SEMINAR IN ETHICS:
ETHICS AND EVOLUTION

PHIL 848J
GENERAL PLANS

- This seminar is intended as exploratory: I’ve sampled some readings but haven’t completed them yet or prepared slides on them in advance.

- I’d like this to be a genuine seminar, with students taking turns presenting the main points in readings, and later presenting their plans for papers, or possibly even short drafts.
  - I can’t go over multiple drafts after the course is over, so do try to write something during the term for feedback – at least a paragraph or two on some of the readings you present.
  - Grades will be based on your 20-page term papers, but as adjusted to reflect oral participation, optional written work, etc.
  - The papers are officially due at the time assigned to the final exam, but with the option of a short-term Incomplete (just a few weeks or so).

- Our pace, along with specific assignments, will depend on our discussion, so I haven’t put a schedule on the syllabus at this point.
Recently a number of philosophers, particularly utilitarians, have used evolution in arguments against moral theories (or attacks on their own theory) based on intuition (e.g., Singer – online).

But cf. Kahane’s argument, on the basis of work by Joyce and Street, that “evolutionary debunking arguments” (EDA’s) can’t be selective. They’d rule out objective moral truth, which is assumed by these utilitarian authors.

Joyce has argued in general for “error theory” in ethics: that moral judgments, taken as assertions, are untrue (though useful to retain as fictions). Ch. 6 in The Myth of Morality, which I’ve been reading in PHIL 640, uses evolution as part of this argument.

Joyce later wrote a better book that focuses on evolution and ethics, which I initially ordered as recommended for this course. After reading a substantial part of it over the break, though, I think it provides a well-organized and highly readable way into the subject, so do get hold of it.

For next time I’d suggest reading up to the first several sections of Ch. 1, where Joyce sketches the evolutionary background. Can I get a volunteer or two to present those sections for discussion?
OTHER POSSIBLE READINGS

• For further readings, we have several options, including:
  • Articles in response to Joyce (e.g., by former student Scott James, defending moral realism in evolutionary terms)
  • Street’s article (aimed particularly against [“robust”] moral realism) and responses to it, or possibly further work of hers using evolution in support of a contractualist theory of reasons.
  • Another book I ordered as recommended, by Philip Kitcher, that I had thought would jibe with James’s realist view (since he recommended it), but apparently not. I read about four chapters of this with a reading group last summer, and we didn’t think much of his arguments on particular issues (e.g., innateness), though we found its “big picture” simpatico. We had just made it to the point where we were intrigued by his treatment of metaethics, when the Fall Term began, and we had to stop.

• I’m also eager for suggestions from students who know this area (or can search the web and scan articles effectively).
ANTICIPATING MISAPPREHENSIONS

• To sketch some of the main points of Joyce’s Introduction: He formulates the question of evolutionary origins as asking whether ethics (or the basis of ethics) is innate. However, that’s not meant to be incompatible with cultural influence, the need for “triggering” factors in the environment, modifiability, or flexibility.

• Also, he’s not arguing that moral behavior is innate (vs. sociobiology), but just that some of the psychological mechanisms behind moral judgment are – and not necessarily all or even most of them (vs. extreme versions of evolutionary psychology).

• He disclaims any political agenda (vs. sociobiology – and some of its Marxist opponents in biology), but rather has a metaethical aim: to determine whether innateness supports or undermines morality.

• [We might also begin to ask a question that will be dealt with in Ch. 1: whose “fitness” is at stake in natural selection?]
OUTLINE OF THE BACKGROUND

- Kin altruism
- Reciprocal altruism (= helping behavior)
  - “direct”
  - “indirect”
- Group selection