

Mr. Hume: Tear. Down. This. Wall. A Response to George Ellis's Critique of My Defense of Moral Realism

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Mr. Hume: Tear. Down. This. Wall. A Response to George Ellis's Critique of My Defense of Moral Realism

I am deeply appreciative that University of Cape Town professor George Ellis took the time to read carefully, think deeply, and respond thoughtfully to my *Theology and Science* paper “Scientific Naturalism: A Manifesto for Enlightenment Humanism” (August, 2017),¹ itself an abbreviation of the full-throated defense of moral realism and moral progress that I present in my 2015 book, *The Moral Arc*.² As a physicist he naturally reflects the methodologies of his field, wondering how a social scientist might “discover” moral laws in human nature as a physical scientist might discover natural laws in laboratory experiments. It’s a good question, as is his query: “Is it possible to say in some absolute sense that specific acts, such as the large scale massacres of the Holocaust, are evil in an absolute sense?”

Pace Abraham Lincoln, who famously said “If slavery is not wrong, then nothing is wrong,”³ I hereby declare in an unequivocal defense of moral realism:

If the Holocaust is not wrong, then nothing is wrong.

Since Professor Ellis is a physicist, let me approach this defense of moral realism from the perspective of a physical scientist. It is my hypothesis that in the same way that Galileo and Newton discovered physical laws and principles about the natural world that really are out there, so too have social scientists discovered moral laws and principles about human nature and society that really do exist. Just as it was inevitable that the astronomer Johannes Kepler would discover that planets have elliptical orbits—given that he was making accurate astronomical measurements, and given that planets really do travel in elliptical orbits, he could hardly have discovered anything else—scientists studying political, economic, social, and moral subjects will discover certain things that are true in these fields of inquiry. For example, that democracies are better than autocracies, that market economies are superior to command economies, that torture and the death penalty do not curb crime, that burning women as witches is a fallacious idea, that women are not too weak and emotional to run companies or countries, and, most poignantly here, that blacks do not like being enslaved and that the Jews do not want to be exterminated. Why?

My answer is that it is in human nature to struggle to survive and flourish in the teeth of the nature’s entropy, and having the freedom, autonomy, and prosperity available in free societies—built as they were on the foundation of Enlightenment philosophers and scientists seeking to discover the best way for humans to live—best enables individual sentient beings to live out their evolved destinies. Let me unpack that sentence. As I noted in my manifesto, my moral starting point is *the survival and flourishing of individual sentient beings*, by which I mean the instinct to live and to have adequate sustenance, safety, shelter, bonding, and social relations for physical and mental health. Any organism subject to natural selection will by necessity have this drive to survive and flourish. If it didn’t, it would not live long enough to reproduce and would no longer be subject to natural selection.

From here we can derive the purpose of life: it is to push back against the entropy of nature, as described by the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Entropy is a fundamental physical rule that closed systems (those not taking in energy) move from order to disorder, from organization to disorganization, from structured to unstructured, and from warm to cold. Although entropy can be temporarily reversed in an open system with an outside source of energy, such as heating cold food in a microwave, isolated systems decay as entropy increases. We can never get around this fundamental law of nature, as the eminent astrophysicist Sir Arthur Stanley Eddington explained in his classic 1928 book *The Nature of the Physical World*:

The law that entropy always increases—the second law of thermodynamics—holds, I think, the supreme position among the laws of Nature. ... [I]f your theory is found to be against the second law of thermodynamics I can give you no hope; there is nothing for it but to collapse in deepest humiliation.⁴

The Second Law of Thermodynamics is the First Law of Life. As the evolutionary psychologists Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, and Clark Harrett argued in their paper exploring the ultimate purpose of evolution:

The most basic lesson is that natural selection is the only known natural process that pushes populations of organisms thermodynamically uphill into higher degrees of functional order, or even offset the inevitable increase in disorder that would otherwise take place.⁵

This “extropy” only happens in an open system with an energy source, such as our planet with the sun providing the energy that temporarily reverses entropy, and replicating molecules like RNA and DNA that enable living organisms to send near-duplicates out into the world that provides fodder for natural selection. Once this system is up and running evolution can move away from the left wall of minimum order and simplicity and toward the right wall of maximum order and complexity. If you do nothing, entropy will take its course and you will move toward a higher state of disorder (ultimately causing your demise). So the most basic purpose in life is to combat entropy by doing something extropic—expending energy to survive, reproduce, and flourish.

Consider another analogy from mathematics, one made by the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker. Certainly moral truths don’t instantiate in some physically measurable form like the mass of a particle or the gravitational force of a star, but there are abstract Platonic truths that most scientists agree exist, such as those in mathematics. Pinker writes:

On this analogy, we are born with a rudimentary concept of number, but as soon as we build on it with formal mathematical reasoning, the nature of mathematical reality forces us to discover some truths and not others. (No one who understands the concept of two, the concept of four and the concept of addition can come to any conclusion but that $2 + 2 = 4$.) Perhaps we are born with a rudimentary moral sense, and as soon as we build on it with moral reasoning, the nature of moral reality forces us to some conclusions but not others.⁶

For example, in his book *Nonzero*, Robert Wright documents an ever-increasing prevalence of nonzero-sum games through the history of life and civilization.⁷ Over billions of years of natural history and thousands of years of human history, there has been an increasing tendency toward the playing of cooperative “nonzero” games between organisms. This tendency has allowed more nonzero gamers to survive. Although competition between individuals and groups was common in both biological evolution and human history, Wright argues that symbiosis among organisms and cooperation among people have gradually displaced competition as the dominant form of interaction. Why? Natural selection: those who cooperated by playing nonzero games were more likely to survive and pass on their genes for cooperative behavior. And this process has been ongoing, Wright says, “from the primordial soup to the World Wide

Web.” From the Paleolithic to the present, human groups have evolved from bands of hundreds, to tribes of thousands, to chiefdoms of tens of thousands, to states of hundreds of thousands, to nations of millions. This could not have happened through zero-sum exchanges alone. The hallmarks of humanity—language, tools, hunting, gathering, farming, writing, art, music, science, and technology—could not have come about through the actions of isolated zero-sum gamers. Thus, reasoning moral agents would eventually conclude that both should cooperate toward mutual benefit rather than compete to either a zero-sum outcome in which one gains and the other loses, or both lose in a defection cascade. Pinker draws out the implications for moral realism:

If I appeal to you to do anything that affects me—to get off my foot, or tell me the time or not run me over with your car—then I can’t do it in a way that privileges my interests over yours (say, retaining my right to run you over with my car) if I want you to take me seriously. Unless I am Galactic Overlord, I have to state my case in a way that would force me to treat you in kind. I can’t act as if my interests are special just because I’m me and you’re not, any more than I can persuade you that the spot I am standing on is a special place in the universe just because I happen to be standing on it.⁸

Then there is the principle of the interchangeability of perspectives, which is at the core of the oldest moral principle discovered multiple times around the world: the Golden Rule. Pinker notes that it also forms the basis of

Spinoza’s Viewpoint of Eternity, the Social Contract of Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke; Kant’s Categorical Imperative; and Rawls’s Veil of Ignorance. It also underlies Peter Singer’s theory of the Expanding Circle—the optimistic proposal that our moral sense, though shaped by evolution to overvalue self, kin and clan, can propel us on a path of moral progress, as our reasoning forces us to generalize it to larger and larger circles of sentient beings.⁹

Professor Ellis asserts that my attempt to base moral values in science fails, but, in fact, as I document in *The Moral Arc* (and more briefly in my manifesto), the moral progress we have witnessed over the centuries—the abolition of slavery, torture, and the death penalty; the expansion of rights to blacks, women, children, workers, and now even animals—has as its origin the scientific and reason-based concept that the world is governed by laws and principles that we can understand and apply, whether it is solar systems, eco systems, political systems, economic systems, or social and moral systems. Whether or not you consider “ought” to be a scientific category (Ellis, along with most philosophers and scientists, concurs with David Hume that it is not—one cannot derive an *ought* from an *is*), for centuries we have been treating the *is* of the world—the way things really are that we can discover—as a basis for determining what we *ought* to do morally. Thus, he concludes,

science *per se* does not in any recognizable sense imply that survival and flourishing is either good or bad, because there is no scientific test for good or bad and no scientific proof that they are positive or negative in moral terms, i.e. that this is the way things *ought* to be.

Excuse me? We have, in fact, been running such experiments for centuries—the natural experiments of societies and their social, political, and economic systems. Every state or national constitution is an experiment in social and moral living, and we can compare them through the comparative method social scientists and policy makers routinely use. Different laws and systems produce different outcomes. We can study and learn from them, with our evaluative criteria grounded in human nature and our desire to survive and flourish.

A couple of important corrections: First, Ellis claims that Sam Harris’s defense of moral realism in *The Moral Landscape*¹⁰ (and elsewhere) has received a “drubbing” from “competent philosophers” so, he concludes, “let’s discard it.” Not so fast. While there have been

many critiques of Harris's hypothesis, he has actively sought critical feedback and robustly defended his position.¹¹ In my opinion, his defense of moral realism still stands, but at the very least a thorough and honest review of the literature cannot lead one to simply discard it. Second, Ellis naively rejects standard natural selection theory with the individual as the target of selection, and in its stead embraces multi-selection theory with its concomitant acceptance of group selection theory, as if this were no longer controversial. Nothing could be further from the truth, as even a cursory review of the literature in evolutionary theory reveals. Group selection, if it has any basis in reality—and even that is questionable—is at most a minor player in the evolution of organisms, including humans, and has been nearly universally rejected by most evolutionary biologists since the 1960s, and more recently debunked by Steven Pinker.¹²

Finally, intellectual humility requires me to admit that it is possible that my entire program may be, in Ellis's words,

sociologically based—it is that of a WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) culture—taken for granted by those living in such cultures, but not necessarily by others. People brought up in Eastern cultures are likely to make the opposite assumption.

Sure, future scientists may one day discover that humans do not have an instinct to survive and flourish, that most people do not want freedom, autonomy, and prosperity, that women want to be lorded over by men, that animals enjoy being tortured, killed, and eaten, that some people like being enslaved, and that large populations of people don't object to being liquidated in gas chambers. But I doubt it.

Through science and reason we have followed a path of discovery that has led more people in more places to lead better lives and enjoy more moral rights, respect and consideration. The *is-ought fallacy* is a red herring. Mr. Hume: Tear. Down. This. Wall.

Notes

1. Michael Shermer, "Scientific Naturalism: A Manifesto for Enlightenment Humanism," *Theology and Science* 15:3 (August 2017), 220–230.
2. Michael Shermer, *The Moral Arc: How Science and Reason Lead Humanity Toward Truth, Justice, and Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015).
3. Abraham Lincoln, Letter to Albert G. Hodges. Library of Congress, 1864. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/treasures/trt027.html>. The line appears in the opening of a letter to the editor of the Frankfort, Kentucky, *Commonwealth*, Albert G. Hodges, who had journeyed from Kentucky to meet with Lincoln to discuss the recruitment of slaves as soldiers in Kentucky, which was a border state and thus the Emancipation Proclamation did not apply. Nevertheless, slaves who entered the military could gain their freedom. Lincoln wrote: "I am naturally anti-slavery. If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong. I cannot remember when I did not so think, and feel."
4. Arthur Stanley Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (New York: Macmillan, 1928), 74.
5. John Tooby, Leda Cosmides and H. Clark Harrett, "The Second Law of Thermodynamics is the First Law of Psychology," *Psychological Bulletin* 129:6 (2003), 858–865.
6. Steven Pinker, "The Moral Instinct," *The New York Times*, January 13.
7. Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Pantheon, 2000).
8. Pinker, "The Moral Instinct."
9. Pinker, "The Moral Instinct."
10. Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Moral Values* (New York: Free Press, 2008).
11. Sam Harris, "The Moral Landscape Challenge," 2014. <http://bit.ly/2f2cc1f>.
12. Steven Pinker, "The False Allure of Group Selection," 2012. *Edge.org*. <http://bit.ly/2m7pU8t>.


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Notes on Contributor

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