

Sanctifying Animals: A Study in Evolutionary Ethics

A.V. AFONSO*

There is wide and popular acceptance of evolutionary ethics since the conflict between evolution and religions has been blighted by scholars such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Interest in evolutionary approach had gained with the publication of *The Ethical Animal* by CH Waddington. Evolutionary ethics at one level provides us with a framework that does not conflict with the scientific insights as it does not presuppose 'metaphysical entities' and at another level provides a defence of moral status of man. That it (evolutionary ethics) provides ground for recognition and ascription of moral status to animals other than 'rational human beings' is the objective of this short paper.

In most general terms, not necessarily precise terms, evolutionary ethics is a form of biological approach to moral philosophy. One may locate its origins to ancient hedonism, empiricist philosophers, utilitarianism and modern positivists. The biological foundations may be located to Buffon and Lamarck, who recognized that evolutionary changes are due to inheritance of acquired characteristics. The beginnings of 'evolutionary naturalism' may be located in Spencer's *Social Statics* which elaborated the thesis that 'evil arises because we are ill adapted to natural conditions'. Spencer argued that (moral) evil arises because we are ill adapted to natural conditions and that development of life entails a progressive physical and mental adaptation. He further pointed

out that evolution of human society is to evolve complete concord and cooperation which leads to happiness.

Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* which is alleged to have collected large amount of scientific evidence for biological evolution, further developed Spencer's thesis and claimed that men's intellectual and moral faculties are also due to evolutionary processes. Although Darwin did not articulate the philosophical implications of his thesis in *Descent of Man*, he provided a framework for philosophical inferences when he says: the purpose of life is 'rearing of greatest number of individuals in full vigour and health, with all their faculties perfect, under conditions to which they are subjected'. (Darwin 1896:97) Darwin's works provided Spencer (in *The Principles of Ethics*) with an opportunity to reassert his claim that ethics was to be developed on evolutionary lines as articulated in utilitarian criterion of greatest happiness of individuals and groups.

Although there are many votaries of evolutionary ethics, it was TH Huxley who gave a new dimension to an old thesis. In *Evolution and Ethics*, Huxley argued that civilization is the result not of evolution but of counter-evolution—it is not the person most fit to survive is not necessarily morally best evolved. In the words of TH Huxley: 'I have termed this evolution of these feelings out of which the primitive bonds of human society are so largely forged, into the organized and personified sympathy we

call conscience, the ethical process. So far as it tends to take any human society efficient in the struggle for existence with the state of nature, or with other societies, it works in harmonious contrast with the cosmic process. But it is none the less true that, since law and moral are restraints upon the struggle for existence between men in society, the ethical process is in opposition to the principle of the cosmic process, and tends to the suppression of the qualities best fitted for the success in that struggle... the ethical progress of society depends, not in imitating the cosmic process, still less in running away from it, but in combating it.' (Huxley 1947: 92)

Historically, thus a major shift in the understanding of 'evolutionary ethics' has taken place with the recognition of two evolutionary processes—one biological and the other moral. What seems to have happened is that at one level evolutionary process is based upon the 'survival of the fittest' but at another level there cannot be free expansion of innate faculties—they are 'restricted' by the general good. In other words, ethics is seen as aiming at the end of facilitating the 'free expansion of innate faculties' of the individual, so long as such an expansion is in consonance with the general good.

Julian Huxley attempted to re-establish the autonomy of evolutionary ethics when he asserted that the tension between the ethical and the cosmic can be resolved if we first extend the concept

*Fellow, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla.

of evolution both, backwards into the inorganic and forward into human domain. Secondly, J Huxley viewed ethics not as a body of 'fixed principles but as a product of evolution, and itself evolving'. (Huxley 1947:166) This new understanding of evolutionary ethics is said to be due to advancements in psychology (with Sigmund Freud) and genetics (Mandel). Freud believed to have provided an explanation of moral obligation as a mechanism of primitive superego. Besides, modern psychology is claimed to have brought out many new approaches that radically questioned the absoluteness of moral obligation. Complex and variable genetic make-up of man that accounts for personal differences help us to comprehend various moral temperaments of individuals, claim geneticists. It is in this context that one can make sense of what geneticists and modern genetics has provided as the basis for a comprehensive selectionist theory of evolution undermining or making redundant other evolutionary theories such as Lamarckian, orthogenesis, vitalistic immanence or divine guidance.

The emphasis on the nature of evolutionary ethics as relativistic can be best summed up from Huxley's claim that an individual adjusts himself objectively to the moral standards of his society and the standards of the society are realistically adjusted to science. Standards of what constitutes moral right and moral wrong are determined and reconciled by claims of both present generation and future generations. Evolutionary ethics thus presupposes that older general moral standards are replaced by new ones as the old ones turn out to be obsolete.

In the beginning, evolution of life was purely biological in nature, dependent upon mechanical interaction and natural selection. But once man, a conscious creature is evolved, there were new ways that evolutionary processes became evident. If the processes at the earlier stages were non-moral, at this stage,

concepts such as faith, love for truth, courage, goodness, etc.—in short, moral purpose is evident in evolution. However, the standards of right and wrong became dependent upon the direction of evolutionary processes. In other words, the direction of evolution determined what is morally right or morally wrong. This resulted in some form of hedonistic ethics.

It is with the arrival of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin that evolutionary processes were given a direction that led to convergence with the divine. Teilhard believed that in man evolution has become 'conscious of itself' and consequently individual has to bring about social and spiritual progress of nature. Although Huxley and Teilhard agree to what consequently is the base of the direction of evolution, they differ in their interpretations based either on utilitarian considerations or theological humanism respectively.

CH Waddington although agrees with Huxley and Spencer regarding the need for evolutionary approach to moral philosophy, but argues that their interpretations suffer from logical fallacies of vicious circle and naturalistic fallacy respectively. Waddington pointed out that Spencer (and even Huxley) claims that evolutionary progress is good and therefore moral goodness of our acts can be defined in terms of evolutionary processes. It may also be noted that the evolutionary processes lead to increasing complexity of what evolves, and this can lead to a dead end.

There is another issue that Waddington addresses. He not only desires that the proposed evolutionary approach to ethics is not only superior to that of Huxley but also that he can argue against the contemporary analytic thinkers who question the validity of normativeness of ethical formulations. The need for guidance in recognizing what is morally right and wrong or what we ought to do and what we must avoid is universal. As adults we have already been imbibed with this sense of

recognition. These 'feelings' are seen as 'ethical feelings' because of a common trait of their being guide to a type of behaviour distinguishable from other types.

How do we then determine whether such 'feelings' are moral and they would be a proper conduct of man? There could be no better guide, in Waddington's view, than an investigation into the animal and human evolution in relation of behaviour and action of humans. Waddington also draws our attention to the fact that besides the animal evolution there is 'human' evolution that has significant impact on formation and determination of moral 'feelings'. It is this human evolution that is responsible for the development of culture—and it is the study of culture that sheds valuable light of development of value system that ultimately leads to creation of ethical systems.

Most biologists accept that evolution is progressive and hence every stage or state creates a more complex and more evolved better stage or state. The mechanisms through which such a change occurs is natural selection and mutation. The question that remains (may be at this stage of our understanding of evolution) unanswered is why couldn't evolution be a directionless change.

One of the important features of the natural selection is that it brings about changes not merely in the organism's genetic system but in the whole of 'epigenetic system', namely the information contained in the genetic system is provided a functional structure thereby ensuring survival of the organism that has best adaptive character. 'Survival of the fittest' is not survival of the strongest, but those that successfully transmit certain kinds of hereditary qualities.

Another feature of evolutionary mechanism is that the organism is not just determined or shaped by the environment, but to certain extent chooses to modify it. In Waddington's words: 'Biological evolution, then, is carried out by an "evolutionary system"

which involves four major factors: a genetic system, which engenders new variation by the process of mutation and transmits it by chromosomal genes; and epigenetic system, which translates the information in the fertilized egg and that which impinges on it from the environment into the characters of the reproducing adult; and exploitive system, by which an animal chooses and modifies the environment to which it will submit itself; and a system of natural selective pressures, originating from environment and operating on the combined result of the other three systems.' (Waddington 1960:94-95)

Natural evolution in animals takes a complex form of cultural evolution in man as man has reached a stage of evolution that makes it possible for man to transmit information through its cultural elements such as teaching, learning, writing and printing. The evolution does not any more depend entirely upon information transmitted through cybernetic modes as in case of earlier stages of evolution.

Another dimension of evolution is its socio-genetic transmission of information that only requires certain mechanisms, both for transmitting and receiving information. In other words, individuals and particularly infants and children must be endowed with receptors that are capable of receiving information and retaining them from elders and 'authority'. It is through these mechanisms that values are transmitted and received. It is both a logical necessity and empirical need that children 'submit to learning from others'. The resultant feelings are internalized, creating a system of values that have reinforcing and determining mechanism called 'conscience'

Jean Piaget, while studying the development of the moral sense in the child, observed spontaneous feelings in the child (in the presence of parents and subsequently in presence of adult human beings) that his parents and others are greater than and superior to himself. The

development of such 'authority-bearing system' is a precondition of infants and children becoming information-acceptors. This leads to children becoming acceptors of moral standards and values. Developing moral feelings is an essential outcome and factor of the evolutionary process.

The question whether all evolutionary changes are progressive remains unanswered. However, it is observed that there is a clear direction of change that moves from lower efficiency to a higher level of complexity and greater efficiency, a result of development of higher forms of life. Waddington characterizes evolutionary progress as a development, to higher and higher levels, of various capacities which 'to remain relatively independent of the environment, to incorporate into the life-system more complex functions of environmental variables, and ultimately to control the environment.' (Waddington 1960: 137) Consequently evolutionary theory provides moral philosophers with useful means to evaluate moral feelings and actions from a developmental point of view unlike the traditional theories. There may be many differences between philosophers arguing for evolutionary ethics. However, one thing is clear, they methodologically provide us with tools of differentiating between various stages of moral development. It is on the basis of this presupposition that one can justify the problem of ascribing moral status to animals.

KR. Popper's evolutionary emergentism takes a step further in understanding how moral beings come to exist. Popper begins from the experience that human being is irreplaceable and the example of organ transplant/replacement is not analogous to machine and its parts. One cannot replace the fact that human being *enjoys life, suffers and faces death consciously*. Human beings, for Popper, like Kant, are ends-in-themselves and this aspect raises *their value* immeasurably. We do not value machines (unless very useful, rare, unique, etc.) but humans in

spite of over population and social problems, we value them. Therefore, to hold that human are machines (as a doctrine or model) is not only mistaken but also one that lowers the dignity of man as a *moral being*.

Classical materialism viewed matter as something extended in space (occupying space) ultimate and needs no further explanation, and everything else is explained in terms of it. Classical materialism was transcended by explanatory theories of modern physics: Newton's physics, electron of JJ Thomson and divided atoms of HA Lorenz. Matter is no longer viewed as a 'substance' that can neither be created nor destroyed. Hence, new 'materialists' such as UT Place, JJC Smart, DM Armstrong and others explain man and animals as 'electro-chemical' machines. Matter is real along with forces and fields of forces, changes, etc., 'entities' we find in physics. Biology views that life must have originated from chemical synthesis thus proving that dead matter has *more potentialities* than we imagine—*produce life, consciousness, language, etc.*

Individual seems to have or has preferences in selection of new environment (unlike Darwin's natural selection where an interaction between blind chance within the organism (mutation) and external forces upon which the organism has no influence takes place). For Popper organism chooses its environment and thus man chooses evolution of his brain and mind, by *choosing to speak*. And it is this interaction with language that has led to emergence of human brain and consciousness itself.

Popper admits that it is difficult to say much about 'how' of emergence of consciousness. Panpsychism and behaviourism avoid the question. Cartesians attribute consciousness only to man. Popper claims that there are *lower and higher* stages of consciousness (think of dreams). And if the fact that animals cannot speak is sufficient reason to deny higher consciousness to them, it would

also be sufficient reason to deny the babies at any age before they learn to speak.

The most reasonable view seems to be that consciousness is an emergent property of animals arising under the pressure of natural selection. In evolution (for materialists), all that is potential or pre-formed becomes actual. But for Popper evolution has brought into existence many unforeseeable things. It has produced sentient animals with conscious experiences. This is due to *creative evolution*. Briefly, creative evolution may be explained as follows: At one time, there were no other elements except hydrogen, helium, etc. Again, there was a time when those who had knowledge of operating physical laws, could not predict the properties of heavier elements, nor could say that they will emerge. Therefore, we can say that something unforeseeable has emerged. There are stages in the evolutionary process of the universe and that it has produced things, unpredictable and unforeseen at a prior stage. Popper believes that mind, consciousness and brain are the outcome of an evolutionary processes in which one cannot predict the outcome or what would come into existence. Determinists, classical atomists, potentiality theorists, etc. have criticized 'emergent' or 'creative' evolution on the ground that the present state of universe is effect of its anterior state.

The Great Ape Declaration demanded that chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans be included in the 'community of equals' whereby enforceable rights are accorded to them: (a) right to life; (b) protection of individual liberty; (c) prohibition of torture. These basic rights based on moral principles that govern our relations to each other be enforceable in law. (Cavaliere and Singer: 1993:4) This Declaration must be seen as recognition of a new evolutionary phase in the human civilization whereby we *sanctify* animals, not raising them but recognizing them to be on par with humans at moral level.

Philosophical reflections resultant from the developments in applied ethics and particularly bio-ethics has far reaching implications to evolutionary hypothesis. The claim that human and non-humans belong to two different moral categories is based upon a hurried dismissal of evolutionary theories. If we reflect with lesser *a priori* dispositions, we may be able not only to lay claim moral dignity of man but also extend the same to species other than humans. One of the most crucial claims of moral philosophy is that normative conclusions cannot be legitimately derived from factual premises. It may however, be noted that 'when we separate the general appeal to the gap between facts and values from the (covert) appeal to a bias in favour of our species in ethics, we can see that the general appeal to gap between facts and values cannot serve as a basis for denying that Darwinism can have any impact on traditional morality'. (Kuhse 2002:131) It is hard to reject the fact that the difference between various species, and particularly between species that are radically similar, is of degrees rather than of kind. It would be premature to claim that these differences do not have adverse consequences on the moral status of these species.

The radical and fundamental separation between man and other species is a result of a long tradition dating back from Aristotle and Aquinas to Descartes. But the absolute separation of the ontological categories, human on the one hand and animals on the other is the theological product of two millennia that is now recognized as an *a prioristic* tenet of Western civilization. The Kantian categorical imperative has rendered theological legitimacy to the presumption of infinitely superior moral worth of human beings.

There is one assumption that contemporary philosophers wish to consider in order to ascribe 'moral worth' to species other than humans and that is 'personhood'. But there is a prior question that needs to be answered,

namely, in what sense do we apply 'personhood' to humans and do we apply 'personhood' to all humans? Is it in the same sense?

Taking into account the entire rationalist, empiricist and Kantian traditions, 'Person' has been defined as one who has self-consciousness, rational, and minimal moral sense and consequently worth in itself. In the strict sense, the term 'person' applies to adult human beings who have all the above characteristics. However, debates in bio-ethics have thrown up difficulties in application of the concept of person to fetuses, neonates, children with incurable mental abnormalities, coma-tose patients, totally mentally deranged individuals, patients suffering from extreme form of Alzheimer's disease, etc. who cannot be justified either as potential 'persons' or as having been 'persons'. Nevertheless, personhood is morally 'ascribed' to them. Again, one may have to reflect not so much on an essentialist description of what constitutes person, but take into account the attitude of the community that recognizes 'personhood' in individual human beings. Ascription of 'person-hood' or treating someone or something as person goes beyond the traditional essentialist description of persons. Societies much before they had provided with a legal definition of person and applied the same to institutions and corporation, have 'treated' animals other than humans (first mammals and after that birds etc.), mountains, rivers and trees as persons. We do recall the fact that Plato and Aristotle found difficult to recognize slaves as persons since they were 'instruments for the well-being' of others.

There is another way of looking at the use of the concept of 'person'. The descriptive or the metaphysical merely defines the person whereas the normative or the moral compels us to ascribe moral properties such as rights and duties or right to life, etc. The two distinctive uses of the term 'person' are inter-dependent. There is however, one issue

that remains unresolved in the debates: Is there a possibility of moral ranking of personhood on the basis of pain and suffering that we inflict upon 'persons'? Further, can we use the moral and metaphysical use of the term (as it has happened in history of mankind) to extend the same to species of animals other than 'humans'?

Term person is emblematic in the sense that it is linked both to 'role' played and 'relation' between things. To regard and recognize a being as a 'person' is to attribute a special kind of value to that being. The locus of relationships and the role being played is accidental rather than an essential part of that being—the term consequently can and must be used as an instrument for moral reform or improvement.

The argument for inclusion of non-human great apes in the general moral category of 'personhood' rests on our understanding of moral relatedness and similarity. By relatedness, we assume not only that humans share almost 98.4 per cent of our DNA with chimpanzees, gorillas and orangutans, but that the three species (*homo troglodytes*, *homo paniscus* and *homo sapiens*) are but species of man in varying and not 'discontinuous mind'. The traditional argument of demarcation between *homo sapiens* and others on the ground of linguistic capacity, needs a more sensitized approach. The evidence collected by the scientists such as in the case of Ameslan (or American sign language) interactions between Francine Patterson and the gorillas Koko and Michael, or between Lyn Myles and the orangutan Chantek or between Deborah and Roger Fouts and community of chimpanzees, and such other cases may not be conclusive enough to prove capacity of self-consciousness among these species. Evidence now collected (2005) show not only chimpanzees and other apes in captivity but gorillas in the wild have been making use of 'simple tools' such as poking a stick in a swampy pool of water to check its depth. Details regarding gorillas named Leah and Efi

by scientist Thomas Breuer and his team of observers are available on online journal *PLoS Biology*.

But in a world dominated by an alleged superior species, deprived species whether great apes or the slaves of ancient Greek world or Americans of 17th century were never ascribed with the type of self-consciousness that is claimed to be prerogative of the 'homo sapiens'. Moral debates are not necessarily or exclusively that of recognition of moral worth of entities, but *ascribing* moral value to beings who are *a prioristically* and metaphysically denied the status.

Normative principles in their ultimate analysis rest upon 'a general account of what there is including fundamental, fully general statements' as Rawls argues. Metaphysicians depend upon *a priori* arguments rather than human consensus, certainty rather than ambiguity and absolute generality rather than particular context and details. One does not deny the relevance of metaphysical principles, but in the moral discourse these absolute, certain and *a priori* principles seem to conflict with the cultural values and formation of public policy that is based upon secular philosophy. The debates in bio-ethics are not decided with the knowledge of metaphysical principles that are quoted by the proponents and opponents—but by religious doctrines resultant from the metaphysical foundations. For instance, the Nicene *Credo* recited by the believers is full of metaphysical principles available first in the Greek philosophy and later on in the medieval thought of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. They are far from the 'lived experiences' of early or later Christians.

The need for the change in moral orthodoxy of about the non-human animals is presupposed in the plea for intra-human moral equality. One must remember that the principle of sanctity-of-life applied to *Homo Sapiens* as a biological being, is not a sufficient condition for human beings to be characterized as having self-awareness

and rationality. There are two arguments—inclusivist and exclusivist. The inclusivist argument grants moral status to all humans and the exclusivist one grants such status only to humans. Attempt to ascribe moral status to the embryo, the fetus, or the comatose who are not human in the evaluative sense of philosophers and moral theologians, undermined inclusivist argument and consequently the traditional notion of moral community. Although the traditional moral philosophers criticized the attempts at ascribing rights and privileges to non-human species, the inclusivist discourse opened up the possibility of developing ethics of animal liberation. Recent developments in philosophy has given us new insights into understanding of evolutionary ethics that may enable us to view differently the status of non-humans and whether they are in wholly different moral categories.

Once the metaphysical claims and assumptions of radical difference between humans and non-humans are questioned, the attempts to ascribe special dignity to humans at the exclusion of non-human are untenable. There is not only a greater challenge to the world which gives not only a special status to humans but denies the same to our immediate ancestors in the evolutionary process. Discussions in twentieth century ethics pay little or no attention to evolutionary theory because of the claim, largely accepted in modern moral philosophy, that normative conclusions cannot legitimately be derived from factual premises.

But when the debate between facts and values is used covertly to pose special status to human species *vis-à-vis* non-human species, the same cannot serve as a basis for denying that the theory of evolution can affect the traditional moral theories. Evolutionary ethics may not be able to reject humanism, but it definitely undermines the traditional arguments *pro homo sapiens*.

Religious protection of animal life has a long history and definitely much

before theoretical discussion of environmental protection. Hinduism and Buddhism have had a strong theoretical justification in their eschatology that led to the protection of animals. Biblical statements provided the theoretical justification for protection of animals and environment for the Christian philosophers. All this in spite of the fact that most religions (including tribal religions) have sometime or other promoted animal sacrifices.

It is obvious that animals remained a species lower than human—radically different and deserving no status equal to ‘soul’ imbued humans. Animals have never been recognized to be on par with man and endowed with moral status like man. The reasons for this are not the

‘lived experiences’ of religious man, but the metaphysical and theological constructs of the specific religions. ‘Sanctifying animals’ is not merely to treat some animals as sacred, but to ascribe moral status to them in the belief that evolution is not a metaphysical theory but a perpetual reality.

REFERENCES

- Cavaliere, Paola, and Singer, Peter (eds.) (1993), *The Great Ape Project: Equality beyond Humanity*, London: Fourth Estate.
- Darwin, Charles (1988), *Origin of Species*, London: J. Murray.
- Huxley, T.H. (1947), *Touchstone for Ethics*, N.Y.: Harper.
- Huxley, T.H. (1893), *Evolution and Ethics*, in *Collected Essays*, vol. 9, N.Y.: D. Appleton.
- Kuhse, Helga (2002), *Unsanctifying Human Life—Essays on Ethics*, U.K.: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
- Piaget, Jean (1975), *The Moral Development of the Child*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Popper, K.R. and Eccles, J.C. (1978), *Self and its Brain*, N.Y.: Springer Verlag.
- Singer, Peter (1990), *Animal Liberation*, N.Y.: New York Review of Books.
- Thomson, Paul (1995), *Issues in Evolutionary Ethics*, State University of New York Press.
- Waddington, C.H. (1960), *The Ethical Man*, London: Allen and Unwin.

Globalization: Language, Culture and Media,

edited by B.N. Patnaik and Imtiaz Hasnain

Latest from IAS

The fate of languages throughout human history has been predicated upon political power relationships. Globalization is not just an economic phenomenon. It changes power relationships and brings about political and cultural shifts at the global and domestic level, and thus has a bearing on linguistic patterns and language hierarchy. As a result of globalization, a new ordering is afoot, new power alignments are taking place, socio-cultural reorientations are in evidence, and new hegemonies are being created. Globalization has also led to the emergence of new media imperialism and the creation of new world order, which is a euphemism for linguistic hegemony and regimentation. One manifestation of the hegemony could be seen in the extensive use of, and consequent dominance of English worldwide. In this scenario, issues relating to the situation of Indian languages would need to be clarified. Where do developing languages and societies stand vis-à-vis this phenomenon? What is the future of a language that is no longer a guarantee of upward mobility? Furthermore, in this context of new hegemonies, where do the indigenous cultures and vernacular literatures stand? What kind of participation would they be assured of? What is the nature of the net gain that might accrue to such societies, languages, literatures, and cultures? What role would or could the electronic and print media play in this?

ISBN: 81-7986-061-2

Rs. 375