

## **Moral Commitment without Objectivity or Illusion: Comments on Ruse and Woolcock**

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**Abstract:** Peter Woolcock, in “Ruse’s Darwinian Meta-Ethics: A Critique”, argues that the subjectivist (nonobjectivist) Darwinian metaethics proposed by Michael Ruse (in “Taking Darwin Seriously”) cannot work, because the “illusion of objectivity” that Ruse claims is essential to morality breaks down when it is recognized as illusion, and there then remain no good reasons for acknowledging or following moral obligations. Woolcock, however, is mistaken in supposing that moral behaviour requires rational motivation. Ruse’s Darwinian metaethical analysis shows why such objective support for morality is neither plausible nor necessary; and when that is recognized, it can also be seen that Ruse’s proposed “illusion” of moral objectivity is superfluous.

**Key Words:** Ruse, Woolcock, foundations of ethics, evolutionary metaethics, ethical subjectivism.

Peter Woolcock’s (1993) critique of Michael Ruse’s (1986) Darwinian metaethics is built on a dilemma that is subtle and interesting, but also fallacious. Are ethical principles and imperatives objective, genuinely true, and grounded in fact, existing “independently of our sense of feeling obligated”? (Woolcock, 424) Or is our sense of moral obligation based on “irrational desires” that make it “irrational (because false) to regard ourselves as bound not to behave immorally when we can get away with it”? (Woolcock, p. 428) The only alternatives, as Woolcock presents them, are: obligations must be rationally based on objectively true moral facts, or moral obligations and principles are mere fantasies with no legitimate claims upon us. As Woolcock states the stark quandary:

If sentences like “A is under an obligation to do X” are never literally true, then normative theories such as utilitarianism, contractarianism or even Darwinian normative ethics are just fiction and fairy stories. [pp. 429–430]

Those are the possibilities: objective independent truths, or fairy tales.

Starting from this dilemma, it is a short trip to the vital importance of objectivist ethics. My obligation to care for my children, my visceral revulsion toward torture, my deep moral opposition to exploitation of workers: surely

these are more than fiction and foolishness. So they must be objectively true moral principles and obligations.

The problem, of course, is in the initial dilemma premise. If moral claims and obligations are not based on literal factual truth, then the only alternative Woolcock can imagine is fantasy and fraud: the sort of basis on which no reasonable person would wish to base important decisions. That basic false dilemma is clear in the following illustration offered by Woolcock:

Suppose ... a woman ... wants to act only on true beliefs. Such a person has a reason to at least sometimes give the interests of other people equal or superior weighting to her own as long as she believes the sentence "I have at least one moral obligation" to be true. ... But, once she accepts Ruse's arguments, she will realise that her sense of obligation is totally misleading. All that she will be left with as conscious reasons for actions will be her own wants, inclinations, preferences, feelings etc. which may or may not coincide with what morality requires. In particular, she will be left with no reason to act contrary to her own wishes when she wants to do something that harms the interests of others and she can successfully avoid detection and punishment. ... [p. 424]

All of that is true, given the assumption from which Woolcock starts: someone who "wants to act only on true beliefs". That sounds innocent enough: it's certainly better than acting on false beliefs. However, this seemingly innocent assumption sets in place the false dichotomy that is at the heart of Woolcock's argument: either we are acting on true, rationally justified beliefs; or we are acting arbitrarily, with no reason, and with no real conviction. Either we are acting on true beliefs, or we are left with "only feelings" that have no substance and no staying power.

But there are other alternatives, and developing such an alternative – a Darwinian account of moral commitments and imperatives – is precisely what Ruse is doing. On Ruse's Darwinian naturalist view, there is ultimately no rational justification for our basic ethical dispositions: when we act on them, we are not acting on true, rationally justified beliefs, but instead on deeply rooted evolved motives:

Thanks to evolution, humans have innate dispositions to believe that we should promote the general happiness, and that we should treat people as ends rather than means. [p. 251]

But such dispositions are not a source of objective moral truth. To the contrary, ethical principles are:

... subjective, being a function of human nature, and reducing ultimately to feelings and sentiments – feelings and sentiments of a type different from wishes and desires, but ultimately emotions of some kind. ... [p. 252].

Our moral obligations are not ultimately based on true moral facts or objective obligations, but on the fundamental dispositions that our species evolved. Ruse makes the point quite graphically:

We are what we are because we are recently evolved from savannah-dwelling primates. Suppose that we had evolved from cave-dwellers, or some such thing. We might have as our highest principle of moral obligation the imperative to eat each others' faeces. Not simply the desire, but the obligation. [p. 263]

Whatever the plausibility of such an alternative cave-dweller ethic, Ruse's point is plain: the roots of our moral inclinations are shaped by our evolutionary history, and require no ultimate underpinning from Reason or God or objective moral truths. But that does not place such basic moral principles under the rubric of fabulous fairy stories and irrational delusions, nor into the category of "mere feelings" or whimsy. They are our deepest commitments, our heartfelt principles, our fundamental values. They are not rational, nor derived from rational reflection; but neither are they irrational, nor is it irrational to cherish and champion them. They are not merely rules we follow – as one might grudgingly observe a speed limit – only because some authority is watching and we cannot get away with violations. Absence of rational justification does not undermine our commitment to our moral obligations, just as, analogously, our love and commitment to our spouses and children may remain steadfast without either rational grounding or external sanction.

So on Ruse's account of morality, a substantive morality may function without objectivity. And it should be noted that Ruse is not using "morality" in any exotic sense. What defines moral behaviour may be a tricky question, but for the immediate purposes an ostensive definition might suffice: When chimpanzees and humans (acting from their own inclinations) nurture a companion or rescue a troop member, that is moral behaviour. That seems to at least roughly fit Ruse's conception of morality, and Darwin's. Of course other – and quite different – models of morality are possible. On Kant's view, only acts done from pure rational commitment to universal law count as moral. Thus on a Kantian view, chimpanzees are unlikely to engage in moral behaviour; but then, precious few humans do, either – and most of the human behaviour that we ordinarily classify as moral would be pushed outside the moral realm. In any case, Woolcock's challenge is not based on a different definition of morality. He seems to accept – at least for the purposes of argument – the Darwin-Ruse conception of morality, and argues that it requires objectivity for its successful functioning.

Ruse rejects both the existence and the need for objective morality. Objective morality dies hard, however; and Ruse himself – having developed a clear and effective account of the Darwinian nonobjective roots of basic ethical dispositions and "intuitions" – cannot resist ascribing a central role to *belief* in moral objectivity. Ruse's suggestion that morality requires the illusion of

objectivity shows the strength and pervasiveness of the temptation to intellectualize moral principles. It is most evident in Kant, but even a thoroughly Darwinian empiricist like Ruse is not immune to its charms, positing a vital role for belief in the cognitive objectivity of moral principles even as he undercuts any genuine rational foundation. And in fairness to Woolcock, Ruse's proposal of an essential "illusion of objectivity" concerning morality does make Ruse's position confusing, and leaves it vulnerable to some of Woolcock's criticisms.

Ruse is led to this claim concerning the necessary illusion of moral objectivity by his observation that:

... the big weakness of traditional subjectivism is that it fails to account for the true nature of our moral experience. The whole point about morality is that it is binding, not open to individual choice. It is greater than and above any of us. [p. 252]

But while other forms of subjectivism or noncognitivism may run aground here, Ruse insists that "Darwinism can handle this point". And Darwinism handles it thus:

The Darwinian argues that morality simply does not work (from a biological perspective), unless we believe that it is objective. Darwinian theory shows that, in fact, morality is a function of (subjective) feelings; but it shows also that we have (and must have) the illusion of objectivity. [p. 253]

The objectivity illusion is required (according to Ruse's view) in order for this moral adaptation "to get us to go beyond regular wishes, desires and fears, and to interact socially with people" (p. 253). The moral adaptation accomplishes this:

By filling us full of thoughts about obligations and duties, and so forth. And the key to what is going on is that we are then moved to action, precisely because we think morality is something laid upon us. ... If morality did not have this air of externality or objectivity, it would not be morality and (from a biological perspective) would fail to do what it is intended to do. [p. 253]

But just here Ruse turns his very plausible Darwinian account of ethics upside down. His account explains, and quite cogently, why we should be tempted to ascribe objectivity to our most basic value motives. But nothing in that account shows that such an "illusion of objectivity" is essential to the functioning of morality. Indeed, Ruse himself gives excellent reasons for believing such an illusion is not essential: the testimony of his own experience, and the experience of many others who have rejected belief in the fundamental objectivity of moral obligations. As Ruse puts it:

In the case of morality, we are all part of the game, and even those of us who realize this (who realize that ethics is nonobjective) have no desire to drop out. [p. 257]

But if those who reject the objectivity of ethics can and do continue to believe in and follow their moral obligations and values, then the “illusion of objectivity” is not necessary for morality to function.

Furthermore, Ruse offers – in the very chapter in which he posits the need for an illusion of objectivity – a second line of compelling evidence against any such requirement. As Ruse states:

Darwinism insists that features evolve gradually, and something as important as morality should have been present in our (very recent) shared ancestors. Furthermore, if morality is as important biologically to humans as is being claimed, it would be odd indeed had all traces now been eliminated from the social interactions of other high-level primates. [p. 227]

Ruse then cites examples of moral behaviour among chimpanzees, noting that in their observations of a band of semi-wild chimpanzees at Arnhem Zoo:

Time and again, the primatologists have seen behaviour which differs not at all from human moral behaviour. [p. 228]

On the basis of such examples, it is quite plausible to suppose that chimpanzees act morally, including particularly such moral acts as intragroup peacemaking. But it is highly implausible (and excessively complicated) to suggest that the moral chimp peacemakers are motivated by an illusion of objectivity. It is one thing to suppose that chimps act morally, from deep-rooted moral dispositions that overcome immediate desires. It is something else again to suppose that they believe their moral behaviour to be directed by objective (rather than subjective) moral principles. Belief in objectivity is a consequence of human intellectualizing of moral dispositions (“I don’t just feel strongly that incest is wrong: God backs me up on this” or “These are not merely animal sentiments: they are derived from pure Reason or sublime Intuition”) rather than an essential element of moral functioning.

So there are powerful counterexamples to the claim that morality requires an illusion of objectivity. Chimpanzees and rhesus monkeys (Rachels, 1990, pp. 147–152) and perhaps many other animals act morally, and presumably without any convictions – or illusions – concerning moral objectivity. And surely one could find at least some instances of moral behaviour in the lives of David Hume, Charles Darwin, A. J. Ayer, Rudolf Carnap, Herbert Feigl, B. F. Skinner, and Michael Ruse, all of whom managed or manage without the illusion of moral objectivity.

Of course if one has invested heavily in gods and divine commandments, or the stern Kantian moral dictates of pure Reason, or a transcendent realm of moral truth that does not depend on interests or dispositions or commitments, then any morality based on the commitments and nonrational dispositions of human animals may suffer by invidious comparison. For example, Woolcock regards the following as almost a *reductio* of Ruse’s Darwinian metaethics:

Ruse, however, will not allow obligations to be mind-independent in the sense that each of us has an obligation not to enslave people, regardless of whether any of us ever has such a sense of obligation. [p. 424]

And that is true: Ruse's Darwinian metaethics cannot find room for moral principles or obligations existing in splendid objective isolation from any dispositions or commitments. But unless one requires that ethical commitments have the sanction of God or some secular substitute, then that is not distressing. After all, many of us do have a profound and visceral commitment to the principle that it is wrong – terribly, egregiously wrong – to enslave people. And that commitment requires no imprimatur from Reason or deity or objectivity to enhance its status as a profoundly held moral principle.

The situation is described powerfully by Hans Reichenbach:

Let us throw away the crutches we needed for walking, let us stand on our own feet and trust our volitions, not because they are secondary ones (derived from another's will or approval), but because they are our own volitions. Only a distorted morality can argue that our will is bad if it is not the response to a command from another source. [pp. 292–293]

So this nonobjective morality – not imposed by any objective or divine or outside authority – may be firmly fixed by our own deepest dispositions and commitments.

Thus to deny the objectivity of moral principles and obligations is not to regard them as irrational. Woolcock points out that a woman who – learning from Ruse – now regards moral beliefs as nonobjective would have “no true beliefs sufficient to stop her from stealing or murdering if she so wished” (p. 425). But while she might have no “true beliefs” to counteract her occasional murderous or larcenous wishes, she may still have profound moral commitments and principles that would oppose such desires. And these commitments are her own: not rationally based, but not irrational accretions that she longs to eliminate. To suppose that all our nonrational commitments must be felt as irrational and alien burdens is to vastly overintellectualize our nature, and to ignore obvious counterexamples: our nonrational (but not irrational and not alien) commitments to our families and friends, and our nonmoral – and certainly nonrational – commitments to favorite teams and towns and taverns.

Ruse's simpler Darwinian account places a heavy burden of proof on the moral objectivist. Obviously Ruse does not show that there is no objective basis for morality; however, he does show that we can explain moral behaviour – and profound moral commitments that push well beyond immediate desires – more economically by tracing the causes to deep biological dispositions. As noted, Ruse adds the unnecessary “illusion of moral objectivity” complication; but that can be excised without compromising the genuine accomplishment of Ruse's general Darwinian account of ethics. Morality requires neither the substance nor the illusion of objectivity.

Woolcock, however, challenges this deletion of the moral objectivity illusion from Ruse's theory. He asks, rhetorically: "If we would continue to obey these (social moral) rules under these circumstances (circumstances when we could violate them with impunity and advantage) even when we don't believe morality to be objective, then what work does his theory do?" (p. 427) But the illusion of objectivity is an unfortunate appendage, not the heart of Ruse's Darwinian account. Without it, Ruse's theory still does important work: it gives a parsimonious account of our strong belief in and commitment to moral principle, an account that fits ethics squarely into a naturalist Darwinist framework and eliminates any appeal to moral objectivism.

Woolcock has a further argument against lightly discarding Ruse's moral objectivity illusion. For Woolcock claims that *if* – without belief in moral objectivity – people who could get away with violating moral rules and obligations continued to act morally, then "this would strongly suggest an irresistible genetic tendency" toward moral behaviour, and Woolcock finds the empirical evidence against this decisive:

As it happens, there are only far too many people willing to break the social rules when they can get away with it, so there seems to be no case for this kind of genetic tendency either. [p. 427]

Woolcock is correct that there is little evidence in humans for an "irresistible genetic tendency" toward moral behaviour. But Ruse is not suggesting such a human (or chimpanzee) "irresistible genetic tendency". It's not even clear what would count: after all, an "irresistible" tendency would be transformed from tendency to tropism. If instead there is, as Ruse suggests, a strong (not irresistible) genetic *tendency* toward moral behaviour, then we would expect – as indeed we find – that some individuals are more oriented toward that tendency, and that the tendency can be enhanced or inhibited by varying environments (such a genetic tendency may find more fertile ground among a well-functioning Quaker community than in a starving and desperate group of Ik tribesmen). The tendency may be strengthened or weakened, activated or atrophied, by the right (or wrong) training, opportunity, environment. So Ruse's causal analysis is supported by (is at the very least compatible with) the available evidence, and provides a lean but effective naturalistic nonobjectivist Darwinian metaethics.

But Woolcock has a response to Ruse's analysis of the causal – as opposed to objectively justificatory – foundations of morality. Woolcock claims that the same distinction that Ruse finds in ethics also applies to science, and since the reasons/causes distinction in science does not undermine scientific objectivity, the analogous distinction in morality does not threaten moral objectivity. This is an interesting argument, and examining it yields a clearer picture of Darwinian metaethics.

Woolcock begins with Ruse's acknowledgment that the criteria for good science – simplicity, causal regularity, consilience, falsifiability – are a matter of general agreement among scientists. Thus when a scientist has given such reasons for preferring one theory to another, then (as Woolcock states):

There are no further reasons a scientist can offer to justify his or her choice of theory in so far as the goal of his choice is to arrive at the theory most likely to be true. After all, what counts as justifying his or her choice seems to be nothing more than showing that it meets the criteria of rational theory choice. So, if we are to go further, if we need an explanation of why scientists want their theories to conform to the criteria of rational theory choice, then we will have to step outside of the justification game, that is, the game that concerns itself with which theories are true, into the causal game. [pp. 433–434]

When we reach that point, we must ask why scientists prefer such theories – and ultimately we shall find causes, rather than justifications. Then Woolcock draws the moral of the story:

So, if the reasons/causes distinction breaks down in the moral case, then it also breaks down in exactly the same way in the scientific case. Ultimate justification in morals is no worse off than ultimate justification in science. Both forms of justification come to an end and, when they do, any further explanation will be causal rather than justificatory. [p. 434]

And if reaching such a justificatory limit does not threaten the objectivity of science, then an analogous limit poses no threat to moral objectivity.

But Woolcock's analogy is not quite accurate. Science does reach a justificatory limit, just as ethics does. But when science reaches its limit and turns its spade, justification resources are not yet exhausted: one may turn to justification by appeal to basic shared values (a justification within a shared framework of ethical – rather than scientific – principles). For example, a scientist may acknowledge the general principles of science, but still ask: "Is the pursuit of science really (morally) good?" Here the scientist has moved out of science, and the question posed is ethical. It may (or may not) be resolved for the questioner at that ethical level: "Yes, pursuit of science is good, because pursuit of truth is the proper and highest good for humanity", or "Science is good because science helps relieve suffering and it is morally good to relieve suffering". But suppose such ethical justifications are challenged, and the resulting ethical questions are pursued to their rational justificatory far limits (as they may be, when one places the greatest value on the pursuit of new discoveries and another champions static secure orthodoxy, or one thinks all suffering an evil to be eliminated and another values suffering as a vital element of the richness of life). In that case there is no further justificatory domain available, and the remaining intractable disputes are enduringly ethical. Such unresolved moral disputes undercut the objectivity of ethics in a way that has no analogy to the queries that arise *within* the given framework of scientific principles.

*Given* the goals of science, we cannot contrive other principles or practices that would yield them. We can easily imagine that Ruse's cave-dwelling faeces-eaters would have very different basic ethical values from our own; but whether one's origins are caves or savannahs, Earthly or extra-terrestrial, if one shares the basic goals of science then we know of no alternative values for effectively pursuing those goals. So lack of ultimate justification need not disturb the scientist. As scientist, she can answer challenges to her scientific principles in terms of their unique effectiveness in achieving the shared and generally definitive goals (prediction, discovery, control) of the scientific enterprise. If those basic scientific goals and values are challenged ("comfortable religious orthodoxy is more morally worthy than the arrogant search for potentially disturbing discoveries") then the issue must be passed over into ethics. Such a challenge questions the proper place and worth of objective scientific inquiry within our framework of basic moral values, but it is not a challenge to scientific objectivity.

The situation is quite different when we reach basic ethical and evaluative inquiries. At that level we cannot turn the value questions over to some other domain. Although we may justify some of our values in terms of others ("I value equal educational opportunity because of my egalitarian principles") eventually we reach the point at which no more basic value principles are available for appeal. Then we do not (as in science) have the luxury of assuming shared basic goals: at that level the basic goals are precisely what are being queried, and there is the possibility of intractable fundamental disagreement over those goals and values. If ants or wasps evolved higher intelligence, while retaining the same reproductive processes and genetic links, it is likely that they would regard our emphasis on individual rights – and the insistence that no individual be treated as a means – as not merely absurd, but morally odious. But such fanciful examples of ants and cave-dwellers are not required. We are only too aware that within our own species there is the possibility – and the actuality – of fundamentally different and categorically opposed basic moral principles (as between egalitarian and elitist-aristocratic value systems). When disputing such views, we may eventually find that there is no shared set of values on which to base arguments. Thus reason and argument may end without any rational means of resolving the conflict, and no basic value framework can be assumed without begging the question against alternatives that (however repugnant we may find them) are genuine and coherent. In such cases we can seek the causes of such differing moral dispositions, but we are at the end of justification.

In sum, Ruse's Darwinian critique of moral objectivity can withstand Woolcock's critique. But Ruse's own position requires simplification. The supposed objectivity of morality is an illusion, as Ruse argues. But though the illusion may have had some uses and even some limited benefits, it is so far from being essential to the functioning of morality that it is more likely to be an impediment. Rather than worrying about – to use Woolcock's comfortable metaphor – "letting the cat out of the bag" by revealing the nonobjectivity of morality, we should welcome the release of this particular feline into harsh light and hard scrutiny. The illusion of moral objectivity is not doing the essential

work, and the illusion has kept us from looking carefully and empirically at the basic motivations that fuel morality, how they can be strengthened and fostered, and in what environments they flourish. So long as the illusion of objectivity distorts our view and limits such investigation, failure of emotive moral commitments will continue to be condemned and blamed, but seldom understood.

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