connected levels of a century-long sea shift of theory to life-blind parameters of analysis.

4.1. Analytic Philosophy and the Naturalistic Fallacy

Let us begin where the going may seem most difficult for a life-value philosophy and way of human being: standing up to the analytic demands of classical normative philosophy at its most rigorous.

Perhaps the most analytically developed search for a general principle of value is that of G.E. Moore (1873-1958). His *Principia Ethica* (1926) is a paradigmatically analytic work which is most celebrated for his objection to what he calls the “*naturalistic fallacy*”. This fallacy, Moore argues, attempts to define the good as a “natural property” such as “pleasure”, “evolution”, or “the normal”.

It is mistakenly thought, Moore reasons, that because we may *attribute* good to pleasure, or to evolution or to the normal, *the good is identical* with one or other of these natural properties: as in The Good = Happiness. Such an identity of the good with a natural property, Moore argues, rules out the question of value that always still remains - but is it really *good*? Natural properties like “pleasure”, “evolution”, or “the normal” do not answer this second-order value question.

4.1.1. The Open Question Argument

This critical rejoinder is known in ethics and moral philosophy as “the open question argument”. It is a quintessentially philosophical move, and speaks in the face of the most dominant general theories of value of our era. It is commonly believed, for principal example, that because something is necessitated by laws of nature, or is agreed by scientists to be biologically or economically determined, that its perceived order is (1) inalterable and therefore (2) obligatory to accept. Thus it is widely believed that all must compete in terms of such “natural laws” to be “fit to survive”.

4.1.2. Normalized Avoidance of the Malicious Implications

A disturbing implication of this received position is not considered. That is, since violence and bullying, killing, rape, and cannibalism favor the survival of some over others in Nature, then such forms of life are naturally required for survival and evolution. Where such “evolutionary strategies” promote the self or self-group’s reproductive success, it is necessary, so the argument goes, to adopt them. Ideologies like ‘fascism’ and forms of ‘social Darwinism’ have proposed variations on this way of thinking with immense human misery as a result.

Affirmation of biological or economic evolution is seldom stated in this form because its meaning is too provocative to be acceptable. Instead, such implications of “the evolutionary facts which humanity must face” are normally unspoken. Even G.E. Moore who leads the attack on the good = evolution equation does not follow up on these grisly implications. Instead he adopts the standard method of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy which is to structure painful facts of the world out of analysis.

4.1.3. From Avoidance to Relish

Outside the Anglo-American analytic pale, there is often no such reservation. Contemporary French and pre-1945 German philosophy, for example, highlight painful realities and take pleasure in them - as, for example, the Hegelian concept of history in which the “pages without blood are blank pages” and the Foucaultian knowledge = power equation where the “inscribing of bodies” by disciplines and punishments are described in fond detail. Although Hegel (1770-1831) is a universalist rational determinist, and Foucault (1926-84) is the postmodern opposite, they manifest one philosophical meta-pattern. Their clinical awareness of history’s cruel trampling of human life is at one with English-speaking silence insofar as no alternative ordering is conceived.

4.1.4. Purging the Felt Side of Being as a Ruling Pattern

With the “fitness to survive” value system, there is strict indifference to extreme suffering as irrelevant to external counts. The feelings of life competing for survival where victory goes to the most rapacious, and defeat or death to the rest is thus screened out.

In other words, scientific method rules out the felt side of being as a prescription of its ‘rational objectivity’, while Anglo-American philosophy leads and adopts this convention. This is the lost value field of feeling life, and it is investigated in depth in *Good and Evil Within: Opening the Terra Incognita of the Felt Side of Being*.

4.1.4.1. Gene Machine Model as Exemplar

In the genetic model of fitness-to-survive theory, feeling life is ruled out a-priori. Mechanisms of genetic transmission and extinction that secure (or fail to secure) “survival advantage” are alone of concern. The felt being of observer or observed has no place in the meaning - as the signature concept of this thought-system, “gene machines”, makes clear. In this way the original focus of evolutionary biology on living organisms is displaced by the genetic programs of which they are conceived as transient vehicles.

4.2. Fitness to Survive as a General Value Theory

Before gene machines, G.E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* “ is detailed in discussion of the social Darwinist thinker, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), whose work, he argues, epitomizes the naturalistic fallacy of equating the good to evolution.

Yet meta-ethics and moral philosophy since Moore avoid the social-Darwinist version of the fallacy, and focus instead on the familiar stalking horse of utilitarianism. Thus the most powerful form of the naturalistic fallacy - the mode of thought which construes good as equivalent to “fit to survive”, and, by fateful implication, bad as *unfit to survive* - is hardly challenged. In the dominant culture of global market competition, the struggle to exist with the unfit going under is assumed as a law of nature. Public leaders exhort their societies to “compete harder to survive”, while academic counsel

recommends how to do so and passes by the moral issue. The underlying value syntax all express is undisturbed by question or doubt.

4.2.1. Human Choice versus No Alternative

An interesting parallel develops beneath observation. What God's commands were to the medieval era, the survival-of-the-fittest imperative is to the modern.

The difference between them is that moral choice space to deviate from the survival-of-the-fittest law does not exist in the currently ruling doctrine. In prior commands of God, the choice to obey or not was conceived as the central issue, with final judgment deferred to the afterlife. Here there is no alternative, and there are punishments now. One must compete, or does not survive.

4.2.2. Normality as Good

In contrast, more people seem to know that the *normal* - Moore's third example of the naturalistic fallacy - is an elastic notion whose meaning varies with the conditioning of its users. Thus the "normal" is a far more contested category in philosophy and the social sciences than "fit to survive". Even so, its prescriptions remain central with "normal" and "abnormal" being quite pervasive pro-and-con moral predicates. "Abnormal" has even become an attribute with similar weight to "immoral" - as lucidly explained by R.D. Laing in his *Politics of the Family* (1972).

4.2.3. Nature, God, and Normality at Once

When to the war for life as an imperative is added its normality, the "fit-to-survive" order deepens and widens as an ultimate framework of value meaning. It is so deeply ensconced as an organizing presupposition that no value issue is normally seen. It is a law of Nature, God, and the Normal at once.

Thus the winners deserve their places in the struggle and so too, it silently follows, the losers deserve to suffer and die. Never is this moral sequence explicitly stated in philosophy or science, but it is entailed. The conflation of the natural, the normal, the competitive and the good is assumed as a natural given beneath question.

4.2.4. Competitive Global Market as Natural Religion

What is unique about the value of "fitness to survive" is that humanity is assumed not to have a value choice beyond the law of nature determining it. The character that makes a person or society "fit" to continue to exist is instead scientized as law-like fact - the decider of those who may continue to live and flourish (the selected), and those who are fated to suffer and die (the rest). We cannot and should not, it is believed, interfere.

The everyday expression of this ethical cast of mind is, "Let Nature/the Market decide".

4.2.5. Testing for this Moral Absolutism in Practice

A basic question reveals the ruling value syntax. Where is fit and unfit to survive or, “competitive” or “uncompetitive” *not* used as ultimate pro-and-con value categories by the leaderships and governments of industrialized societies?

And where is rational challenge to this reigning order of human existence spoken in ethics, moral philosophy, economics or administrative science? In both practice and theory, these questions are not evidently posed save at the margins.

4.3. An Implicit Ground of Justification for Evil

Where *can* a rational line be drawn, then, against the law of the jungle for humankind?

More pointedly, on what ground can one draw the line against what is pervasive in nature’s struggle for survival – violent assault, tyrannical possession, rape, seizure, and indifference to them? By what principle of value can one justly interfere by life-protective stand and regulation? Yet where is any such principle specified by evolutionary ethics?

Analysis needs to move underneath Moore to examine exactly what the implicit ruling value categories of “competitive” and “fit to survive” denote.

4.3.1. Defining Fitness to Survive

In the science of evolutionary biology from which these value categories arise, a very precise onto-axiological meaning can be deduced. *Fitness to survive means what most numerously reproduces itself over time.* This is the uncontested first principle of evolutionary biology and, by transitivity, evolutionary and capitalist ethics derived from it.

What is unexamined in this implicit first principle of life-and-death rule is its moral meaning or, more precisely, the exact *value* that competitive struggle to survive selects *for*.

4.3.2. The Fallacious Logic

A very basic question is not asked - the open question. Is this ultimate value truly good?

Assumption trumps onto-axiological examination. Fitness to survive is presumed good because it is given that survival is good. The possibility that what most numerously reproduces itself over time can still be evil does not arise. “Fitness to survive” or “competitive success” is *good by definition*. This is the equation of a naturalistic fallacy.

4.3.3. The Unseen Vicious Implications

More deeply, this naturalistic fallacy - unlike the good = happiness equation - has horrendous implications for the most successful human groups. Why should genocide of

other peoples *not* be good if it favors the competitive survival of the perpetrators?

4.3.3.1. Why the Competitively Fittest May be the Most Evil

The derangement follows from the value logic. If the most “fit” are those who multiply their numbers most is seizing others’ habitats and resources and killing them, their genocidal mode is evolutionary virtue. The reader might well ask, why then is this value theory not understood as a doctrine of supreme evil? This question is not posed, and no line of value is drawn against this implication.

Moore challenged evolution as an equivalent of the Good, but neither he nor other ethicists have laid bare this ultimate moral issue.

4.3.3.2. The Fittest = The Most Ecocidal Through Generational Time

The bold type equation above follows in principle and in fact from the equation of the fittest beings to the most numerously surviving.

Such a species and its most numerously reproducing members are the “fittest” or “most successful” with the “most favorable characteristics” *because* of their numerically greatest reproduction through time; and so, conversely, because of those life forms and conditions they eliminate and displace with no limit to this “success” so long as none but their own numbers increase.

4.3.4. Overpopulationists Avoid the Baseline Moral Disorder

Revealingly, even those many who deplore “human overpopulation” do not confront the implicit value-system axis which propels the symptom they seize on.

This is the value-system axis of evolutionary biology *and* modern economics which both affirm as ‘Science’ that the most successfully reproducing and growing demand for resources is “the most competitive” and, thus, “the most fit to survive”. Where is there exception in either primary discipline or its policy practice?

4.3.5. Necessary Evil as Good across Political and Disciplinary Divides

Observe the value-system operations for both presupposing *and* denying the ruling imperative.

The dominant members of the dominant species continue blithely in “competitive success” within this thought-system’s terms of reference by destructions of most or all other life forms with no issue arising. None arises within its thought frame because its value equation is assumed as value neutral, a purely scientific account of the laws of evolutionary biology.

Accordingly, a covertly regulating value system can lead to a world progressively denuded of every other species: with the dominant species’ dog-eat-dog competition among its own members selecting for these results at the same time.

4.3.6. The Law of Evolutionary Competition

With all this conceived as propelled by the “natural competition for survival”, the vicious circle of value conception is closed at ever higher levels of cumulative life-system destruction with no problem or alternative conceived within it. The “fittest” within this ruling value system can therefore be the elect of a monstrous moral mechanism, but the problem cannot be posed within its framework of ideation.

All are thus fated to compete against each other and other species for space and means of life, with more and more individuals and species being destroyed and consumed by the ‘evolutionary’ mechanism as its human apex achieves ever greater material powers of annihilation. Nothing can or should be done about it because it is already presupposed as natural law - which cannot in principle compute as an issue of moral choice.

4.4. The Meta-Alibi:: Denying Value-System Choice Locks It In

As long as moral thought does not break past this closure of reigning doctrine, the worst at the human level may be affirmed as necessary to “progress” and “evolution”. For example, the bloody dispossession and elimination of rural and first peoples is conceived even by Marxian revolutionaries as a necessary cost of productive evolution - the ‘productivist’ principle of evolutionary understanding which has unified Marxist and capitalist understanding at both theoretical and practical levels. Production itself is decoupled from life grounds.

This closed circle of evolutionary conception reigns at biological and economic levels across schools. For its adherents, the scientific undeniability of the process is self-evident. The facts over billions of years confirm its pattern as law-like, and so render its rule inalterable.

Extinctions have already occurred to 99% of the species which have existed over time, it is reasoned, and so this is the inexorable work of “the laws of evolution”- condemning any higher value-system to extinction as an “unfit evolutionary strategy” or in conflict with “historical laws of development”.

4.4.1. Collective Abdication of Responsibility

There is no choice in what happens at this level, it is assumed. Whatever we might like, what happens is determined by forces beyond our control.

This is the closure to responsibility which Jean-Paul Sartre called “bad faith”, but he limited the term to individuals.

With him as well, a ‘collective bad faith of society’ cannot be comprehended - a problem we explore in depth in later sections.

4.4.2. The Repressed Alternative of Human Value Regulators

A deep distinction of possibilities is overlooked. The competitive fitness-to-survive story has no capacity to distinguish between systematically destroying other life and life habitats to multiply human numbers as “fitness to survive” *and* a mutually enabling life order which sustains biodiversity in compassable flourishing. The latter goal is proposed by deep ecology, but without any standard of human needs to prioritize their satisfaction. This still preconscious value system has been introduced as “the life sequence of value” in *The Global Crisis of Values*, and given principled need content in *The Transcultural Idea: Good as Happiness and Bad as Pain*. Its full onto-ethical meaning is explained step-by-step through the remaining chapters.

While humanity’s powers to evolve by conscious rules above genetic mechanism constitute its species nature, the moral choice-space of *homo regulator* is not adequately comprehended.

4.4.3. The Alibi Equation:: Existing Order = Natural Order = Good Order

An unexamined value-system becomes closed when it is assumed as naturally necessitated, and conceived as beyond human ability to change. This pattern of ruling value-lock is old and transcultural, but the deadly effects increase with material powers - in proportion to how much they are imposed against the requirements of reproduction of other peoples and species.

In any ruling value system, the bold-type compound equation is a cognitive reduction, and its disorder can in fact be discerned at work through history. Yet although discerned in *other* social orders, it is seldom discerned within its own. This externalization of the problem is as old as civilization.

Feudalism assumed the natural right of kings and lords to dictate service of the rest to them by divine laws. Capitalism assumes the natural right of private money-capital competing for profit in a transborder market to dispose over society’s means of life and labor to which all others must sell their labor to survive. Hinduism assumes the caste order of command and subjugation as natural and necessitated by the moral law of the universe. Confucianism assumes the five relations of rule and obedience as the natural mandate of heaven and deviation as immoral.

These are variations of the naturalistic fallacy, but occur at the level of social value system where philosophers presuppose them as well. Whatever their vast differences of moral order, each and all sanctify the surrounding existing order as equivalent to the good and the obligatory - one grand scheme of moral blindness across cultures and time, one which we uncover as we move.

4.4.4. Cultural Universals within the Meta-Pattern

We find here an inner logic of the justification of oppression which is so recurrent and unflagged in different orders as to appear built in. The equation of what exists to what is natural to what is good, however, has certain constant themes across diverse orders. For

example, women are subordinate to men because this is “natural”; armed wars across history are “human nature”, the poor live miserable lives or starve because of “the natural laws of competition”, and so on.

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Biographical Sketch

John McMurtry holds his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Toronto, Canada and his Ph.D from the University of London, England, and has been Professor of Philosophy at the University of Guelph for over 25 years and University Professor Emeritus since 2005. He is an elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, and his many articles, chapters, books and interviews have been internationally published and translated.