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Nietzsche Contra Wright: On Becoming What You Are

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My name is Jordan Rodgers, and I am a senior philosophy major and mathematics minor at the University of Kentucky. I am also involved in the Honors Program here at UK. I was the winner of the Kentucky Philosophical Association’s Student Essay Contest in both 2006 and 2007, and of UK’s Kuiper-DeBoeur Scholarship for the 2005-2006 school year. This work is the fruit of a long-time love of the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche, and a constant desire to relate the issues he grappled with to concerns of the present day. It is hopefully only the beginning of my work in this area, which I wish to continue in the future in graduate school, where I hope to work toward a doctorate degree in philosophy.

This project in particular was the Honors thesis resulting from a semester of study under the tutelage of Dr. Suketu Bhavsar, which was, in large part, involved in a study of recent evolutionary psychology and its implications for the moral and social fabric of the individual and society. The relationship between morality and individualism has been a passion for me in recent years, and it seemed to me that one of the most important (and perhaps most neglected) problems for an evolutionary worldview was how to find room for both a worthwhile morality and a healthy individualism. A sticky, but as I hope to show, not an irresolvable problem. My reading of Robert Wright’s The Moral Animal convinced me that these issues were not being approached with a sufficient degree of caution, and that only a return to a vital individualism such as Nietzsche’s could help us out of the forest. The result, I hope, is the promise of a new way of looking at ourselves as we fit into the evolutionary framework.

I would like especially to thank Dr. Bhavsar, who helped me immensely through in- and out-of-class discussions, and who read drafts of the paper as it was being written. Also, I would like to thank my fellow students in my Honors 301 class, who also read and suggested revisions for drafts of the paper, and whose points in in-class discussion helped to give birth to my ideas for the paper in the first place.

Abstract
Robert Wright’s recent book on evolutionary psychology, The Moral Animal, is concerned largely with the ethical implications of recent evolutionary science, and espouses a form of utilitarianism as the ethical theory that should naturally follow evolutionary insights into human psychology. This paper challenges that notion, with constant reference to the work of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, on the basis that such an ethical theory places far too little emphasis on the individual as such, and is tantamount to a form of nihilism. This paper also argues that, while seeking for the happiness of other people is a good thing, our most sacred duty is not to our fellow man, but to ourselves, and that the greatest ethical imperative is to “become who you are.” We have received with distress the news that we are fundamentally selfish beings, but Nietzsche’s advice is not that we try to minimize that selfishness — rather, we should make ourselves worthy of it.

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I am delighted to endorse this submission by Jordan Rodgers. Jordan originally wrote this paper for my Honors Proseminar (HON 301) class. His very thoughtful analysis of ethical issues regarding selfishness and altruism, their roles in our quest to be moral and happy beings, and ultimately our debt to ourselves and society is very worthy for publication. Using work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jordan address the conflict between the selfish individual and his obligations to society. Kaleidoscope, the UK Journal of Undergraduate Scholarship is a very fitting venue for this well considered analysis concerning human nature and our striving for perfection.


**Introduction**

Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution has proven to be one of the most important and controversial scientific theories in the history of modern science. Of course, all scientific theories that are important and controversial have generated a great deal of debate. Darwin’s theory of evolution is no exception. The scientific principle was, in turn, made into a moral principle. What are the consequences of this or that moral theory (if the moral theory is at all testable, that is)? But, it cannot help us to discover what we ought to do. Darwin’s theory of evolution is a scientific theory and, as such, it does not prescribe for us how things ought to be; rather, it describes how things really are. It might be the case that new scientific theories open up new moral questions, or allow us to test the efficiency of this or that moral theory (if the moral theory is at all testable, that is). But, it cannot help us to discover what might be the proper moral theory. In short, it cannot tell us what we ought to do.

One of the most famous attempts to glean moral and sociological insight from Darwin’s theory comes to us in the form of social Darwinism, which had begun to develop (although not under that name) before Darwin had published his monumental Origin of Species in 1859. The movement has had many different proponents, all of whom had different ideas as to how it was conceived. However, what is important here is the use of Darwin’s principle of natural selection as a sociological (and later, moral) principle. In Darwin, natural selection is the process by which those individuals endowed with traits favorable to their survival and propagation are more likely to thrive in competition than those who are unfit. It is a simple scientific principle. Because the stronger individual on average has traits that allow him or her to survive in competition, the stronger individual will be able to procreate more often and more successfully than the weaker.

Although the principle is scientific, the social Darwinists applied it to social theory, saying that the fittest individuals in human society are more likely to survive in competition than those who are unfit. This scientific principle was, in turn, made into a moral
principle: the fittest individuals not only do, but ought to survive and thrive, and the weaker and less successful not only do, but ought to fail. Because the principle is elevated to the realm of morality, the concept of social progress becomes extremely important within social Darwinism. What was in Darwin’s scientific analyses a principle that merely guided species to become better adapted to their environment becomes in social Darwinism a moral progress: human society is constantly getting better and better, because the weak individuals are being weeded out. The stronger and more noble individuals should do all they can to survive, propagate, and pass on their genes to the next generation, and get rid of the weaker parts of society that might hold back social progress.

This moral outlook may, perhaps, seem utterly detestable from a modern point of view. It has been used by some to justify class systems and social inequality; it is, after all, perfectly “natural” to a social Darwinist that inequalities should exist among humans, and the correct way to deal with that inequality would be to encourage the strong to assert their superiority over the weak. In the end, the growing strength of humanity would be served, and society as a whole would progress. Because modern Western moral sentiments (influenced by recent movements for equality in civil rights for women and people of different races) tend toward a more egalitarian construction of society, this social Darwinist view has been largely rejected. Also, it has proven quite difficult to determine which individuals in society are, in fact, the “stronger” ones. Indeed, the term “strong” may be misleading; it seems obvious that we should not want society to be a means merely to a more physically strong people. Is intellectual strength meant? Moral strength? Eventually, “strength” becomes an objectively meaningless term; instead, those in political power use the principle to justify their oppression of those without power. However, the success of the politically powerful is not “progress” in any meaningful way.

It is for reasons such as these that, in the recent rise of psychological studies informed by evolutionary theory, evolutionary psychologists have generally been wary of any moralizing about the process of evolution, for fear that they might be labeled social Darwinists. The social Darwinists had confused what was “natural” with what was ethically preferable. Therefore, the new Darwinists avoided, if at all possible, any discussion of what is ethically preferable. However, recently this, too, has changed, and evolutionary psychologists are starting to moralize again, but this time with very different conclusions.

One of the most popular writers in this vein is the evolutionary psychologist Robert Wright, whose book, The Moral Animal, seeks, among other things, to provide a new look at how our concepts of morality might be informed by evolutionary science — a look that is not tainted by the view that just because something is “natural,” it is also ethically defensible. Wright wastes no time in making his intentions known; in his introduction, he writes: Can a Darwinian understanding of human nature help people reach their goals in life? Indeed, can it help them choose their goals? Can it help distinguish between practical and impractical goals? More profoundly, can it help in deciding which goals are worthy? That is, does knowing how evolution has shaped our basic moral impulses help us decide which impulses we should consider legitimate? The answers, in my opinion, are: yes, yes, yes, yes, and finally, yes. (Wright, p.10)

Wright’s beliefs are quite clear; though he admits the danger of the naturalistic fallacy elsewhere, he still maintains that science can help us to determine what moral judgments are “legitimate.” Because Wright is aware of the fallacy that he seems to be falling into, we must see how he justifies this move.

In order to look into this, it will be useful to remember the sorts of views that Wright is attempting to avoid, especially with respect to social Darwinism. What went wrong there? Basically, the discovery that all beings naturally sought their own self-interest was used as a justification for those in power to act selfishly, because they were in a position in which that was possible. Selfishness was essentially elevated to the highest moral good. It seems (at least to a modern person) that there is something wrong here: most of our most highly esteemed moral codes tell us that being unselfish and altruistic is the moral way to act. For example, Christianity, one of the most popular of religions, has as one of its foremost moral demands that we love our neighbors as ourselves, whether they are weak or strong. Many other world religions have similar moral laws. When the social Darwinist tells us that we should root out and eliminate the weak parts of society, rather than attempt to help them, it goes against these fundamental religious beliefs and most revered moral teachings.

Wright tells us that the seemingly universal acceptance of these moral teachings can be explained adequately by an evolutionary history of beings concerned fundamentally with themselves. The term Wright uses for this development is “reciprocal altruism,” though he is not the first to speak of it as such. The idea behind reciprocal altruism is quite simple: if we want to describe how we came to be altruistic (and came to make it our highest moral good) within an evolutionary context, which tells us that we are always looking out for “number one,” we have to explain how altruism might be useful to the individual.

Wright’s basic explanation for this usefulness deals largely with a concept he calls “non-zero-sumness.” Wright invites us to think of ourselves as a chimp who has just found some food and decides to give it to a fellow chimp who has very little food. While you lose food in the exchange, the food is more valuable to the other chimp, precisely because he is in such dire need at the time. So, your loss is much less than the other chimp’s gain, and the two do not merely cancel each other out. “The essential feature of non-zero-sumness,” Wright tells us, “is that, through cooperation, or reciprocation, both players can be better off.” (Wright, p. 194) This perhaps somewhat obscure example is not the only case of non-zero-sumness, either; simple division of labor and trade of resources — cornerstones of practically every society with which we are familiar — are also prime cases. “The key
Although there are other aspects of reciprocal altruism besides non-zero-sumness that further flesh out the theory, what is of most basic importance for our concerns is that Wright finds an evolutionary (i.e., a scientific) explanation for the arising of altruism as a morally laudable practice. While the theory of evolution had previously seemed to reveal to us that we were all fundamentally selfish, it now can reveal the possibility of human cooperation and altruism. Although it must be noted that this possibility has its basis in a more primary selfish drive. What Wright and other proponents of the reciprocal altruism theory suggest is not that we have evolved to be pure altruists, caring more for those around us than for ourselves; such a notion would be overly idealistic, under this view. Rather, what the study of evolutionary psychology has revealed to us is that being reciprocally altruistic is a much smarter and better way to be selfish. Wright puts it quite bluntly: “Exquisitely sensitive sympathy is just highly nuanced investment advice. Our deepest compassion is our best bargain hunting.” (Wright, p. 205)

So far we are dealing with more or less scientific matters. The theory of reciprocal altruism is a scientific model, meant not to extol the virtues of altruism, but to explain how the desire for it might have arisen out of natural selection. Wright’s account of reciprocal altruism is, I think, quite convincing. But he is not content to remain in the realm of scientific inquiry, and seeks to create an ethic from his scientific findings. Wright understands the moral dilemmas involved in the acceptance of natural selection and reciprocal altruism: if every action we commit is ultimately selfish, then our moral standards will have to be viewed differently. Pure altruism has been an ethical imperative for a long time, and now that it has been revealed to be overly optimistic idealism, “the question may be whether, after the new Darwinism takes root, the word moral can be anything but a joke.” (Wright, p. 326)

The problem is a very real and distressing one, and brings up major philosophical questions: if our moral feelings and judgments developed as a result of the random and purposeless mutations of evolution, what kind of validity can they have? It seems that we have been denied the idea that we are free to react to our impulses in different ways. The moral feelings that we employ to combat our impulses are just as determined by evolution as the impulses themselves.

How are we to find our way out of this moral mess? Wright’s solution to the problem is quite different from that proposed by the social Darwinists; in fact, one might be hard-pressed to find another so strikingly opposed to social Darwinism. Wright makes it quite clear that his moral evaluations are in agreement with the ethical theory known as “utilitarianism.” This theory, developed mostly by English philosophers of the 19th century, such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (and, interestingly enough, Darwin himself), proposes that our actions are governed by the principles of pleasure and pain. Pleasure and happiness are basically good, while pain and suffering are basically bad. So, it makes the most moral sense to seek to increase the pleasure and happiness of the greatest number of people. Developing our morality consists of finding more and more efficient ways to eliminate suffering and promote happiness.

Though Wright mentions that Mill himself (utilitarianism’s greatest proponent) did not necessarily see his moral philosophy as deriving an “ought” from an “is,” he makes it clear that he thinks “that the goodness of happiness is, in fact, a moral value that remains unscathed by the naturalistic fallacy.” (Wright, p. 334) Wright’s commitment to utilitarianism seems, at least at first blush, to make a good deal of sense in an evolutionary context; it seems that processes such as reciprocal altruism, for example, have as their aim a sort of overall happiness. Two people cooperate with one another, and both benefit from the deal. The (successfully achieved) goal of the interaction is the happiness of all parties involved; Wright’s proposal is that we simply extrapolate, and apply the same principle to all of humanity. In other words, “You should … go through life considering the welfare of everyone else exactly as important as your own welfare.” (Wright, p. 336) So, the ethic that Wright derives from evolutionary science is diametrically opposed to that of social Darwinism: while the latter had preached selfishness as the greatest good, Wright would have us be as unselfish as possible.

Two things about this ethical theory that will prove more important later must be mentioned in passing. While Wright considers it the most natural and unassailable ethical theory possible (who doesn’t want to be happy?), it contains certain presuppositions that might seem a bit more debatable. First: utilitarianism is essentially hedonistic: as was noted above, utilitarianism preaches that our actions are governed by pleasure and pain, and we should seek in all our actions to maximize the former and minimize the latter. It should be noted that “hedonism” ought to be distinguished from the connotations of the “rock n’ roll lifestyle” that are often connected to it: hedonists can (and more often than not, do) distinguish between higher and lower pleasures, and most would say that some form of delayed gratification is indispensable in living a truly pleasurable life. However, the claim that pleasure is essentially good, and pain is essentially bad, is a highly debatable ethical claim.
Second, utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory. This means that it judges the consequences of an action, rather than the intentions of the person committing the action, as the morally important component of the act. In order to judge whether an act is good or evil, utilitarianism invites us to see how much happiness it will cause, and for how many people. In other words, it tells us to look at the consequences of our actions, and make our decisions based on them. This, like hedonism, is a highly debatable position: other moral thinkers have focused completely on human intention and will in their investigations.

We have now looked at two vastly different ethical theories, both claiming to arise from the insights of Darwin’s evolutionary theory. We must remember that, however different they are, they do spring from a common root. As such, they also contain some important similarities. The first theory, social Darwinism, was summarily rejected for a number of reasons, not the least of which was that it committed the naturalistic fallacy and derived an “ought” from an “is.” Wright claims that he has avoided this flaw in his own moral theorizing, but then conveniently neglects to explain why, pointing out that the explanation would involve too long a digression from his main topics of discussion. That is perfectly understandable; however, it is a claim that seems to me completely unfounded.

As has already been indicated, utilitarianism, as an appropriate ethical theory, is not so undeniable as Wright seems to indicate. However, even if it were, that would still not allow us to jump from the “is” (I want happiness) to the “ought” (happiness is good). It is important to note that it is possible to agree with Wright on pragmatic grounds, and assert that happiness is what we all really want to pursue anyway, and still maintain that Wright falls victim to the naturalistic fallacy. But in doing so, we still must admit that the morality Wright offers is one of his own construction. It does not follow from his scientific conclusions, and thus loses much of its basis in commonly accepted premises.

Failing to avoid the naturalistic fallacy is not the only thing that social Darwinism and Wright’s utilitarianism have in common. They also both have some idea of historical human moral progress built into them. We have already explicitly discussed this view with respect to social Darwinism, but it is just as present in Wright’s moral theory. Wright’s utilitarianism works, however implicitly, with an end in mind. As our technology grows, and we become more intimately connected with people from the remotest regions of the earth, it becomes a matter of our evolutionary interest to care about everyone’s welfare. If what guides our moral judgment is the striving for the happiness of the greatest number of people, then technological evolution becomes moral evolution. The technological progress that allows us to connect to more and more people is equivalent to moral progress — those are more people whose suffering we can alleviate. Those are more people whom we can make happy.

Just as the social Darwinists thought of the process of the strong overcoming the weak as the progress of the world toward a strong humanity, utilitarianism sees global communication and connection as the progress of the world toward a happy humanity. In both cases, there is a constant moral progress toward an end. This follows quite naturally from a point made earlier: Wright’s moral theory (and social Darwinism as well) is consequentialist. It stands to reason that a theory concerned primarily with the ends of an action rather than the intentions behind that act would be absolutely concerned with the ultimate end of the process. A consequentialist moral theory, when pushed to its limits, seeks a good consequence (that is, a good end) not just to every singular human action, but also to human action as a whole.

Another similarity between the two theories that might not be immediately apparent is a certain style of moralizing. We must keep in mind that both theories at least purport to be derived from a scientific principle. For that reason, both attempt to offer a scientifically testable morality. In the modern age, in which scientific knowledge seems to have emerged as the paradigm for knowledge in general, it would seem quite natural to try to formulate a scientific morality. Social Darwinism attempts to do so on the basis of the nebulous concept of “strength,” and fails, but Wright’s utilitarianism is a bit more subtle and powerful. Happiness and pleasure, in this context, are far less ambiguous terms; we seem to know intuitively what is meant when we use them. And it would seem quite possible to scientifically test their presence or absence.

Take an obvious case for an example: the moral value of “thou shalt not kill” is easily testable under utilitarian methods. In fact, we can do the test more or less in our minds. Being killed, or having someone close to me killed, would greatly impinge on my happiness, and having the ability to kill people when I want does not seem to greatly enhance my happiness, nor can I imagine it doing so for another person, unless he or she is quite abnormal. In any case, the value of the moral restriction “thou shalt not kill” has been tested, and in this case it passes the test. Even if there are more subtle cases in which this experiment cannot be performed by the imagination alone, it can always in theory be tested in real life. This, in fact, is possibly the most important advantage of Wright’s utilitarianism. It seems less active in social Darwinism, but that is not because it is ascientific. Rather, it is because it attempted to be scientific and failed. An ideal of both moral views is that moral theories ought to be testable, i.e., scientific.

It is to similarities between the two theories such as these that I would like to turn, because I find myself to be unsympathetic, and even hostile, to all of them. I realize that this feeling of mine is not universal. It makes a lot of sense to some people to judge actions based on their consequences to the general public, and thus to progress morally toward a good ultimate consequence; it makes a lot of sense to some to seek to derive our moral principles from undeniable scientific ones, and thus to seek a scientifically testable morality. All of these, as they have been presented thus far, seem to be relatively benign, and seem to follow quite naturally from indubitable principles. They also seem to set quite reachable moral goals. There is a sense behind the whole of Wright’s book that the time is not far away
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social Darwinism had its heyday, but its faults are by now obvious to most, and I do not intend to beat a dead horse. The dirty little secrets of utilitarianism are somewhat less known, however, and deserve to be brought to light. For this reason, though my critiques are primarily directed at consequentialism, moral progress, and scientific morality, I will use Wright's utilitarianism (and not social Darwinism) as a prototype of the morality at which this critique is aimed.

A New Perspective

I wanted only to try to live in accord with the promptings which came from my true self. Why was that so very difficult” — Hermann Hesse (Hesse, p. 1)

The critique of utilitarianism that I will put forward here, and the consequent elaboration of a better way of looking at morality, is informed greatly by the nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Why I pick him above the large number of other philosophers who are also decidedly anti-utilitarian will become fully clear only by the end of the analysis. However, a few preliminary remarks about my selection of Nietzsche are perhaps necessary. Indeed, the choice might initially seem somewhat strange. Nietzsche is certainly considered one of the greatest philosophers of morality who ever existed, but this is largely because of his brilliant critiques of morality. So, while it might seem that Nietzsche could provide a devastating critique of utilitarianism (and he certainly is up to the task), it might also seem that his critiques would apply to morality in general, and that no positive notions of morality are to be found in his writings.

I think this is misleading, largely because of a certain ambiguity in the term “morality.” It can, on the one hand, mean a system of rules or doctrines that is generally applicable to all of humanity, such as the Ten Commandments. However, it can also mean the simple concept of valuing one thing over another. I decide to value freedom of the press more highly than censorship, for instance, and in doing so I make a “moral” decision. To deny or critique “morality” in the first sense in no way condemns one to say that nothing is preferable to anything else.

While Nietzsche’s critiques of morality are scathing, I think that they are aimed at morality in the former sense, the broad, general system of moral rules; to question the latter, the making of specific value judgments, would be practically inconceivable: “how could you live according to … indifference? … [Living is] — estimating, preferring, being unjust, being limited, wanting to be different.” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 205) As our discussion of Nietzsche unfolds, we will see that, because being an individual (i.e., being different rather than indifferent — asserting oneself and one’s estimations) is one of Nietzsche’s most valued “morals,” he is committed to attacking the concept of a “morality” that would stifle such individuals. Without distinguishing between the two, one could paradoxically assert that Nietzsche’s morality is opposed to morality. With the distinction, however, the paradox dissolves.

With that in mind, let us see what Nietzsche might have to say about Wright’s utilitarianism. One of Nietzsche’s oft-quoted phrases is: “In the end one loves one’s desire and not what is desired.” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 283) Contained in this small phrase is Nietzsche’s first critique of utilitarianism: what we really love is not the objects we receive or the ends that come about from our actions, but the process of getting those objects and reaching those ends. I feel much more passion for the object of desire, for instance, when I am pursuing and trying to obtain it, than I do when I have already achieved my goal. Proverbs such as “absence makes the heart grow fonder” ring true in this light. Granted, I had the end of my pursuit in mind as I went, but my most intimate connection is not to that end, or even to the object of desire itself, but to my desire. I might add, though I do not think Nietzsche says this, that it is largely because we are so intimately connected with our desires that we tend to moralize about them, rather than their objects. So, I think it is in some sense natural
to be dissatisfied with a morality that addresses itself only to the objects of our desires (such as the utility of an action’s consequence), and never approaches what are most important to us: our intentions and desires themselves.

This small point informs Nietzsche’s second and more thoroughgoing critique of consequentialist theories of morality. It was mentioned in passing above that, while Wright claims his moral theories are based on scientific truths, he also left open the possibility of accepting utilitarianism on pragmatic grounds. While I consider it proven that Wright’s utilitarianism does not follow from scientific truths (precisely because that would be impossible), one still might ask: don’t we all really want happiness? Even if we can’t “prove” that it is true that we should work toward being happy, don’t we all really want that anyway, and isn’t that enough? Nietzsche’s response to this question is an emphatic “no.” One of the most important and radical aspects of Nietzsche’s thought is a critique of this valuing of happiness and contentment as the highest good. Wright says that “we should look at moral axioms the way a prospector looks at shiny rocks — with great respect and great suspicion,” (Wright, p. 362) and surely Nietzsche would agree. As he was fond of pointing out, many moral philosophers have taken their own morality for granted as the true one and attempt to give reasons for it after the fact; they never really see the problem inherent in morality itself, i.e., the problem of determining the value of different moralities. (Nietzsche, 2000, pp. 287-9) However, it seems that Wright has not completely learned this lesson. He never inspects his moral axiom (that happiness is the greatest good) but simply attempts to found it rationally.

Nietzsche, on the other hand, is more than willing to inspect this moral axiom, which was just as widespread (indeed, perhaps more so) in the nineteenth century as it is now. Nietzsche finds this morality of happiness problematic. Why? First: utilitarianism claims that we are governed by pleasure and pain, and that we should seek to minimize the latter while maximizing the former. However, Nietzsche would call this an impossible endeavor — pleasure and pain are, in a sense, interdependent on one another. “If you decide…to diminish and lower the level of human pain, you also have to diminish and lower the level of their capacity for joy.” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 86) If this is the case, then minimizing the pain of the world comes at a steep price, and a utilitarian morality seems to offer us not a utopia filled with happiness, but merely “as little displeasure as possible, painlessness in brief.” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 86) It would seem that, under this conception of happiness (i.e., the minimization of pain), to be happy is merely to be satisfied with the state of things, and to have ceased needing to get very excited about life anymore. This is, for Nietzsche, the deeper truth of the interdependence of pleasure and pain: in order for life to be worth living, the tension between great pain and great joy must be present.

If we are to take this seriously, then we must take a different attitude toward pain and suffering. It should no longer be a pure evil that we always avoid. We must ask why joy and pain are interdependent, and the answer is that our joy often comes from hard-fought battles with things of which we are afraid, things that cause us pain. Thus, Nietzsche tells us in a particularly exciting passage:

For believe me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is — to live dangerously! Build your cities on the slopes of Vesuvius! Send your ships into uncharted seas! Live at war with your peers and yourselves! (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 228)

It seems that nothing could be more at odds with utilitarianism. Living at war with each other is certainly not the way to promote the happiness of the greatest number. And, indeed, one might be a bit wary of such teachings — they might make one a bit afraid. But this is precisely Nietzsche’s point: “the imperative of herd timidity: ‘we want that some day there should be nothing any more to be afraid of.’…the will and way to this day is now called ‘progress.’” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 304) As long as this is the sort of “progress” at which our morality aims, we are aiming at something very suspicious. If the joys and sorrows of life are dependent on a certain degree of suffering and danger, then what would it mean to get rid of this suffering and danger?

You want, if possible…to abolish suffering. And we? It really seems that we would rather have it higher and worse than ever. Well-being as you understand it — that is no goal, that seems to us an end, a state that soon makes man ridiculous and contemptible — that makes his destruction desirable. (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 343)

Thus, we see what the utilitarian “progress” really leads to: a devaluing of life itself. Fundamentally, to want above all to get rid of suffering is to decide that life is not worth living, for life is (quite literally) nothing without suffering. Consequently, a desire for this progress is a desire for an end to life, and as such is a form of nihilism.

It is this nihilism that hides below the glossy surface of such high-sounding ideas as “the happiness of the greatest number” with which Nietzsche is ultimately concerned. It is the inspiration for one of the more famous passages of his writings: his discussion
of “the last men” in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The last men are so named because they represent the success of the sort of nihilistic progress just discussed. They have diminished completely their capacity for joy or suffering, and have thus fallen into a state of complacency and contentment. “What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?” thus asks the last man, and he blinks.” (Nietzsche, 1976, p. 129) In these questions, the last men show that they have renounced all the things that had made life so dangerous, exciting, and worth living in the past. They no longer even know what these things are. Though the last men claim to have “invented happiness,” they have really only created a life in which they no longer have to worry about the happiness that means something — that is, joy, great passion, a happiness that one has fought for. They are resigned to a life of boredom and stagnation.

So, what seemed like a very high ideal indeed, the happiness of the greatest number, turned out to be a hidden desire for destruction and death. One might ask with some urgency, if morality is not to be found here, where the ground seemed so solid, where are we to turn now? Ultimately, Nietzsche’s advice is simple, though certainly not easy to follow: no one can tell you where to turn but you, yourself, as an individual. The error that all moralities make is that they investigate what one should do in any given situation, and thus are no discriminator of persons. What I really want to know is what I should do in a given situation, and only I can determine that for myself.

Wright’s utilitarianism commits this error perhaps more flagrantly than most other moral philosophies: he tells us that we should view the welfare of others just as highly as our own welfare — every individual looks at him- or herself as the most important creature in the world, and obviously they cannot all be right. But Wright’s point is unnecessarily absolutistic. We are not talking about who really is “the most important person on Earth” in an objective sense, but how we, ourselves, should view ourselves. In this sense, I cannot view others as more important than myself. I am my most immediate concern. The fear of the selfishness inherent in social Darwinism sent Wright to the other extreme: perfect selflessness. But the lesson of social Darwinism is not that selfishness is evil; it is that selfishness not tempered by moderation can lead to disastrous consequences.

As we have seen, pure, thoughtless selflessness can lead to consequences just as disastrous. Nietzsche advocates a moderate position between these two extremes: “Self-interest,” Nietzsche tells us, “is worth as much as the person who has it: it can be worth a great deal, and it can be unworthy and contemptible.” (Nietzsche, 1976, p. 533) Selfishness is not evil. It is a fact of life, as evolution has helped to teach us. I am, without a doubt, more interested in myself than any other person in the world. The real moral imperative is not to minimize this interest, but to make oneself into a person who is worthy of it. It is this fundamental point that forms the core of Nietzsche’s individualism.

Because I am advocating an individualistic morality, moral theories in the traditional sense are inadequate, because they attempt to come up with general rules that apply to all people. Morality must be a discriminator of persons: “it is immoral to say: ‘what is right for one is fair for the other.’” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 339) It is worth noting that this remark is not restricted to utilitarian and consequentialist moral theories; theories that seek to moralize about human intentions and duties, such as the ethics of Kant, are just as hated by Nietzsche. Like consequentialist theories, these moral theories proclaim that what is good for one person is good for all. Nietzsche’s complete opposition to this might seem odd; after all, is it not commonly held that all human beings have a conscience, which tells them what is really right and wrong?

But why do you listen to the voice of your conscience? And what gives you the right to consider such a judgment true and infallible? For this faith [i.e. the faith in one’s conscience] — is there no conscience for that? Have you never heard of an intellectual conscience? A conscience behind your “conscience”? (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 263)

What Nietzsche ultimately prescribes is to look behind our moral motivations, to look relentlessly deeper and deeper and to gain a greater knowledge of ourselves. As our study of evolution has pointed out to us, what seems to us to be pure and innocent moral feelings sometimes turn out to be nothing but “highly nuanced investment advice.” What is needed is an “intellectual conscience,” a ceaseless drive to know more about ourselves, and to seek constantly the answer to Kant’s question “what is man?” Though we might now rephrase the question: “who am I?” My fundamental concern in life is to discover who I am, and to create out of myself my own moral values:

Let us therefore limit ourselves to the purification of our opinions and valuations and to the creation of our own new tables of what is good, and let us stop brooding about the “moral value of our actions!” … We…want to become those we are — human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves. (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 266)
From thoughts such as this we can formulate what is, for Nietzsche, the ultimate moral imperative: you should become who you are. A rather mysterious phrase, certainly. Surely I already am “what I am;” to speak of becoming what I already am would seem paradoxical, if not outright contradictory. The contradiction, however, is only apparent, not real. Nietzsche is implying that we are, in a sense, separated from ourselves, especially in the realm of morality. We have been “brooding about the moral value of actions” so much that we have completely covered over and corrupted our deepest opinions and valuations; these are the “promptings of the true self” that Hesse spoke about in the quote that introduced this section.

It is hard to follow these “promptings,” because our tendency has become to disown them in favor of such moral standards as the happiness of the greatest number, or Kant’s categorical imperative: “we are necessarily strangers to ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves … for us the law ‘Each is furthest from himself’ applies to eternity.” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 451) And so, the drive to become what one is is really the highest expression of what Nietzsche had called the intellectual conscience. Through a combination of our two most profound and important drives, the will to truth and self-interest, we can perhaps set to the task of discovering ourselves, and, in fact, creating ourselves.

The former of those tasks is certainly not easy. It requires great honesty and willingness to look at the less savory parts of oneself. The latter, however, would seem almost impossible. How do we create ourselves? For Nietzsche, this is the true realm for moralities, for tables of values. The key is that these tables of values are not created to apply to all of mankind; they apply only to me, for the simple reason that I have created them for myself and no one else. Nietzsche’s infamous conception of the übemensch presents the Nietzschean ideal: spirits that have elevated and strengthened themselves to the point that they can create their own values. To illumine his point, Nietzsche sometimes speaks of this creation of values in terms of aesthetics. Nietzsche had said in his very first book that “art represents the highest task and the truly metaphysical activity of this life,” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 32) That is, creating oneself is an aesthetic endeavor, and yet it is not an arbitrary and senseless creation, for it has metaphysical significance. Thus, Nietzsche praises the ability “to ‘give style’ to one’s character,” which allows us to achieve the “one thing that is needful,” which is “that a human being should attain satisfaction with himself.” (Nietzsche, 1974, p. 232-3) What he is attempting here is a kind of fusion of ethical and aesthetic ideals — giving style to one’s character is certainly an aesthetic endeavor, but being satisfied with oneself is ethical, metaphysical. It seems to me that the nature of the fusion remains obscure, but I also think that this obscurity is, in a sense, necessary. Only you can give concrete meaning to this fusion for yourself. If Nietzsche could simply set out an easy formula for one to follow in order to give style to one’s character, the value of the idea and Nietzsche’s individualism would be completely undermined. The lasting image left with us is that the work is still left to be done, and only you can do it.

The man of knowledge must not only love his enemies, he must also be able to hate his friends.

One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil. And why do you not want to pluck at my wreath? …

… You are my believers — but what matter all believers? You had not yet sought yourselves: and you found me. Thus do all believers; therefore all faith amounts to so little.

Now I bid you lose me and find yourselves; and only when you have denied me will I return to you. (Nietzsche, 1976, p. 190)

Conclusion

In the course of defending his claim that utilitarianism is the appropriate ethical theory to derive from evolutionary psychology, Wright discusses a group of people who might, at first glance, seem to be accepting my view. These people

… might say that although happiness is a fine thing, they don’t think there should be any such thing as a consensually accepted moral code. That’s their prerogative. They are free to opt out of moral discourse, and out of any obligations, and benefits, that the resulting code might bring. (Wright, 334-5)

This seems to be the most apparent danger for an individualist ethic. I have mentioned already that an ethic such as Nietzsche’s is obscure, and that such obscurity is necessary, because only the individual can illuminate it, and she can only do so for herself. But when we enter the realm of moral discourse, such obscurity presents a real problem. I want to be able to explain to someone what my moral motivations are and, to a certain extent, I take their moral judgments of me seriously, and I expect them to do the same for my moral judgments of them. We would hardly be satisfied with a murderer justifying his actions by way of asserting that his reasons for doing so, while perfectly clear to him, must remain obscure to us because of their individual nature. We would want him to explain his motivations for doing so, and evaluate whether they were right or wrong. If we accept a full-on individualism in ethics, it would seem that all moral discourse would be rendered useless.

There is a related point to be raised here as well. Our moral discourse is often largely concerned with the harm an action inflicts on other people. For example, the murderer, in general, is in the wrong because he needlessly makes another person suffer. However, if suffering, as we have said, is necessary for joy, and if the desire to abolish suffering is really a form of nihilism, shouldn’t we all become masochists, and seek above all to suffer as much as possible? To provide an extreme example: what if I decided to torture a young child? Nietzsche’s view would seem to suggest that this action is morally defensible, or even admirable; after all, in increasing the child’s suffering, I also increase its capacity for joy. The deeper the
suffering I cause without killing the child, the deeper the joys it will be capable of experiencing. Indeed, if desiring happiness and contentment as our final goal is nihilism, shouldn’t we seek above all to be unhappy? But surely this is nonsense. Who could live this way? And wouldn’t this be merely another and perhaps more potent nihilism?

These are serious objections, but I think that they are aimed at a position that is far more extreme than the one I advocate. What I think must be made clear, above all, is this: happiness is not, in itself, a bad thing. I am not trying to assert that it is when I say that Wright’s utilitarianism leads to a form of nihilism. My problem with Wright’s utilitarianism is not that it seeks to promote happiness. I think, in fact, that such promotion is quite worthwhile, and that happiness can be a very good thing. My objection to Wright’s moral views is that he elevates happiness to the position of highest and absolute good. The “second nihilism” of the preceding paragraph, on the other hand, goes to the opposite extreme, and elevates unhappiness (or capacity for joy, depending on how one wants to look at it) to the position of absolute good. It is just as mistaken, and I find it just as unacceptable.

What I find unacceptable is the whole process of elevating mere concepts such as “joy” and “happiness” to any ultimate or absolute significance. Such a process cheapens life. Life is not a straight line toward a single goal, which ends when one reaches that goal. Life is a tension between extremes, and between goals. The most fundamental problem that traditional moral theorists encounter is not that they choose bad goals, but that they reject the importance of the tension. Nihilism is a rejection of life. As such, it is a rejection of that tension. Happiness is good, as far as it goes, and so, too, is having a higher capacity for joy. But neither of these is the ultimate good, which should always be pursued at the expense of the other. To assert the opposite would be to say that one of these two is not really good, and that goes directly against our most fundamental instincts. I cannot regard happiness as bad, nor can I regard capacity for joy as bad; either of these alternatives would make life impossible, and so both are tantamount to nihilism.

Once this is recognized, I think that it becomes possible to reconcile individualist ethics with moral discourse. This is possible because the realm of moral discourse (i.e., public morality, political right, etc.) is governed not by absolute goods, but by many different goods in tension with one another. Because it does not have an absolute good for which we always positively aim, this realm presents us with a negative morality. The law rarely tells us what we should do, because to do so would be to claim that it knows what is best for our lives. Much more often, it tells us what we are prohibited from doing. This approach requires no such absolute claim, because it is involved in the situations arising from interaction among people, and our duties to others. But this approach cannot be the whole of morality; a truly worthwhile morality must provide us with some sort of positive motivation for us as individuals. The most basic function of individualism in our ethical life is to be this positive motivation, and to provide us with an ideal toward which we should strive. When Nietzsche tells us to “become those we are,” the statement has the feel not of a restriction but of an invitation.

This separation between positive and negative morality is absolutely essential. Wright’s problem, which he shares with most moral theorists, is that he thinks that our moral discourse should address positive moral claims. That is, we ought to actively go out and increase the happiness of the greatest number of people, and elevate this above all other practices. As we have seen, however, this leads to nihilism. Activities such as the seeking of the happiness of the greatest number can be justifiable pursuits. But, they are not sufficient in themselves. Happiness is far too concrete and universal a goal to provide positive impetus for an individual to act. It ought not be the highest authority to which all our actions are subordinated.

It is my conviction that, while moral discourse and the realm of negative morality in general are important, they still remain subordinate to the positive invitation to “become those we are.” We are used to thinking of our duties to others as being of ultimate importance, whereas we often forget, or even reject outright, that we have, first and foremost, a duty to ourselves. This is the deeper meaning of evolutionary psychology’s claim that we are all fundamentally selfish, and Nietzsche’s teaching that “Self-interest is worth as much as the person who has it.” Our duties to our fellow human beings are certainly sacred, but if we regard these duties as the most important ones, we deny ourselves. Our most vital and sacred duty is to ourselves — only as such can our lives be satisfying.

Works Cited