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Ethics, evolution and the a priori: Ross on Spencer and the French sociologists¹

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1. Introduction

For large parts of the Twentieth Century much moral philosophy in the Anglophone tradition took place in isolation from the study of the natural history of human morality, including evolutionary biology.² To a large extent, this isolationist tendency remains an important part of the philosophical landscape today.³ In this chapter I raise three questions about this tendency. First, what explains the detachment of philosophical attention from empirical questions about the natural history of morality during this period? It may be tempting to think that the philosophers of the time simply ignored the main developments of the emerging human sciences of their time, but a closer reading of the seminal works of the period shows that they did not. On the contrary, they explicitly responded to these developments, and turned away from them on the basis of what they thought of as decisive arguments. So, why did these philosophers turn away from these developments? It may be tempting to think the explanation is closely connected to the alleged diagnosis of the ‘naturalistic fallacy’ in G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* (Moore 1903), but once

¹ Parts of this material have been presented at the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Helsinki in 2013, at the Centre for Research in Arts Humanities and the Social Sciences (CRASSH) at Cambridge University in 2014, and at a workshop at Florida State University in 2015. I am grateful to the audience on those occasions, and to numerous friends and colleagues for helpful comments and suggestions along the way.

² For two notable exceptions, see e.g. Mackie 1977; Ruse 1986.

more a closer reading of seminal works of the period shows that this hypothesis overplays the metaphysical and semantic aspects of their arguments at the expense of their epistemological and normative aspects. This hypothesis is reflected in the prevalence of what may be called a ‘metaphysics first’, as opposed to an ‘epistemology first’ approach to the interpretation of the moral philosophy of the period. (See e.g. Hurka 2014.) The present paper is an attempt to rethink this approach, which in my view suffers from a degree of anachronism. Third, were the philosophers in question right to turn away from these developments? It may be tempting to think that philosophers at the time turned away from these developments for reasons that more recent philosophy has either outgrown or transcended, but in fact their reasons for doing so turn out to display striking similarities with a way of responding to analogous arguments that remains widely accepted at the start of the Twentieth-first Century (c.f. Audi 1996; Shafer-Landau 2003; Peacocke 2004). They therefore remain directly relevant to contemporary discussions of morality and evolution.

In this chapter I critically discuss the dismissal of the philosophical significance of facts about human evolution and historical development in the work of one of the seminal figures in early ‘analytical’ moral philosophy, namely W. D Ross (1877-1971). I address Ross’s views about the philosophical significance of the emerging human sciences of his time in two of his main works, namely *The Right and the Good* (1930) and *The Foundations of Ethics* (1939). Where the latter work contains a discussion and dismissal of Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary ethics, the former work contains a discussion of French sociology which, although not explicitly directed at an example of evolutionary ethics as

³ See e.g. Cohen 2003; Parfit 2011.

normally understood, is nevertheless directly relevant to (and to some extent foreshadows) contemporary responses to so-called evolutionary ‘debunking arguments’ in ethics (see e.g. Joyce 2005; Singer 2005; Berker 2009). For reasons that will become clear in what follows, it is largely irrelevant exactly what form the evolutionary theory to which Ross responds actually takes, e.g. whether it is a form of Darwinian natural selection or some other account of the emergence and development of our moral faculty.

2. Ross on Spencer and evolutionary ethics

Ross explicitly confronts the philosophical challenges presented by evolutionary ethics in one of the less widely read sections of his Gifford lectures, published as *The Foundations of Ethics* in 1939. The main target of Ross’s discussion in these sections is Herbert Spencer’s evolutionary ethics, as read mainly through the spectacles of Moore’s 1903 discussion of the same topic in *Principia Ethica*. In fact, there is substantial overlap between Moore and Ross with respect to which aspects of Spencer’s work they address in their respective responses to Spencer’s version of evolutionary ethics. For example, at one point Moore directly quotes a number of passages from Spencer’s *The Data of Ethics*, including the following:

No school can avoid taking for the ultimate moral aim a desirable state of feeling called by whatever name – gratification, enjoyment, happiness. Pleasure, somewhere, at some time, to some being or beings, is an inexpugnable element of the conception. (Spencer 1894, Sect. 16)

Moore's response to Spencer, in *Principia Ethica*, is as follows:

Mr Spencer himself tells us his 'proof' is that 'reversing the application of the words' good and bad... 'creates absurdities' (Sect. 16)... So... he is... a naturalistic Hedonist. (Moore 1903, 104-105)

What Moore appears to be saying is that Spencer is not, at bottom, an 'evolutionary ethicist' (in the sense of someone who seeks to 'derive' moral claims from naturalistic claims about human biology and the like), as much as a philosophical hedonist about the good, who also happens to think that evolution proceeds by producing more pleasure, and therefore more good on the whole. The fundamental case for Spencer's hedonism is not that it somehow 'derives' from, or even accords with, the direction of evolution; but rather that its denial 'creates absurdities'. As Moore sees it, this is most plausibly read as an *a priori* claim about which ideas can be coherently affirmed together, and is therefore one that can be made from the comfort of the armchair, hence without any prior appeal to, or knowledge of, evolutionary theory.

In his later discussion in *The Foundations of Ethics* Ross makes exactly the same move. Ross claims that Spencer's 'fundamental ethical theory' is that 'it is conduciveness to pleasure that is... the real ground of rightness'; that 'life always contains a surplus of pleasure over pain; and that co nduciveness to life and conduciveness to pleasure always go together'; that therefore '[h]is fundamental theory turns out to be universalistic Hedonism, or Utilitarianism'; and that consequently evolutionary ethics 'need not be

examined as a separate form of theory regarding the ground of rightness' (Ross 1939, 59). Once more, then, Spencer is said to be at bottom a philosophical hedonist, and not an 'evolutionary ethicist' (as defined above) at all. (The exact nature of Spencer's 'hedonism' is a separate question I shall not pursue here. For present purposes it matters less what Spencer actually thought about pleasure than what Ross and his philosophical contemporaries took him to think.⁴)

Moore and Ross are by no means alone among moral philosophers of this period in responding to Spencer in this way. In *The Theory of Good and Evil*, published in 1907 (but substantially written some time earlier), Hastings Rashdall has a similar go at Spencer, when he writes that '[m]orality essentially consists in the promotion of a good or ideal of life, the nature of which is discerned by our rational judgements of value', at least some of which are self evident *a priori*. (Rashdall 1907, 401). Explicitly targeting Spencer, Rashdall notes that '[t]here are... parts of Spencer's writings... in which he would seem almost prepared to admit the simple, *a priori* unanalyzable character of the idea of Right' (Rashdall 1907, 368), and that '[h]is judgement that pleasure is the sole good is, in short, like all ultimate moral principles, an *a priori* judgement of value, true or false' (Rashdall 1907, 372), although Rashdall claims to find no evidence of this view in *The Data of Ethics*, which is the work cited by Moore and Ross on this topic (Rashdall 1907, 369), and which includes the very claim about pleasure being 'an inexpugnable element of the conception', that Rashdall himself quotes on p. 379 of his book. On the whole, Rashdall's treatment of Spencer is characterized by a noticeably acidic tone, as when he claims that most of the empirical claims on which Spencer's argument really

⁴ For further discussion, see Francis 2007.

depends were ‘fairly well known before’ the emergence of evolutionary theory (Rashdall 1907, 361); that Spencer’s data is based on ‘his experience of a Somersetshire village in 1834-6, and not upon any study of the habits either of the Amoeba or the ‘peaceful Arafuras’’, and that ‘[a]ll the biological and sociological apparatus... was simply an afterthought, an attempt to invoke the supposed ‘teaching of Science’ in support of foregone conclusions’ (Rashdall 1907, 397). Essentially the same response can be found in an essay by Rashdall’s Oxford contemporary R. R. Marett from 1902, where Marett writes of ‘that other a priorist Mr Spencer’ that ‘insofar as it pretended to rest on history, ‘rational utilitarianism’ was a sham. Its appeal was never to veritable history, but to... the ‘is really’ of an *a priori* metaphysical naturalism’ (Marett 1902, 246, 265).⁵

Either way, Marett, Moore, Rashdall and Ross all claim that insofar as Spencer’s alleged philosophical hedonism has any legitimate claim to our philosophical attention, this is because its truth or falsity must be assumed to be knowable *a priori*, and regardless of the plausibility of any theory of evolution, whether of a Darwinian, Spencerian or any other kind. No development in evolutionary theory, past, present or future, therefore has the potential to change our fundamental moral beliefs one way or the other. With respect to the basic truths of morality, evolutionary theory, like all empirical speculation about the nature and development of ethics, is ‘simply beside the mark’ (Ross 1930, 15). This dismissive response to evolutionary ethics on the part of Ross and his philosophical contemporaries was a simple function of their *a prioristic* methodology.

⁵ Marett rejected this kind of naturalism, but also expressed a sceptical attitude towards the ‘unconditional dualism’ of ‘is’ and ‘ought’ embodied in the *a prioristic* non-naturalism with which his more influential contemporaries are associated (c.f. Marett 1902, 246ff).

Did Ross and his fellow *a priorists* get Spencer right, or did they fail to grasp the place of his claims about the foundations of moral knowledge in his wider science of human morality? The issue is not entirely straightforward, at least for two reasons. First, much of the inspiration of Spencer's ethics derives from a heterogenous tradition of British moral philosophy that is neither always clear nor always consistent on this issue (see Schneewind 2003). Second, Spencer's views on morality changed substantially over time, at least sometimes without either explicit acknowledgement or revision of earlier views.⁶ What is entirely straightforward is that at some point in his career Spencer did express a commitment the sorts of claims that Ross and his fellow *a priorists* latched onto. Thus, in his 1853 paper 'The Universal Postulate' (republished in part as 'General Analysis' in *The Principles of Psychology* in 1855), Spencer writes that '[m]ean what we mean by the word truth, we have no choice but to hold that a belief which is proved, by the inconceivableness of its negation, to invariably exist, is true' (Spencer 1853, 530; quoted in Francis 2007, 179), and that 'the invariable existence of a belief [is] our sole warrant for every truth of immediate consciousness, and for every primary generalization of the truths of immediate consciousness... [and] our sole warrant for every demonstration' (Spencer 528-9; quoted in Francis 2007, 179).⁷ Spencer's application of this 'universal postulate' in these passages is meant to provide a reconciliation of his broadly empiricist philosophy with the 'common sense' rejection of scepticism. The analogous application of the postulate to basic moral beliefs will have been tempting, if not irresistible. Hence

⁶ For further discussion of both points, see Francis 2007, 157-210.

⁷ Even if conceivability is an infallible guide to possibility (which is controversial), our ability to believe need not be an infallible guide to conceivability. Pursuing this issue further would take me too far afield here.

in *The Data of Ethics*, Spencer claims that ‘there is no escape from the admission that in calling good the conduct which subserves life, and bad the conduct which hinders or destroys it... we are inevitably asserting that conduct is good or bad according as its total effects are pleasurable or painful (Spencer 1894, 28); that ‘[t]o prove this it needs but to observe how impossible it would be to think of them as we do, if their effects were reversed’ (Spencer 1894, 31); that this is a ‘fundamental assumption’ (Spencer 1894, 40) or ‘postulate’ that is ‘universally accepted’ (Spencer 1894, 45); and that ‘reversing the applications of the words creates absurdities’ (Spencer 1894, 45). Pleasure, says Spencer, ‘is as much a necessary form of moral intuition as space is a necessary form of intellectual intuition’. It is ‘an inexpugnable element of the conception’ (Spencer 1894, 46).

From the perspective of Ross and his fellow *a priorists*, whether the basic truths in question are described as ‘*a priori* self evident principles’; ‘first principles of reason’; ‘fundamental and indispensable assumptions’; or are assigned some other (from their perspective) salutary label, is less important than the fact that no appeal to experience beyond the armchair, much less the theory of evolution, would seem to be necessary in order to arrive at them. Spencer’s attraction to ‘the philosophy of common sense’ and the universal postulate he appears to have extracted from it is easily recognizable as a core element of the ‘ethical intuitionism’ of Ross and his allies. They were therefore within their rights to point out that Spencer’s evolutionary ethics did not seem to rest (at least at this point) on an *a posteriori* appeal to the history or evolution of our moral faculties, even if they were wrong to underplay the extent to which his broader theory was

undeniably more empirically tractable in other ways than their own.⁸

3. Ross on the French sociologists

In the opening chapter of what may be his most widely read work, *The Right and the Good*, Ross briefly takes it upon himself to argue against the temptation to draw any significant moral or epistemological conclusions from the empirical study of the causes or functions of moral beliefs; biological, historical or otherwise. His main target in the relevant passages (less than three pages in total, but strategically placed in the first chapter of the book) is the emerging science of sociology, here in the guise of Emile Durkheim and Lucien Levy-Bruhl, both of whom Ross appears to have read (or at least have read about) in the original French.⁹ Addressing this work and its significance for moral philosophy, Ross writes:

[I]t may be well to refer briefly to a theory which has enjoyed much popularity, ... the theory of the sociological school of Durkheim and Levy-Bruhl, which seeks to replace moral philosophy by the 'science de moeurs', the historical and comparative study of the moral beliefs and practices of mankind. It would be

⁸ For a longer discussion of 'the universal postulate' in Spencer's thought, see Francis 2007, 171-186.

⁹ The work to which Ross actually refers is Parodi 1910. The sociological work responded to by Ross was methodologically similar to that of Ross's own to the extent that it was largely conducted from the armchair. (Indeed, the writers in question would have self-identified, and also have been known, as 'philosophers' in a sense associated

foolish to deny the value of such a study, or the interest of many of the facts it has brought to light with regard to the historical origin of many such beliefs and practices... What must be denied is the capacity of any such inquiry to take the place of moral philosophy. (Ross 1930, 11-12)

According to Ross, the members of this 'sociological school' are trapped in what he describes as an 'inconsistency' (Ross 1930, 13). On the one hand, they tell us to accept 'an existing code as something analogous to an existing law of nature... and on this side the school is able... to proclaim itself conservative of moral values' (Ross 1930, 13). On the other hand, by claiming that 'any code is the product... of bygone superstitions and... out of date utilities, it is bound to create... a skeptical attitude towards any and every given code', and thereby make our moral beliefs vulnerable to a form of historical, sociological or developmental debunking (Ross 1930, 13). Some readers may see traces of 'Hume's Law' or the so-called 'naturalistic fallacy' as a diagnostic tool in the passages just quoted. Yet when Ross proceeds to deny the philosophical significance of the empirical facts that sociology has brought to light, what he offers is not an argument against inferring an 'ought' from an 'is' or identifying moral properties with natural properties, but instead an argument against a narrowly functional understanding of moral beliefs. Thus, he writes:

[T]he analogy which... [sociology] draws between a moral code and a natural system like the human body... is an entirely fallacious one. By analyzing the

with that word at least in the continental parts of Europe.) Where it differs from Ross's work is in making no claim to be purely *a priori*.

constituents of the human body you do nothing to diminish the reality of the human body as a given fact, and you learn much that will enable you to deal effectively with diseases. But beliefs have the characteristic which bodies have not, of being true or false, of resting on knowledge or being the products of wishes, hopes and fears... (Ross 1930, 13)

Ross's point is that a reductively functional understanding of moral (and other) beliefs fails to take account of the fact that beliefs have *contents*, the correctness conditions of which cannot be assumed to be a simple function of the social or psychological role that these beliefs happen to play at any given time or place.

The comparison between moral codes and the human body can be traced to Durkheim's work *The Rules of Sociological Method*, where Durkheim writes:

For societies, as for individuals, health is good and desirable; sickness on the other hand, is bad and must be avoided. If therefore we find an objective criterion, inherent in the facts themselves, to allow us to distinguish scientifically health from sickness in the various orders of social phenomena, science will be able to throw light on practical matters while remaining true to its own method... The state known as health... is a valuable reference point to guide our actions... It establishes the norm which must serve as a basis for all our practical reasoning. (Durkheim 1982,

Yet to say that moral beliefs can be either healthy or unhealthy is not to deny that they have evaluable contents, nor is it to deny that the success conditions of moral beliefs are distinctive in kind. Nor can Durkheim can be accused of having been unaware of the fact that ethical thought is distinctively normative, as when he writes (in his review of Levy-Bruhl's *Ethics and Moral Science*):

A science can reach conclusions which permit the establishment of norms, but is not normative by itself... It is necessary, therefore, to renounce this contradictory conception of a normative science and to dissociate definitely science and practice.

(Durkheim 1993, 30)¹¹

More charitably, perhaps, Ross could be read as accusing his chosen interlocutors of describing the success conditions of moral beliefs in implausibly relativistic terms, as when Durkheim writes that 'theoretical morality... is quite simply a way to coordinate as rationally as possible the ideas and feelings which constitute the moral conscience of a definite period of time.' (Durkheim 1993, 32), or that '[e]very system has its own rationality... Roman morality has its rationale in Roman society just as our morality has

¹⁰ Elsewhere, Durkheim writes: 'Does it not happen constantly that the doctor becomes involved in problems for which physiology provides no solution? And what does he do then? He opts for the course of action which seems the most reasonable according to the present state of knowledge. Rational moral art will proceed likewise' (Durkheim 1993, 32). For more about this 'rational moral art', see below.

¹¹ One possibility is that the Durkheim of *The Rules of Sociological Method* is vulnerable to some version of Ross's argument, but that by the time he comes to review Levy-

its rationale in the nature of contemporary European society.’ (Durkheim 1993, 48).¹² Ross’s response is telling. Instead of seriously considering the possibility that some ethical claims could nevertheless prove themselves to be justified (or even true) even if they are in some sense ‘relative’, Ross considers the alternative presented by ‘the sociological school’ as the starting point of a journey into the epistemological abyss. He immediately goes on to say that the possible (and in some cases actual) mismatch between the actual causes and function of moral beliefs and the correctness conditions of those beliefs threatens to imply a universal scepticism about the claims expressed by those beliefs. He writes that ‘in so far as you can exhibit... [moral beliefs] as being the product of purely psychological and non-logical causes of this sort, while you leave intact the fact that many people hold such opinions you remove their authority and their claim to be carried out in practice’ (Ross 1930, 13). His discussion continues with the following oft-cited passage, with which many contemporary philosophers will be familiar (if only in part). Ross writes:

[I]f human consciousness is continuous, by descent, with a lower consciousness which had no notion of right at all, that need not make us doubt that the notion is an ultimate and irreducible one, or that the rightness (*prima facie*) of certain types of act is self-evident; for the nature of the self-evident is not to be evident to every

Bruhl’s book there has been a significant development in his views. For discussion of this possibility, see R. T. Hall’s introduction to Durkheim 1993.

¹² Along similar lines, Levy-Bruhl writes of ethical ideals as a ‘projection’ of the ‘social reality of the epoch’ that formulates them (Levy Bruhl 1905, 122), and that ‘the character of universality, attributed by the conscience of each individual to its dictates... is only the logical translation of imperious feeling’ (Levy-Bruhl 1905, 187). The latter claim might

mind however undeveloped, but to be apprehended directly by minds that have reached a certain level of maturity, and for minds to reach the necessary degree of maturity the development that takes place from generation to generation is as much needed as that which takes place from infancy to adult life. (Ross, 1930, 12)

What concerns Ross in this passage is that the views of ‘the sociological school’ seem to imply that all our claims to moral knowledge are entirely without foundation. He is concerned to rebut the challenge that knowledge of the causes and functions of our moral beliefs will debunk those beliefs because their contents are unconnected, or at best accidentally related to, the justificatory or veridical grounds which they are said to imply or presuppose.¹³ Regardless of the truth-value of a given moral belief – or so the challenge goes – our justification for that belief would be undermined if it turns out that our possession of it has the wrong kind of relation to what would make it justified, or true. Ross writes:

[I]f anyone can show that A holds actions of type B to be wrong simply because (for instance) he knows such actions to be forbidden by the society he lives in, he

be interpreted as consistent with an ‘error theoretic’ reading of moral beliefs (But see Section 4 Below.)

¹³ On this point, Durkheim points out that ‘[h]istorical research can demonstrate that a certain moral practice is related to a belief which today is extinct and that the practice is thus entirely without foundation’ (Durkheim 1993, 135). Along similar lines, Levy Bruhl asks: ‘can it be doubted that a similar analysis of the Western conscience is possible? Do we regard the acts that we feel bound to do or not to do, obligatory or forbidden for reasons known to us and logically founded? No one would dare to affirm it in every case. We often explain them by motives that have nothing in common with their real origin. That observation has been made more than once with regard to those particular obligations which are the customs and conventions of society’ (Levy-Bruhl 1905, 70). In

shows that A has no real reason for believing that such actions have the specific quality of wrongness, since between being forbidden by the community and being wrong there is no necessary connexion... He does not, indeed, show the belief to be untrue, but he shows that A has no sufficient reason for holding it true; and in this sense he undermines its validity' (Ross 1930, 14).¹⁴

Ross rejects the debunking challenge outright. His response is as follows: basic moral knowledge, in the form of self evident universal principles, is *a priori* accessible to minds that have reached a certain stage of development (or civilization), and therefore regardless of any *a posteriori* knowledge those minds may or may not have of their own evolution or history, the social function of their moral sensibility, or any other contingent fact about particular moral systems, practices or traditions. Furthermore, Ross appears to be confident that the human mind has, in fact, at the time and place of writing, reached a stage of development at which basic moral knowledge is accessible in this way, and that some people (presumably including himself) actually demonstrate that they have access to such knowledge whenever they successfully exercise the relevant capacity (e.g. when they correctly rule out certain moral claims as absurd or implausible from the armchair). Ross writes:

[T]he human mind... is competent to see that the moral code of one race and age is in certain respects inferior to that of another. It has, in fact, an *a priori* insight into

other words, some moral beliefs may be vulnerable to historical debunking. There is no suggestion by either Durkheim or Levy-Bruhl that all of them are.

certain broad principles of morality, as it can distinguish between a more or less adequate recognition of these principles... [T]here is a system of moral truth, as objective as all truth must be, ...and from the point of view of this, the genuine ethical problem, the sociological inquiry is simply beside the mark. (Ross 1930, 14-15)¹⁵

So what ultimately prevents our moral beliefs from falling into the epistemological abyss, and what makes the evolutionary or historical study of the moral beliefs and practices of mankind beside the mark in accounting for the foundations of our moral knowledge, is that basic moral knowledge consists in the grasp of self-evident principles that are knowable *a priori*, and therefore regardless of any *a posteriori* knowledge of particular ethical systems, practices or traditions. Not only do we not need a comparative study of different ethical systems, practices, traditions or their evolution to access these truths; no such discovery has the potential to undermine our entitlement to our basic moral beliefs.

4. Did Ross argue against straw men?

In light of Ross's response to 'the sociological school', it might be tempting to think that moral philosophy is faced with a dilemma. Either we are entitled to appeal to self evident *a priori* principles in order to explain the objective credentials of our moral beliefs, or

¹⁴ The appeal to a 'necessary connexion' arguably overstates Ross's case. For a later development of such arguments on explicitly evolutionary terms, see Mackie 1977; Joyce 2005.

¹⁵ One question that Ross does not answer is how, even if we do have access to *a priori* self evident moral truths, we can be confident that we have actually accessed them, given

else we are stuck with an unpalatable form of moral relativism according to which our moral beliefs are at best valid strictly relative to a given society, and therefore have no genuine objective credentials. It is quite clear that Ross thinks that his chosen interlocutors are stuck on the second horn of this dilemma, when he writes:

According to this school, or rather according to its principles if consistently carried out, no one moral code is any truer, any nearer to the apprehension of an objective moral truth, than any other; each is simply the code that is necessitated by the conditions of its time and place, and is that which most completely conduces to the preservation of the society that accepts it. (Ross 1930, 14)

To which Ross understandably responds that ‘the human mind is not content with such a view’ (Ross 1930, 14).

From these remarks it is natural to infer that Ross’s chosen interlocutors must have failed to grasp the epistemological implications of their explanatory project. This claim does not stand up to scrutiny. Far from having missed out on the epistemological need for an *a priori* foundation for moral knowledge in self evident principles, Ross’s interlocutors (rightly or wrongly): a) explicitly reject the possibility of such a foundation, and b) explicitly reject the claim that such a foundation is necessary to prevent the universal debunking of our moral beliefs. The idea that we must either be able to ground our moral knowledge on *a priori* self-evident principles or submit to some form of moral skepticism

the variable causes of our moral beliefs and the fact that self evident truths need not be obvious. For discussion of the wider implications of this question, see Lillehammer 2011.

is (as they see it) based on a mistake.¹⁶

With respect to a), Ross's chosen interlocutors explicitly argue that there is no prospect of providing our moral beliefs with an *a priori* foundation in a set of universal norms and principles because the norms and principles in question (even if we could eventually come to accept them as universally valid without exception) will inevitably be *a posteriori* projections of the norms and principles embodied in the actual system, practice or tradition with which one begins. In *Ethics and Moral Science*, Levy-Bruhl argues against the project of providing moral knowledge with an *a priori* foundation on exactly these grounds. According to Levy-Bruhl, moral thought is essentially a 'rational art' that consists in developing conceptual tools to address the practical challenges (of survival, mutual cooperation, etc.) presented by our contingent natural and historical circumstances, and is therefore not a suitable object of a theoretical science in which answers to moral questions could be asymmetrically grounded in a set of self-evident principles knowable *a priori*. On the contrary, any rational ethical system, practice or tradition 'has to be entirely constructed' from the natural and historical materials with which we contingently find ourselves (Levy-Bruhl 1905, 204). This process of construction will inevitably proceed by engaging critically with existing practice, which it will necessarily in some sense reflect, and therefore cannot provide with an *a priori* and practice independent foundation. In other words, there is 'nothing *a priori* to authorize

¹⁶ A comprehensive assessment of this claim falls outside the remit of this chapter. For a related discussion of the French (and other) sociologists on this point, see Abend 2010, 566-570. See also Lillehammer 2010.

the affirmation that becoming is a progress' (Levy-Bruhl 1905, 175).¹⁷ Yet as Levy-Bruhl sees it, none of this entails that our moral beliefs are incapable of improvement from one generation, or society, to another. What it does entail is that any such improvement is possible only in the light of a historically informed, and therefore *a posteriori*, engagement with some particular ethical system, practice or tradition that instantiates it.

With respect to b), Ross's chosen interlocutors explicitly deny that rational reflection on the historical causes and functions of our moral beliefs will necessarily debunk all, or even most, of those beliefs. On the contrary, they claim that such reflection has the potential to improve those beliefs, insofar as more informed beliefs can, when coherently integrated with existing beliefs, be more 'rational', or sensible, (and therefore in some sense 'better') than the beliefs they replace.¹⁸ In *Ethics and Moral Science*, Levy Bruhl considers the possibility that if someone 'learns that... [morality] has no rational foundation, that the repulsion... called forth by certain acts are explained by historical and psychological reasons', this will thereby 'take from them both their prestige and their power' (Levy-Bruhl 1905, 109-9).¹⁹ His response to this challenge is as dismissive as

¹⁷ Along similar lines, Durkheim writes: 'Is there not really something strange in posing these high questions when we do not know yet... what property rights are, or contract, or crime, or punishment, etc., etc. Perhaps the time for synthesis will come some day, but it hardly seems to have arrived yet. Therefore, the moral theorist can only respond by an admission of ignorance, to the often repeated question, 'What is, or better yet, what are, the ultimate principles of morality?' (Durkheim 1993, 130)

¹⁸ Durkheim writes: 'The more one becomes familiar with the laws of moral reality, the further along one will be in modifying it rationally, in saying what it ought to be' (Durkheim 1993, 31).

¹⁹ Levy-Bruhl also writes (in the same passage and elsewhere) that ethics is 'relative'. What exactly he means by that, and exactly how it relates to various normative or meta-ethical views commonly known as 'moral relativism' is a question worthy of more

Ross's own:

If ethical prescription does not hold its authority from a theoretical conviction or from a system of ideas, it could exist by its own strength... The imperative character of the ethics now practiced not being derived from reflection, is scarcely enfeebled by it. (Levy-Bruhl 1905, 111-12; c.f. Op. Cit. 157)

In other words, the question whether our moral beliefs will survive critical reflection on facts about their causes and function is one to which the answer is, at least sometimes, affirmative. For example, we sometimes find ourselves in conditions where the reasons why we hold certain moral beliefs, and therefore those beliefs themselves, would critically withstand reflection on the nature of their own origins. (Just as we sometimes find ourselves in circumstances where they don't, e.g. cases where a moral belief can be shown to depend on a falsehood.) Durkheim is equally clear on this point, when he writes:

[O]ur moral beliefs are the products of a long evolution, ... they are the result of an endless succession of cautious steps, hard work, failures, and all sorts of experiences. We do not always perceive the causes that explain our moral beliefs because their origins are so distant and so complex. Therefore we ought to treat them with respect, since we know that humanity... has not found anything better. We can be assured, for the same reasons, that we will find more wisdom

attention than I am able to give it here. For three relevant discussions, see Putnam 1981; Williams 1985; Abend 2010.

accumulated in them than in the mind of the greatest genius. It would surely be childish to try to correct the results of human experience with our own limited judgement... Morality would thus have quite enough authority in our minds since it would be presented to us as the summary and conclusion, however provisional, of human history. (Durkheim 1993, 135).

According to Durkheim, the extent of our justified confidence in our moral beliefs is a partly function of the extent to which they have already withstood reflection and challenge over time; including empirically informed reflection on their historical causes and function. Obviously, not every moral belief would pass this test, partly because some moral beliefs obviously conflict, and partly also because some moral beliefs may never have been suitably challenged. Yet the idea that knowledge of the causes and function of moral beliefs could somehow undermine our moral belief system as a whole is one that Durkheim is prepared to dismiss out of hand.

To conclude, not only did Ross take an unduly dismissive view of the philosophical significance of ‘the historical and comparative study of the moral beliefs and practices of mankind’. He made no serious attempt to engage with those implications as they were actually conceived by his chosen interlocutors. In this respect, he is not alone – either among his, or among our own, philosophical contemporaries. What exactly to make of this fact is an important question, but one I cannot do justice to here. Instead, I will conclude this brief discussion of ‘the sociological school’ by suggesting that their predominantly *a posteriori* approach to the study of moral thought may embody a philosophically respectable form of epistemological modesty. Once more in the words of

Levy-Bruhl:

To conclude, it seems to us that there is no answer to the demand: “Give us a system of Ethics!” because the demand has no object. Only the system they already have could be given to those who ask, because if another were suggested they would not accept it... [Yet] if ethical rational art does not offer us a ‘system of ethics’... it promises not the less to have important consequences; for, thanks to it, the ethical reality can be improved within limits impossible to fix beforehand. (Levy-Bruhl 1905, 217).

Such an improvement, he claims, would involve ‘the custom of considering the ethics of a given society.... in its necessary relation with the social reality of which it forms a part.’ On his view, this is a project that is ‘both modest and critical’, rooted as it is in the continuous reassessment of our natural and historically conditioned moral beliefs (Levy-Bruhl 1905, 230). In other words, even in the absence of an *a priori* self evident foundation of our moral beliefs, we could still be entitled to hold onto (at least some of) them, and even (sometimes) improve on them. Yet any such improvement would always be the result of some empirically tractable engagement with some actual and historically embodied moral practice or tradition. Thus understood, it is compatible with the views of ‘the sociological school’ that by thinking systematically about actual human moralities we can come to discover moral principles that apply at all times and in all places (at least with respect to beings like ourselves). What is not compatible with this view is that these moral principles would thereby have been shown to either have, or stand in need of, a

purely *a priori*, or ‘fact independent’, foundation (c.f. Cohen 2003).²⁰

5. *Truth, disagreement and confidence*

As we have seen, therefore, both Ross and his chosen interlocutors were acutely aware of the moral and epistemological challenges arising from the fact of widespread difference and disagreement on ethical questions both ‘in different societies’ and ‘within the same society’; in particular ‘a real difference of opinion as to the comparative worth of different goods’ (Ross 1939, 17; 19). In response, Ross claims that ‘on examination’ such disagreement (at least among ‘sufficiently mature’ minds) can be shown to depend ‘not on disagreement about fundamental moral principles, but partly on differences in the circumstances of different societies, and partly on different views which people hold, not on moral questions but on questions of fact’, including (he might have added) facts about human evolution and historical development (Ross 1939, 18). Moreover, Ross claimed, ‘the very fact of difference of opinion is in itself evidence of the persisting confidence of all of us that there is an objective truth’, even if we cannot be reasonably confident that we presently know what it is (Ross 1939, 19). Whether or not this claim is too optimistic, Ross’s chosen interlocutors could in principle have agreed with him. Yet even if they did not actually do so (I don’t claim to have shown that they did), Ross arguably moved too quickly when he diagnosed the epistemologically subversive implications of their comparative, historical, and therefore essentially *a posteriori* approach to moral

²⁰ On this reading, Levy-Bruhl’s position can be read as suggestive of a form of ethical constructivism. For a paradigm manifestation of constructivism in Twentieth Century

philosophy. He therefore also arguably underestimated the challenge of those who think that no philosophical account of moral knowledge is plausible that fails to seriously engage with the norms and principles of actual moral systems, practices and traditions. Among these can be counted not only the French sociologists and their contemporary descendants in sociology, anthropology and social psychology, but also those who continue to argue for the normative significance of facts about human evolution and development, including contemporary proponents of some form of evolutionary ethics (see e.g. Ruse 1986; Joyce 2005). Exposing the fault-lines in Ross's response to these challenges not only helps to make explicit what is at stake in these debates but also brings out the way in which contemporary discussions of ethics and evolution are themselves historically located in a particular intellectual tradition. How much further we have got in making sense of these issues in the century or so that has passed since Ross and his intuitionist contemporaries responded to Spencer and the French sociologists is an interesting question, worthy of further scrutiny.

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moral and political philosophy, see Rawls 1971, Sections 1-9; 87.

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