



Darwinism and Morality in Frances Power Cobbe (1822–1904)

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In the 1860s Cobbe believed that Theism was consistent with Darwin's account of evolution through natural selection: God had originated the evolutionary process and it realised his plan. But Cobbe turned against evolutionary theory when Darwin published *The Descent of Man* in 1871, where he explained human traits, including moral responses, as inherited products of evolution. For Darwin, since we are group animals, selection pressures over time have favoured such social instincts as sympathy. But had the evolutionary pressures and circumstances of human life been different we would have acquired different instincts and regarded different things as obligatory.

In 'Darwinism in Morals' (1871) Cobbe objected that this makes moral principles contingent – they could have been otherwise – whereas they are absolute. Also, Darwin makes moral principles dependent on natural facts about humankind. On the contrary, Cobbe holds, moral principles have a non-natural source – in God and the moral law – so that even if evolutionary pressures had fostered or started to foster different traits in us, moral requirements would remain the same. This mattered because Cobbe thought that, plausibly, evolutionary pressures have actually given us dispositions to act selfishly, compete and trample the weak underfoot. Morality must have a non-natural source so that it can stand firm against such dispositions.

Cobbe argued that Darwin gets our moral feelings wrong. For him what we feel to be right is whatever long history has established is useful for the health and vitality of the species. Cobbe objects that our concepts of right and of utility or species-health are different and can come apart.

Cobbe concluded: 'The bearings of [Darwin's] doctrine on Morality and on Religion seem to be equally fatal. The all-embracing Law has disappeared', replaced by 'a code of Right in which every cruelty and every injustice may form a part' (1871: 192).

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