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“All that is most beautiful”: Darwin's Theory of Morality and Its Normative Validity

Shortly after he read Malthus and initially formulated his conception of natural selection, Darwin turned to work out a theory of morality. His naturalistic construction of evolutionary development would have human beings as a final goal, so he had to account for their distinctive character, namely their moral capacity. In the late 19th century, T.H. Huxley objected to any evolutionary construction of morals, since an evolutionary account could only be descriptive and not normative. With G. E. Moore this objection traveled under the rubric of the naturalistic fallacy, which most philosophers throughout the 20th century have thought an insuperable barrier to any evolutionary ethics claiming normative force. In the last several years, psychologists, behavioral economists, and others have conducted experiments to show that Darwin's basic account is empirically valid. The question remains, can the basic theory also be shown to be normatively valid. I will argue that it can be so demonstrated.