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Should theology take evolutionary ethics seriously? A conversation with Hannah Arendt and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone

ABSTRACT

In this essay I attempt to bridge the gap between evolutionary and theological meta-narratives by making a proposal for a bottom-up, contextual form of evolutionary ethics, and then specifically ask how this might apply to the evolution of morality, to ethical judgments, and the status of ethical judgments and moral codes in theology. Most importantly, this will imply a Christian ethics, and a notion of morality that proceed not from a consideration of rules, duties, rights, moral judgments, moral status, but proceeds rather, from the examination of the fundamental evolutionary realities of human nature. This argument is developed against the background of an analysis of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's engagement with the work of Hannah Arendt on the notion of evil. Finally I argue that the work of evolutionary ethicists are of great importance for theologians because of their direct interest in how the evolutionary origins of human behaviour is to be explained, and in which way our behaviour has been constrained, but not determined, by biological factors. Evolution by natural selection can explain our tendency to think in normative terms, i.e., our innate sense of moral awareness. However, evolutionary explanations of this moral awareness cannot explain our moral judgments, nor justify the truth claims of any of our moral judgments. Why and how we make moral judgments can only be explained on the level of cultural evolution, and by taking into account the historical embeddedness of our moral codes in religious and political conventions. For Christian theology the choice will not be between a moral vision that is inherent in revelation and is, therefore, 'received' and not invented or constructed. Instead, on a post-Foundational view our moral codes and ethical convictions of what is 'received' is itself an interpretative enterprise, shaped experientially through our embeddedness in communities and cultures.

INTRODUCTION

The tension between evolutionary theory and Christian faith is often viewed as the most recent and the most long-standing example of defensive posturing by people of faith in the face of advancing scientific understanding, the kind of scientific understanding that seems to have systematically threatened belief in God by the sheer firepower of naturalistic explanation (cf. Schloss 2004:1f.). I do believe, however, that a constructive dialogue with evolutionary theory should not be about whether or not supernatural accounts of the origin of creation can be defended, but should rather focus on the fundamental question: What kind of creation do we have?

Against this background, I want to try, in this essay, to begin to bridge the gap between evolutionary and theological meta-narratives by making a post-foundationalism proposal (cf.

Van Huyssteen 2006:6-24) for a bottom-up, contextual form of evolutionary ethics, and then specifically ask how this might apply to the evolution of morality, to ethical judgements and the status of ethical judgement and moral codes in theology.

FROM EMPATHY TO MORAL AWARENESS OF ETHICS

In her fascinating studies, especially her acclaimed Roots series, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone goes to the evolutionary roots of human cognition, language and communication by developing a very pronounced “hermeneutics of the human body” (1990; 1994; 2008). Throughout her work the emphasis is on the role of the human body in understanding meaning and mind. The most fundamental theme advocated in her work, however, is the existence of a biological disposition to use one’s own body as a semantic template for the way we communicate with others. Sheets-Johnstone wants to go even further, however, and “get back” to our hominid roots through the evolutionary continuum of the tactile-kinaesthetic body (cf. 1990:280), so as to illuminate the evolution of sexuality, language, cognition and morality.

Ultimately, Sheets-Johnstone argues that the biological disposition to use one’s own body as a semantic template to communicate with others in the most fundamental sense of the word is about symbolic behaviour and conceptual origins (1990:3), or what Steven Mithen would call the “emergence of cognitive fluidity in the embodied human mind” (cf. Mithen 1996:70, 136). Her fascinating thesis is that human thinking is modelled on the body and it is precisely the sensorial felt and sensorial feeling body that serves as the cognitive source of those human concepts that continuously shaped human thinking and evolution, thus functioning as a semantic template (1990:5, 6). It is against this background that Sheets-Johnstone argues that many contemporary answers to the origins of language fall short as they continue to ignore the reality that “no language can be spoken for which the body is unprepared” (1990:135).

No wonder, then, since the path from embodiment leads directly to the evolution of empathy and the moral sense, the fundamental embodied roots of morality have been of utmost importance in Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s most recent work. For her empathy goes to the evolutionary heart of human personhood. Our ability to care, to trust, to empathise and have deep feelings for others is essential to the development of moral awareness and the realisation of a fully resonant human being (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:193f.). As such, it gives us access to the mental acts and processes of others and through empathy we discover the feelings and values of others, what their convictions are and precisely through this capacity for empathy we ultimately share what Husserl already described as an inter-subjective world, that is, a *communally intelligible world* (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:194). And – of crucial importance, although often neglected – in empathy we basically make sense of each other in ways *outside* of language.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone’s work on the roots of morality is infused by the fact that in hominid and human history there clearly emerged a deeply embodied sense of empathy: and the core phenomenon we observe when we reflect on our own empathetic actions is not simply a *body*, but a *moving body*. Movement is an *unfolding dynamic event* and we, in fact, have perceptions of movement as well as *feelings* of movement. Sheets-Johnstone accurately describes this as a *double spatial sense of movement: we perceive our movement as a kinetically three-dimensional happening; and we feel the qualitative dynamics of our movement kinaesthetically* (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:199). Indeed, in empathy *we move in ways we are moved to move* (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:207f.). It is in this sense that empathy is through and through indicated somatically: it is indeed not merely a question of a body, but of a body in movement.

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone also follows infant psychiatrist Daniel Stern (1985) and makes an important conceptual distinction between *attunement* and *empathy*: in this way an important distinction is made between neurological mother-infant attunement and attachment, and embodied empathetic movements or understandings that flow from this. What is thus revealed is that our cognitive understandings finally enter deeply into the congruent dynamics of both attunement and empathy. Furthermore, both attunement and empathy start with an emotional resonance, but attunement takes the experience of emotional resonance and automatically recasts that experience into another form of expression. So, for Sheets-Johnstone, attunement occurs largely beyond awareness and almost automatically, while empathy involves the mediation of cognitive processes (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:203).

For Sheets-Johnstone empathy is, furthermore, an embodied form of *responsivity*. It is never just a form of mental construction and it is never just a one-sided experience, but it is rather a spontaneous embodied response to direct experiences of the other, and from its foundations in affect attunement and attachment, it progressively discloses richer and more complex dimensions of others. In exactly this sense, empathy is a seeing deeply into another and, I would add, in a more Ricoeurian way, finding oneself in another, finding oneself as another (cf. Ricoeur 1992:1-29). Responding empathetically, then, we experience the density of another person, the meanings that are livingly present for him or her (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:225f.). And importantly, these deepened understandings of another over time are not ready-made but mature progressively as we ourselves mature. We grasp at ever deeper levels what another is living through because we have ourselves grown in life experiences and thus reach out to the deepest levels of one another, as we together become more mature, intricate and trustworthy persons in the process.

Against the background of this illuminating discussion of empathy, Sheets-Johnstone now adds the notion of *trust*. Trust, as deeply embedded in empathy, is already grounded in a non-linguistic sense of the other that is rooted in sensitive and deep awareness of the feelings, dispositions and intentions of the other toward us (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:265). And, it is only the learning of trust that can ultimately overcome the existential meaning and impact of uncertainty. However, because its cognitive structure is always open to affective influence or some form of fear, the cognitive structure of trust can be unstable. Only if and when we arrive at a fuller understanding of our relationship with the other and of the *affective foundations of trust*, will we be able to arrive at a fuller understanding and an overcoming of the more fragile nature of the *cognitive structure of trust* (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:281). And it is this ever-maturing cognitive structure of trust, so deeply embedded in the embodied, affective structure of empathy, which ultimately opens the door to a mutual *rationality of care* for one another.

In further developing this argument, Sheets-Johnstone now calls for philosophical and evolutionary ways to understand how empathy is indeed a spontaneous outgrowth of affect attunement and emotional attachment (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:211; cf. also Kirkpatrick 2005). Empathy also has direct links to Theory of Mind, that is, our intuitive knowing of the minds of others. For Sheets-Johnstone this is now enriched by redefining Theory of Mind as getting to know not just other minds, but *getting to know other moving bodies* (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:213ff.). In principle, Sheets-Johnstone thus offers us a fascinating evolutionary trajectory for engaging any project in ethics that opens up an understanding for a particular form of inter-animate meaning, namely *empathy, moral awareness, and a rationality of care* (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:215). It is this rich revisioning of a profoundly embodied notion

of empathy, I believe, that will eventually become a crucial building block for understanding the evolution of morality, of notions of good and evil, and although Sheets-Johnstone herself does not go there, to a responsible way of thinking about the evolution of religion (cf. Van Huyssteen 2011b).

Thus, in trying to understand the evolutionary roots of human morality through affective attunement and empathy, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone develops what I would call a “bottom-up” understanding of morality grounded in the nature of human nature. Most importantly, for her this evolutionary approach to the understanding of the roots of morality directly implies a phenomenological exploration of human experience, including the phylogenetic and ontogenetic heritages of humans, experiences of the embodied human psyche and of the very basic facets of embodied human existence (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:1f.). Most importantly, this implies a morality that proceeds not from a consideration of rules, duties, rights, moral judgements, moral status or leading current ethical issues in Western society or the world at large, but proceeds rather, and first of all, from the examination of the fundamental evolutionary realities of human nature. As such, Sheets-Johnstone articulates multi-disciplinary and multi-layered understandings of human morality that are ultimately grounded, as we will see, in bottom-up, pan-cultural aspects of human existence.

For Sheets-Johnstone the need for such an “interdisciplinary therapeutic” is called for because an ethics based on anything other than human nature would lack solid empirical moorings and easily loses itself in the reductionist abstractions of disembodied, abstract issues like selfish genes, dedicated brain modules, and reductionist views of evolutionary altruism, et cetera (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:2). Following the historical line of Hume, Rousseau and Hobbes, whom she sees as developing, each in his own way, an understanding of morality rooted in what he saw as *the nature of human nature* (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:2ff.), Sheets-Johnstone reclaims a strong empirical approach that is based on evidence from both personal and social experience. Not only that, but she casts her evolutionary approach in a phenomenological perspective so that it could be seen as offering a *profile* of human nature, that is, just as an object offers multiple possible profiles to a phenomenological observer, so also does human nature (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:2). For Sheets-Johnstone the challenge in effect is to discover the nature of the human condition on the basis of the kinds of profiles that emerge when we carefully observe human nature, and so to take the first steps to reveal the roots of human morality.¹

Building now on the deeply embodied sense of empathy as discussed earlier, the biological roots of empathy can fundamentally be seen as enabling a social transfer of sense through embodied communication. As such, from an evolutionary perspective, empathy translates naturally into a basic moral sense, that is, how it is first and foremost generated from, and anchored in social and affective bodily experiences, and how it is ultimately sustained by trust in interpersonal relationships (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:7).

¹ Throughout the book Sheet-Johnstone’s approach then unfolds in three successive steps: i) what we have learned from others; ii) then broadening that knowledge by putting it in preliminary evolutionary and ontogenetically perspectives; iii) deepening this phenomenologically by probing along elusive experiential borders to reach the roots of human morality(cf. 2008:6).

ON THE ORIGINS OF EVIL

Ultimately, of course, Sheets-Johnstone argues that the pan-cultural origins of both empathy and evil clearly have their roots in the evolutionary heritage of humans, though just as clearly those roots stretch all the way from the biological to the cultural. And she pointedly asks: What is evil if not violence, warfare, massacres, ethnic cleansings, and what is war to begin with, if not male-male competition (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:128f.)? Moreover, what is war fundamentally if not an expression of the biological matrix of male-male competition raised from the size and power of the individual male to the size and power of groups of males? The whole point, then, of Sheets-Johnstone's argument for the pan-cultural origins of evil is to show that violence and war are socially-elaborated, biological-derived phenomena. And to best unravel the pan-cultural origins of evil through a local, bottom-up, contextual, phenomenological-informed attention to war and violence, Sheets-Johnstone now turns to Hannah Arendt's most famous writings on war and evil.

Arne Vetlesen (1994:85) has already plausibly argued that Hannah Arendt's reflections always start from and retain a highly contextual moment of particularity. Exactly this methodology is what appeals so strongly to a phenomenologist like Maxine Sheets-Johnstone. Time and again in her most famous monograph on the reality of evil, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (Penguin 2006), Arendt would emphasise the particularity of persons, events, and the actions we judge as well as the circumstances in which we do so. Arendt's views on moral judgement as an exceedingly precarious affair inform all her basic themes: the nature of radical or unprecedented evil, the connection between deeds and motives, and the interrelation between thinking and judgement (cf. Vetlesen 1994:84). For Arendt the case of Adolf Eichmann's trial in Jerusalem serves to illuminate all these themes.

Arendt's experience of the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem deeply influenced her views on good and evil and what she finally came to call the "banality of evil": diligence, the blind commitment to doing one's duty. As Arendt strikingly puts it:

[W]hen I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realized what he was doing*... It was a sheer thoughtlessness, something by no means identical with stupidity – that predisposed him to become one of the greatest criminals of that period (Arendt 2006:287).

Thus it was Eichmann's fearsome, mindless diligence to authority, the blind commitment to doing his duty that she ultimately describes as the "banality of evil". No wonder, then, that Hannah Arendt famously dissociated evil from religion and from related questions about the goodness of God, and placed it solidly in the everyday, lived human realm, a realm fundamentally characterised by *a thoughtless diligence to duty*. Precisely in so doing, evil in the Third Reich had lost the quality by which most people recognise it, that is, the quality of temptation. For Arendt it was clear: The Nazi's must also have been tempted to not kill, not murder, "but God knows, they had learned how to resist temptation" (Arendt 2006:150).

Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, in her own rereading of *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, now places Arendt's identification of the banality of evil as a *cognitive* diligence to duty in a deeper *affective* light: in the most basic sense of the word, the appeal to violence or evil is a powerful appeal that

turns people away from empathy (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:131). There is, therefore, the clear *ethical impact* not only of empathy, but also the devastating ethical impact of *turning away* from empathy. For Arendt the relative ease with which humans can close off all civil social feeling and succumb to decimating other humans is, in fact, nothing less than the cultivation of brutality. This cultivation of brutality finally exemplifies evil as it becomes the moral lapse that allows one to absolve oneself of responsibility by an utter lack of judgement following mindless diligence in following orders of the authority. The banality of evil, therefore, flows not only from choosing or not choosing to do evil, but from having no deep motives left anymore except an exclusive concern with one's personal advancement (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:132f.). Turning away from empathy to mindless diligence is, then, a complete moral failure, a lack of judgement that leads directly to the banality of evil.

Following Arne Vetlesen (1994), Sheets-Johnstone now develops these ideas further by taking *emotion* and *perception* into moral account and seeing indifference to others and hatred of others as a deep and significant lack of empathy. In this way, Sheets-Johnstone now adds a significant perspective to that of Arendt through evolutionary ethics: The brutal road to evil is now revealed as a complete *emotional failure* on the level of empathy, which now embeds and includes Hannah Arendt's characterisation of evil as a *cognitive failure* on the level of judgement. The remarkable intellectual account of Arendt's notion of judgement is thus deepened to show not only the crucial importance of empathy for moral performance, but also that there are indispensable cognitive *and* emotional components to moral judgements (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:133). From an ethical point of view, the stark progression is clear: emotional failure (lack of empathy) leads to *cognitive failure* (lack of judgement) leads to evil.

Hannah Arendt, of course, took this one step further in the case of Eichmann: emotional failure not only led to cognitive failure and a lack of judgement, but to the banality of evil, that is, the *ultimate refusal even to judge*. And Sheets-Johnstone's rereading of Arendt enables a less intellectualistic vision of Arendt's views by seeing her view of the banality of evil not just as an *intellectual* inability, but as embedded in a moral vision that acknowledges the depth of emotion and empathy (or the lack thereof). In this sense it is clear that specific moral judgements emanate from individuals in particular circumstances. In this specific sense, morality is first of all an individual matter, and, as Vetlesen argued (cf. Vetlesen 1994:108), the question of individual responsibility must take the form of not allowing oneself to become incapable of judging (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:135).

Against this background Sheets-Johnstone now talks about a *pan-cultural understanding of the banality of evil* as she pursues her quest for an understanding of the nature of human nature. And the banalities of evil are indeed pan-cultural, not only in the immediate sense of being a present-day world-wide human phenomenon, but in the enduring sense of being a chronic historically laden human phenomenon (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:137). This certainly directly implies the natural history that undergirds the banality of evil, a history that, cultural variations notwithstanding, has phylogenetic and, therefore, evolutionary roots. It is here that we find Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's particular evolutionary deepening and enriching of Hannah Arendt's argument: to trace the roots of the natural history that underlies the banality of evil requires an elucidation of the nature of human nature in *evolutionary terms* that does justice both to the essential realities and intricate complexities of the human capacity for evil (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:137). Sheets-Johnstone, therefore, argues powerfully that an inquiry into the origin of the pan-cultural human capacity for evil is in essence an attempt to flesh out, in phenomenological terms, an answer not just to the question, *what is evil?*, but rather

to the question, *what motivates evil?* In this way Sheets-Johnstone could broaden Arendt's "keenly accurate concept of the banality of evil" by showing what a universal dimension and consistently present element evil has been in the history of humanity (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:138f.).

For Sheets-Johnstone this starts with a consideration of behavioural evolutionary relationships, and by probing our animal heritage for clues to the pan-culturality of evil. In doing so, not only important evolutionary roots are exposed, but also the remarkable cultural elaborations of those through the course of history. Rooted in human evolutionary history, the pan-culturality of evil is precisely culturally elaborated, induced and perpetrated along a diversity of lines (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:140). Following a discussion of what Sheets-Johnstone calls the "pan-cultural heroic honing of males" for aggression and violence and its direct relation to the banality for evil, she now nuances her discussion by explaining as follows: in trying to discern the exact relationship between empathy (or rather the lack of empathy) to evil, it is important to realise that by itself a lack of empathy is not yet a motivation for evil, just as a lack of judgement is not yet a motivation for evil. Neither the lack of empathy nor the lack of judgement could explain the outright deliberate motivation to harm or kill others, and this is because the human capacity for evil is just that, *a capacity* (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:156). This indeed is not yet the banality of evil itself but only its potential. The capacity is thus not ready-made, and an ability to act on it may or may not be realised, hence a capacity is a potential that can be tapped into, drawn on, encouraged, nourished, culturally elaborated and promoted. So cultivated, the capacity produces humans who are exemplars of the banality of evil. From an evolutionary point of view, then, we humans are born with a moral sense for right and wrong, a capacity for good *and* evil. As such, humans are not born evil, but have – in addition to a capacity for empathy – the capacity to harm and kill other humans, a capacity that can be culturally fostered and valued to the point of taking over whole societies. For Sheets-Johnstone the heart of the argument is thus in the act that the capacity for evil and the practice of violence and of making war have the same biological roots: both are firmly anchored in the biological matrix of male-male competition. Morality is thus indeed, and first of all, as Vetlesen affirms; an individual matter, but its roots lie in human evolutionary history (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:157, 18).

Thus it becomes clear why, in completing this argument, Sheets-Johnstone has called for philosophical and evolutionary ways to understand how empathy is a spontaneous outgrowth of affect attunement (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008: 211), and why she wants to build on her research on empathy to develop a "rationality of caring" that in turn offers deepened understandings of empathy. She also wants to ground her phenomenological approach by consciously embedding it in Charles Darwin's natural history of the moral sense. In doing this she is making a bold attempt at revealing the inherent link between ethics and biology, thereby laying the ground for a genuine *evolutionary ethics* (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:286). So, a rationality of caring grows out of the insight that one's own body is the standard upon which the plight, concerns, thoughts and feelings of another are grasped. One's own body is a semantic template for those inter-corporeal understandings that ground the rationality of caring; in fact, it generates caring as an attitudinal affect (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:287). In this "transfer of sense" an understanding of another's movements, gestures, words, cries, postures and expressions (that is, another's behaviour in the widest possible sense) is engendered and the capacity for empathy is revealed, a capacity to enter in a dynamically and affectively intuitive sense into the life of another. And a genuine evolutionary ethics makes explicit the epistemological structures of caring while at the same time it anchors those structures in the

corporeal facts of evolutionary life (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:288), and thus enables a leading of the moral life. Or as Sheets-Johnston strikingly puts it: Before being able to give reasons for one's actions and beliefs – the common criteria of rationality – one should be able to act reasonably in the world and have reasonable beliefs about it (cf. Sheets-Johnstone 2008:302).

The work of evolutionary ethicists is, therefore, of great importance for theologians because of their direct interest in why humans behave the way they do, how the evolutionary origins of human behaviour is to be explained and in which way our behaviour has been constrained by biological factors. In this sense one could say that the starting point of evolutionary ethics is the insight that morality has a biological, evolutionary basis. Ethical behaviour is indeed a product of our biological evolution, but this fact by itself does not entail any normative assertions: from the act that morality has developed we cannot conclude that any particular trait of human behaviour is good or bad (right or wrong) in an ethical sense. Put differently, an evolutionary account of ethics does not support any particular moral code, but it may help us understand why such codes have developed (cf. Wuketits 1990:202). We should, therefore, be careful to always distinguish between the *evolution of moral awareness* and any attempt at the *evolutionary justification of moral codes*. Evolutionary ethics in this second sense has a bad history and has resulted in ideologies like Social Darwinism.

When I use the term evolutionary ethics I use it to characterise specifically the view that morality has evolved and there are clear pointers to the biological roots of moral behaviour in pre-human history, as the work of primatologist Frans de Waal (2006), scientist Donald Broom (2003) and philosopher Richard Joyce (2006) have clearly shown. However, from the evolutionary genesis of our moral awareness we cannot derive moral codes for right or wrong. Accepting that our moral awareness has evolved also means accepting that our moral codes may not be fixed forever as unchangeable entities.

As humans, therefore, we are indeed free to find our own moral goals in this world and an evolutionary approach to ethics and morality helps us understand under which circumstances we have created the kinds of values and moral codes that we have. Certainly, some traits of our moral behaviour may be derived from archaic behavioural patterns and from the intense drive to survive. If moral codes have regulated the interactions among individuals in a society, then these codes must also have been useful for survival. In fact, to our phylogenetic ancestors there must have been some survival value to believe that moral codes are simply given, and, therefore, authoritative and objective – as is still found today in the belief that ethical norms are unchangeable and derivable from some set of eternal, divine principles. In an evolutionary approach to ethics the status of these kinds of beliefs will rightly be challenged, and the creation of moral norms, in an a posteriori sense (to use Kantian terms), will be found to lie on a constructive, cultural level. This, of course, means that humans in principle are free to change their moral codes, but this also means that humans carry great responsibility for themselves and that this responsibility cannot and should not be easily delegated to “objective divine moral codes” (in this sense, for example, even the Ten Commandments and Jesus’ love command, over time, are historically revealed as a posteriori moral laws, even as they have acquired over time the authority of biblical truth). This also frees us from the foundationalist need for an idea of absolute moral truth: our idea of truth is relative to our historical and social contexts and their histories, and only a coherentist, post-foundationalist approach can sufficiently explain this. What we find here, then, is an open view of evolution: basic patterns of our behaviour depend on, and have been developed through, our evolutionary past. But this is not a deterministic view, because we humans have the responsibility to make our own

decisions on what counts as the norms and limits to our own behaviour. We are, therefore, constrained, but not determined by our evolutionary past.

CONCLUSION

Through discernment and moral judgement, pragmatically embedded in concrete cultural contexts, we come to agree upon moral codes and the a posteriori affirmation of our seasoned “moral laws”; exactly this fact provides the pragmatic “clout” and post-foundational justification for our moral convictions. For me, the interdisciplinary conversation with Hannah Arendt and Maxine Sheets-Johnstone on evolutionary ethics and on our conceptions of good and evil now yields the following tentative conclusions:

Evolution by natural selection can explain our tendency to think in normative terms, that is, our innate sense of moral awareness. However, evolutionary explanations of this moral awareness cannot explain our moral judgements, nor justify the truth claims of any of our moral judgements. Why and how we make moral judgements can only be explained on the level of cultural evolution, and by taking into account the historical embeddedness of our moral codes in religious and political conventions. This argument, I believe, helps us to avoid committing the so-called genetic fallacy, that is, the mistake of thinking that tracing a belief’s evolutionary origins automatically undermines its epistemic warrant. Or, put differently, the mistake of thinking that the evolutionary origins of our moral awareness necessarily explain away and make impossible the possibility to hold onto moral truth.

The important distinction between an innate, evolutionary moral awareness and the evaluative discernment needed for making intelligent moral judgement (cf. Joyce 2006) does not have to lead to moral scepticism or relativism. On the contrary, each and every one of our beliefs does indeed have a complex causal history. However, it would be absurd to conclude from evolutionary, neurological capacities, and from historical, philosophical or broader cultural reasons behind the history of our beliefs and belief-systems, that all our beliefs are unjustified, including also our religious and moral convictions. On a post-Foundational view, some of our religious beliefs are indeed more plausible and credible than others. This also goes for our tendency to moralise and for the strong moral convictions we often hold. On this view we not only get to argue for some of the enduring moral codes and laws within the context of the Christian faith, but also for why it may be plausible to think that at least some of those moral beliefs are more reasonable than others.

We have now seen that, in spite of a powerful focus on the evolutionary origins of moral awareness, ethics emerge on a culturally autonomous level, which means that the epistemic standing of the particular moral judgements we make is independent of whatever the natural sciences can tell us about their genesis. The evolutionary origin of the human moral sense indeed tells us nothing about how we get to construct moral decisions, codes and laws. That, however, does not mean that we cannot give a philosophical account of how we arrive at these informed judgements, codes, and laws, without having to fall back on supra-naturalist or sociobiological “rules” for moral behaviour.

So, if we take into account what we have learned so far about so-called a priori accounts of knowledge or morality, our moral codes or “laws” in the fullest and deepest sense of the word are indeed, in an evolutionary epistemological sense of the word, a posteriori: for Christian theology the choice will not be between a moral vision that is inherent in revelation and is,

therefore, “received” and not invented or constructed. Instead, on a post-Foundational view, our moral codes and ethical convictions of what is “received” is itself an interpretative enterprise, shaped experientially through our embeddedness in communities and cultures. Through our intellectual and language abilities we have created cultures, vast bodies of knowledge and moral codes, which in a broader sense can all be seen as cultural evolutionary artefacts that enable us to benefit from the trials and errors of the moral instincts of our ancestors. Evolutionary ethics helps us understand now such moral codes have developed, even if this does not yet lead to an evolutionary explanation for the formulation of specific moral codes, laws or norms. In this sense, then, there is a clear difference between an evolutionarily developed moral sense and the actual making of moral judgements.

However, moral judgements, and eventually moral codes and laws, have what Richard Joyce called “practical clout” in terms of the formal, social and conventional ways we come to make moral judgements and decisions, and as such they make inescapable and authoritative demands on us. Moral codes are the core components of religions, also of the Christian faith, and in an evolutionary sense religions can indeed be seen as seen as part of the cultural, social structures that underpin our morality (cf. Broom 2003:164ff.).

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KEY WORDS

Evolutionary Ethics

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