

Philosophy of the Human Person

Lecture #26

Darwin on the Moral Sense

Man as “a moral animal”

what can the phrase mean?

popularly, sometimes, disposition to altruistic behavior

but merely doing what benefits other is too little

ants do that, but it would be odd to say they are moral animals

better—full sense, perhaps, requires

(1) ability to distinguish good from bad (or right from wrong)

(2) disposition to act on the distinction—choosing good & avoiding bad

but, minimally, ability to distinguish (yields “moral responsibility”)

does morality show a difference between man & animal

Darwin (no) vs. Adler (yes) on this question

underlying this, different accounts of what morality is

general remarks

according to Darwin, the key to morality is possession of a “moral sense”

the term is not original with him

it highlights a comparison with perception & emotions

he attempts to show that the presence of the moral sense in man shows only a

difference in degree from something we find in animals

an argument by analogy

(1) certain kinds of human behavior show that human beings have a moral sense
(e.g., hanging our head when we have done something wrong)

(2) some animals (e.g., dogs) are like human beings in displaying that behavior
so, (3) probably those animals also feel something like what we feel (i.e., they
have an incipient moral sense)

(4) if animals have something like a moral sense, then the difference between
man & animal on this point is only a matter of degree

so, (5) the difference between man & animal on this point is only a matter of
degree

a more precise argument

premises

key thesis—Any animal with (1) social instincts & (2) a well-developed
intellect will have a moral sense

some animals have social instincts and a modest intellect (see ch. 3)

so, the difference between man and animal is only a difference in the degree
of development of the intellect
so, it's only a difference in degree
what the terms mean (& what these features of an organism do)
social instincts—tendency to ...
 take pleasure in society
 feel sympathy
 perform services for others
Darwin contrasts
 omnipresent social instincts
 stronger, but transient self-oriented instincts
well-developed intellect
 what it does—compares past & future actions & motives
 approves & disapproves (especially on basis of social instincts)
 to what extent does this action or motive promote or interfere with
 our social tendencies?
moral sense—feelings of approval & disapproval about past & future actions
& motives
defense of the thesis
(1) All animals with (i) social instincts & (ii) a well-developed intellect will
 want to get along with others (given the instincts) and think about how
 past and future actions are related to those desires (given the intellect).
(2) All animals with those desires and thoughts will have feelings of
 approval and disapproval about past and future acts and motives.
(3) Any animal with those feelings has a moral sense.
So, (4) All animals with (i) social instincts & (ii) a well-developed intellect
 will have a moral sense.