

HUMAN NATURE AND MORALITY: THE CASE OF THE IK

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I

Fredrik Barth,¹ and more recently Christine Battersby,² have reacted in different ways to Colin Turnbull's anthropological reports on the Ik. The Ik of Northern Uganda, says Turnbull in his book, *The Mountain People*,³ present us with good evidence that the human species, after all, can well do without certain "luxuries" which for years have been unquestionably taken for "necessities". This is so because, faced with extremely uncongenial conditions in terms of scarce resources, the Ik, so we are told, have dispensed with qualities such as sympathy, love, cooperation hospitality, etc., indeed all such values as are thought to constitute a moral system.

The crux of the matter is that having dispensed with these qualities, the Ik, says Turnbull, continue to survive. We must therefore take it, he persuades us, that (1) these moral qualities are abandonable "useless appendages", not "inherent in humanity at all" (pp. 238-9), and (2) that since such qualities are *basic* to human sociality, we must conclude further that the relationship between human survival and sociality is a contingent one:

Those values which we cherish so highly and which some use to point to our infinite superiority over other forms of animal life may indeed be basic to human society, but not to humanity, and that means that the Ik clearly show that society itself is not indispensable for man's survival, that man is not the social animal he has always thought himself to be, and that he is perfectly capable of associating for the purposes of survival without being social.⁴

1 Barth, F., "On Responsibility and Humanity —Calling a Colleague to Account", *Current Anthropology*, num. 1, Vol. 15, March 1974, pp. 99-103.

2 Battersby, C., "Morality and the Ik" in *Philosophy: The Journal of the Royal Institute of Philosophy*, num. 204, Vol. 53, April 1978, pp. 201-214.

3 Published by Pan Books Ltd., (Picador edition), London, 1974.

4 Turnbull, C. M., *The Mountain People* (See 3 above), p. 239.

So, being moral and being social become mere “superficial luxuries” which can be afforded only under certain conditions. This is why the Western world must draw a lesson from the Ik experience, according to Turnbull. For there was a time when the Ik could afford to be moral just like the Western world can today. This is not to be taken as a mere historical conjecture, for in the author’s opinion, there is a good deal of evidence from his analysis of Icier language that they once understood what it meant to be good, honest, sympathetic, etc. This was before things changed. The situation became such that the natural environment could no longer supply the resources which the Ik could share with a minimum amount of conflict. And in line with the Marxian dogma that man cannot philosophize on an empty stomach, it became inevitable for the Ik to drop all hitherto existing traits of morality.

This, in Turnbull’s message of impending doom to the Western world, is symptomatic of things to come. As of today, he thinks that Western man, because he has a full stomach, is able to carry along all kinds of dispensable moral values. In the very near future (Turnbull precisely states the middle of the next century, p. 242), conditions similar to those that face the Ik are bound to arise, particularly “if population keeps expanding and pollution remains unchecked” (p. 242). The reason for this prediction is simply that “the symptoms of change in our own society indicate that we are heading in precisely the same direction”⁵ as the Ik. So, like the Ik have done, the Western world must be prepared to drop some of those values so strongly cling to.

This, in a nutshell, is the content of *The Mountain People*. Not many would raise dust over Turnbull’s thesis and prediction, for even if they turn out to be false, humanity would suffer no harm. Nor would anybody challenge him for using the Ik as supporting evidence, unless of course, it were established that his reports missed the facts. But anyone with a good amount of faith in anthropology, having read *The Mountain People*, and having gone through the sensation that it creates in him as a descriptive account of an actual living society, is immediately puzzled by the kind of similarities that Battersby sees between it and such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Erewhon*.⁶ This puzzlement could lead him to asking the almost unfair question of “Is Turnbull competent and intellectually honest?”—which is a conflation of the following series of distinct questions:

⁵ Turnbull, C. M., *op. cit.*, p. 238 “our own society” here refers to technologically developed nations.

⁶ Battersby, C., *op. cit.*, p. 203.

A. Is Turnbull's descriptive account of the Ik an accurate report of the situation as it was (or is?). If it is, does the account necessarily give rise to such morally repulsive implications as are beyond the professional ethics of anthropology?

And if the account is not accurate, is the inaccuracy in report due to professional incompetence or is it a case of self-deception? B. Assuming Turnbull's descriptions were accurate, do they logically lead to his final conclusions? Or has Turnbull interpreted his materials from narrow or personal theoretical preconceptions?

These are intertwined questions apt to draw the attention of anthropologists and philosophers alike. Set A questions for instance, have been seriously taken up by Fredrik Barth,⁷ mainly from an anthropological point of view. Barth sets out to do two main things: firstly, to question Turnbull's evidence and secondly to demand from him an explanation for flouting what he regards as their (anthropologists') professional codes of conduct. Barth's score against Turnbull on the first, is in my opinion, minimal since he (Barth) produces neither counter-facts nor any *a priori* arguments to demolish Turnbull, except that "the accounts we are given is a systematically false record" of the situation (p. 101). On the second, Barth, in the manner of Jensen's critics who chastise him for pointing out too many facts about race and intelligence, calls on the Association of Current Anthropology to pass a verdict of guilty on Turnbull for failing "to practise the competences and ethics of our discipline in his relation to other societies and cultures. . .", (p. 102). The issue is thus brought within the confines of only professional anthropologists and the non-anthropologist can only wish them a fair decision.⁸ On my part, suffice it to say I sympathize with Barth's sentiments but I find it extremely difficult to sympathize with his arguments.

With regard to set B questions about how far Turnbull's conclusions can be said to follow from his reported "facts", Battersby attempts an answer. It all depends, she argues, on the conception of morality one is operating with. She sees Turnbull operating with a rather rigid conception of morality, one that leans on the Kantian categorical imperative, in which to be moral, virtues such as "kindness, generosity, consideration, affection. . ." should be desirable not because they are

⁷ Barth, F., *op. cit.*, pp. 99-102.

⁸ Note that the Association of Current Anthropology actually called on Turnbull to respond to Barth's charges. He did, saying that Barth was "uninformed (or misinformed)" about the facts on which his (Barth's) charges were based. Turnbull also offered to resign his membership of the Association if it found credence in Barth's accusations. See Turnbull's reply at the end to Barth's article, *Current Anthropology*, num. 1, vol. 15, March 1974, p. 103.

necessities for survival but because they are duties.⁹ With the Ik, these qualities have their main source in the individual's self-desire for survival. Theirs is a value system devoid of all traces of altruism, claims Turnbull. "Economic interest is centered on as many individual stomachs as there are people and cooperation is merely a device for furthering an interest that is consciously selfish."¹⁰ And it is for this reason that he rejects their claim to morality. This rejection of psychological egoism as a moral virtue is what Battersby refutes. But Battersby is not out for an outright refutation of Turnbull's criteria. She adds that although Turnbull's criteria for morality may not be wrong, in which case, he has good reasons for claiming to have discovered a non-moral society, such criteria are not necessarily acceptable to everyone for the mere reason that they are "too restrictive".¹¹

Turnbull shares (although he does not seem to note) the same difficulties which faced Kant in his attempt to define the moral in terms of acts performed from moral motives. Both having conceptually presupposed a neat divide between acts "performed from self-interest" and acts "performed from duty", found it difficult in practice to find examples that fit into such categories. J. N. Brown tries to resolve this difficulty in his argument for compatibility between egotism and altruism.¹² Brown presses for a distinction between the "source of desire" and the "end of desire". "The fact that a desire proceeds from X is one fact, and the fact that it is directed towards a future state of X is another fact, neither one entails the other."¹³ A clear case of egotism following this distinction, will be a situation where "a desire proceeds from X" and X's action is directed towards X's own interest (end of desire). But it is possible for "a desire to proceed from X" with X's action directed towards the interest of say Y (end of desire), which is a blend of egotism and altruism. How far Turnbull is ready to admit of this brand of egotism (enlightened egotism, whatever it is) is left for him to sort out with Battersby.

II

Now, the above two kinds of reaction to Turnbull's book carry the assumption that the issue of whether or not a particular community

⁹ Battersby, C., *op. cit.*, p. 211.

¹⁰ Turnbull, C. M., *op. cit.*, p. 136

¹¹ Battersby, C., *op. cit.*, p. 213.

¹² Brown, Norman J., "Psychological Egoism Revisited", *Philosophy*, num. 207, vol. 54, July 1979, pp. 293-309.

¹³ *Id.*, p. 293.

is moral can be settled by appeal to some universally acceptable concept of morality. Barth and Battersby do not seem to find anything wrong with this: the former would accept Turnbull's conclusions, so it seems, if his data were accurate and if he had limited his remarks about "other cultures" to what was ethically acceptable to his profession; and the latter would not also query Turnbull's thesis if he had employed a less restrictive concept of morality. Both reactions may be legitimate, but they take home only trivial scores. One may ask, for instance, of what would be left of human science, qua science, if in Barth's view certain facts are to be stated with leniency or demand of Battersby why she thinks that Turnbull's conclusions would remain the same had he applied a different concept of morality.

In my opinion, they have both ignored the sharp edge of Turnbull's sword. Turnbull is raising more theoretically fundamental issues than can catch the eye of the ordinary reader. Indeed, like Nietzsche's redefinition of morality, Turnbull is claiming to have discovered more about the *nature of man and society*, a discovery which calls for a new conception of man or a complete revision of the old. Turnbull's new man is not Plato's social animal but the man to whom sociality has become vestigial, the man without emotion, love, sympathy, fidelity etc., for all such values have been replaced by the biological need for survival. The inevitable conclusion, according to Turnbull, is that "these qualities are not inherent in humanity at all, they are not a necessary part of human nature" (p. 239).

Many, it seems, would read *The Mountain People* merely as a sensational piece and treat with contempt Turnbull's conclusions, were they not meant as a prescription for altering so key a concept as the "human". Turnbull's redefinition of the nature of man throws open a distinct set of questions which I consider more crucial than those raised in A and B. We know of divergent views about the nature of man. There are those held by people on one extreme side with Konrad Lorenz —those who claim that human behaviour patterns are genetically determined, allowing almost no place for environmental influence. At the other pole are Skinnerian psychologists who see man as such a pliable being whose behaviour is almost entirely shaped by his environment. Between these two extremes are Freudian thinkers, who admit of influences from both sides. They may stress the innate, but still hold that man's environment could reshape that which was originally stamped into him. Sociobiologists lean more towards the Freudian side than any of the others.

Turnbull's findings, it seems, provide some basis for taking sides, if empirical evidence is anything to go by. That is why we must grant

that Turnbull is not essentially mistaken on the point of evidence. For, only then shall our conclusions be of something other than mere academic quibbling. The alternative is to treat *The Mountain People* as a piece of science fiction, in which case, it still provides room for intellectual gymnastics, except that our conclusions will then be only trivially true. Not many would wish for such a substanceless pursuit.

Now, let us consider the crucial questions:

- C. (i) What is the status of the Ik as regards being human?
- (ii) How would Turnbull account for the Ik's apparent evolutionary process in which egotism triumphed over reciprocal altruism?

Turnbull is neither interested in such conceptual analyses concerning questions such as "what makes the human human or the moral moral?" Nor is he concerned with recent sociobiological views about the mechanisms involved in the evolution of human behaviour patterns. Yet, these are the very issues the adequate analysis of which will lend credence to his conclusions about the Ik. Despite his lack of concern, Turnbull inadvertently finds himself discussing some of these problems, although in a rather vague manner. (He is just a professional anthropologist, after all). He gives two rather contradictory answers to C(i). In one, Turnbull could not regard the Ik as humans for the mere fact that their "society" is sustained on non-moral "survival tactics". For him, therefore, to be human is necessarily to be moral, and morality is not to be equated with just a cluster of "survival techniques". But Turnbull, on the other hand, is so impressed (blinded?) by the singular evidence of the Ik that he is ready to drop his main criterion and take the Ik as truly representative of human nature. This means also that he is prepared to abandon any previously accepted concept of man if that conflicts with the evidence before him. Put together, Turnbull's two inconsistent answers to the question of whether or not the Ik are human do not say anything. One cancels out the other.

Understandably, Turnbull's muddle arises from an apparently incompatible situation, namely a state of conflict between his preconceived concept about human nature and the facts presented by the Ik experience. The question of whether or not Turnbull saw the Ik as humans appears unfair to him since he at no time saw himself as an ethologist rather than an anthropologist. But, perhaps, certain confusing passages in his book justify asking such questions. Not only does Turnbull make such comparisons as, for instance, finding more love

in “two baby leopards than I did among the Ik” (p. 195) he was not even sure whether or not to categorize the Ik as humans. He writes:

For the moment abandoning the very old and the very, very young and the rather bleak future they hold in their hands, the Ik as a whole must be searched for one last lingering trace of humanity as we like to think of it, as being far different from and elevated above the rest of humanity. . . The Ik appear to have disposed of virtually all the qualities that we normally consider are just those qualities that differentiate us from other primates. . .¹⁴

Turnbull wrote home from his research base stating his doubt. He could not believe he was “studying a human society, it was like looking at a singularly well-ordered community of baboons”.¹⁵

This doubt raises some fundamental issues. It is true that man is an animal but it is also true that he possesses certain essential characteristics which are not shared by other animals. But, what are these qualities? First, it is necessary to note that the issue of the concept of human nature is not an empirical question. It is a conceptual one. And as such, it is not uncommon to face arguments denying that there is such a thing as human nature, and such arguments simply derived from the logic of universal terms, namely that there cannot possibly be any feature common to all their ascriptions. Just as all games, as Wittgensteinians would put it, do not need to have some common and peculiar features for them to be so called, so do human beings not need to share some common qualities for them to be classified as humans.

But this is not to deny that there is something *essential* to being human. Men may be as varied as they are in number, but our use of language suggests that we attribute to them certain general tendencies which are inapplicable to non-human animals. Traditional writers, when usually they speak of man’s mark of uniqueness, point to his anatomy, his increased brain capacity and hence his increased intelligence, his ability to use language and symbols and perhaps more significantly man’s sociality. Man is also said to be the only animal that does not adapt to his environment but deliberately changes and controls it by use of tools.

But it is a mistake to weight the Ik, and indeed any human group, against these formal criteria. More facts about animals in recent ethological researches have shown that some animals come close to man in the acquisition of these qualities. Man may communicate by

¹⁴ Turnbull, C. M., *op. cit.*, p. 193.

¹⁵ *Id.*, p. 194.

use of language but he is not the only animal that communicates by sound. Dogs bark, frogs croak, birds call, etc. The claim cannot even be convincingly argued for that man is the only animal that uses tools or makes things. Bees make hives, birds construct nests, beavers make dams and a lot of other animals design and make complex structures that are sometimes superior to human products. The only point that may be plausibly sustained is that man performs better in a lot of these areas. And this is because he is able to adjust, and quickly too, when there is need to do so. This is to say therefore that the difference between man and animal is one of degree rather than of kind.

But many would react disdainfully to such a position, even to the very idea of making the comparison in the first place. Such feelings of disgust are usually brought about by concern for the adverse effects which the idea of weighing man against animal may have on human dignity, something similar to what critics see as the possible consequence of comparing the intelligence of machines with human intelligence. At best, some would admit of the biological as the only common features that link man with other animal species. This does not seem to pose any problem just as it does not tell us anything about the entity described as human. One may even raise problems about the possibility of separating the “biological man” from man, if that makes any sense. Montagu seems to try this when he talks about the two aspects of human nature namely the “primary nature and the second nature”.¹⁶ The former, according to him, refers to man’s genetically inherited properties and the latter those qualities he acquired through culture. In other words, the biological man, to use Mary Midgley’s words, “needs a culture to complete him”,¹⁷ if he is to be fully human.

Emphasis on culture and its various components as the defining characteristics of man need not be taken as a denial of the fact that human beings share with other animal species certain basic features. It is too well known that men and animals share basic drives such as hunger, thirst, sexual gratification and the quest for physical comfort. The point is that unlike other animals, man seeks to meet these needs in culturally defined ways. Man, like any other animal must eat, but as a product of culture he must only eat certain things and not others; man must mate, but his pattern of mating is culturally determined; it is guided by rules.

¹⁶ Montagu, Ashley, *The Biological Nature of Man*, New York, Grove Press Inc., 1956, p. 71.

¹⁷ Midgley, Mary, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Behaviour*, The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1979, p. 289.

All this makes it almost impossible to see man operating as a mere animal. In fact, the strength of cultural determinism on human behaviour is such that man could (experience has shown man does) dispense with certain biological needs if their modes of fulfilment become incompatible with his cultural needs. Men have been known to have accepted death rather than face dishonour, abstain from sexual gratification in response to social constraints or starve rather than eat food that is by social rules forbidden. These are non-controversial truths repeatedly stated almost in all volumes that have to do with man's need for culture. This is why Turnbull's claim that the Ik have "replaced human society with a mere survival system", (p. 239) calls for a serious re-examination, not only at the level of theory but also on issues of facts.

Now, if human nature is an end-product of both biological and the cultural givens and the latter is as variable as there are societies, the view cannot be sustained that man has a fixed and unchanging nature. In other words, the whole idea that there are some features universally characteristic of all human behaviour or that there are some constants uniformly shared by humanity can only be sustained on conjectural grounds. Yet, it seems that the quest for such universal roots of human nature become so entrenched in the tradition of scholarship that it cannot be dismissed as mere ghost hunting. When Thomas Hobbes described man as a "nasty brute" or a selfish individualistic animal always at war with his fellow humans, and when Freud, after the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, imbibed the view that mankind was full of hostile impulses which needed culture to curb, they were seriously describing what to them was some unchanging reality. Even such more optimistic claims about the innate goodness of man as are held by Alfred Adler,¹⁸ in which man's main defining characteristic is his sociality, do not seem to admit of any change or variation.

Arguments concerning the reality of human nature may have their academic merits, but like most conceptual analyses, they cannot draw on the support of empirical evidence. This is why one cannot argue seriously for or against the claim that a particular community is not human. It is an issue on which consensus between disputants largely depends on sorting out the various meanings attached to the very concept, "human". One way, therefore, of laying to rest such arguments is to stick to the ordinary meaning of the word as a particular

¹⁸ See his *Understanding Human Nature*, translated by Walter Beran Wolfe, Allen & Unwin, 1928 (reprinted 1954).

linguistic community would use it --the position of “these are the features we normally take as the distinguishing mark of X”. But this is not to suggest that the ability to identify a class of things must depend of knowing some set of necessary criteria. Even if one were to accept the theory of essence, and argue that for a thing to fall under any sortal characterization it must share of whatever is essential to that class as a whole, this would not imply that any one trying to identify a member of that class must consciously recognize its generic essence. The most imbecile of humans will not take a fellow human for a chimpanzee or for a dolphin even in the face of very apparently similar behaviour patterns. This is not because he consciously reflects on man’s essential qualities and bases his decision on such reflection. It is simply that he cannot make a mistake in separating humans from non-humans.

III

What has been said so far about the difficulties of finding some peculiar and common features which are definitive of humanity also applies to morality. Battersby is right on the latter, when she says that, although one paradigm may be better than another, the distinction between the moral and the non-moral depends on “the observer’s own paradigm of morality”.¹⁹ This drop of relativism makes more difficult the task of deciding whether or not Turnbull’s Ik are of the status of human and moral beings. But whatever appellation we may wish to use, let us consider the residual issue of whether or not the Ik are a true replica of the new direction of human evolution, and what mechanisms such a process must have involved.

By way of cautioning, Turnbull tells us that the Ik, being at the forefront of human evolution, must serve as a lesson for the rest of humanity. For, “in one dramatic generation, they have leaped ahead and given us a taste of things to come”.²⁰ Theirs initially was a society in which individuals cooperated for a common good; that is to say, of course, that “reciprocal altruism” flourished, a system which an ethical naturalist would describe as one in which moral words such as “good”, “right”, “ought”, etc., referred to whatever was conducive to group survival. Turnbull attributes the collapse of this system and the subsequent triumph of Icient egotistic tendencies to the acute shortage

¹⁹ Battersby, C., *op. cit.*, p. 213.

²⁰ Turnbull, C. M., *op. cit.*, p. 237.

of food. As of now, he claims, Icient society is reduced to a mere individualistic survival system and “moral” words have accordingly assumed new meanings:

The very word “good”, *marang* (italicized), is defined in terms of food. “Goodness”, *marangik* (italicized), is defined simply as “food” or, if you press, this will be clarified as “the possession of food”, and still further clarified as “individual (italicized) possession of food”. Then if you try the word as an adjective and attempt to discover what their concept is of a “good man”. . . you get the truly Icient answer; a good man is one who has a full stomach. There is goodness in being, but none in doing, at least non in doing to others.²¹

In the past decade or so, sociobiologists of various stands have speculated on the various possible directions en which the evolution of human moral behaviour is set to follow. Without any assumed faith in this new fashion of “biologized ethics” (for this itself is what I am set to question, with particular reference to the Ik case, having refuted the general principles behind the doctrine in an earlier paper),²² much of what has been written sounds plausible even if only at the level of theory. In fact, the vast amount of followership which the new trend takes along with it is enough of a caution against any writer might want to dismiss it as a mere myth-creating process. Some significant internal disputes remain however to be sorted out among sociobiologists, once it is granted that genetics has the said predominant role in our moral evolution. The primary unit of selection in the evolution process, we are told, is the gene whose characteristics many biologists are involved in exploring. But because the gene resides in the individual and the individual in the group, the notions of “individual selection” and “group selection” have accordingly been taken to mean the overt expressions of some internally unobservable mechanisms.

I intend not to delve into the question of which of these levels is more potently involved in the evolutionary process. In fact, the IK case in question does rule out the involvement of group selection since Turnbull does not attribute their evolved behaviour patterns to any possible initial inter-group competition.

One may want to follow Richard Dawkins’ three strategy model by which genes are characterized by certain inherited behavioural patterns. Dawkins thinks that genes as such direct the activities of

²¹ Turnbull, C. M., *op. cit.*, p. 112.

²² Sogolo, G. S., “Sociobiology and Social Behaviour in Men and Animals”, *Theoria to Theory*, num. 3, Vol. 13, 1979, pp. 207-224.

individuals who then stand as mere human machines.²³ But as Mary Midgley points out, this would amount to treating genes as sentient entities, which can be “selfish or unselfish”, “jealous”, “teleological”, etc., which they are not.²⁴ She is right. Personifying genes would make them look as if they were capable of directly engaging in social interactions. Yet, Dawkins’ analysis even though may be empirically wanting, still provides us with a heuristically useful model for understanding how natural selection could have operated to produce the Icient type of “morality”. The possibility I wish to examine therefore is one of how in an initially mixed population of egotists and altruists (assuming the system was originally so composed), the former had more selective advantages over the latter.

Purely on logical grounds, the argument against altruism being favoured against egotism in the selective process, is that each time and individual makes self-sacrifice (e.g. lays down his life for others), the genes responsible for that trait diminish their chances of survival. This is against the counter-argument which again appears genetically sound, namely that under such a situation where a man lays down his life for two brothers or eight cousins the result will be the survival of two siblings (each with half of his genes identical to the man’s) or the survival of the group of cousins (each with about one-eighth of his genes identical to the man’s). This calculation no doubt makes altruism look more favoured than egotism in the process of selection.

Now, to borrow Dawkins’ model, it must be assumed that the system to which it applies meets the conditions necessary for the successful operation of natural selections. In Wynn-Edwards terms it must be (a) “a discrete local population”, (b) “self —perpetuating and capable of maintaining its intergrity”, (c) contain an “effectively isolated set of genes (or gene pool).²⁵ Now, let us suppose that the Icient system in question meets these conditions and let us suppose further that initially it was composed of traits similar to Dawkins’: “Suckers”, whose actions are indiscriminately oriented towards the good of others (Indiscriminate Altruists), “Cheats”, whose actions are always self-centered and would always expect favour but would never give the same in return (Extreme or Pure Egotists), and “Grudgers”, who would always act in favour of only those who do the same to them (Reciprocal Altruists). Given the above, we do not need to

²³ Dawkins, R., *The Selfish Gene*, (OUP 1976).

²⁴ Midgley, Mary, “Gene Judgling”, *Philosophy*, num. 210, vol. 54, October 1979, p. 439.

²⁵ Wynne Edwards, V. C., “Population Control and Social Selections in Animals” in *Genetics*, D. C. Glass (ed) New York, Rockefeller University Press & Russell Sage Foundation, 1968, p. 160.

work out the possible consequences of any combination in respect of proportions and the degree to which various attitudes are shared.²⁶

Turnbull has told us what the Ik situation is. According to him, Icen society, is composed of extreme egotists (cheats), with no trace of altruism, not even the nearest thing to it –I mean that attitude of self– less service that is normally assumed to flow from parents to children. Parents, we are told, do not stake their welfare, not even for the survival of their children. Nor do children even bother to make such “luxurious” demands. Each individual has a primary goal and that goal is personal survival. Our concern here is that of exploring how natural selection could possibly have led to this situation. In Dawkins’ formulation, the goal of natural selection is said to be the production finally of an “evolutionary stable strategy” (ESS), made up of either one or a possible combination of his strategy. To him, a strategy is evolutionary stable if it survives indefinitely all alternative competitors.

Now, J. L. Mackie, following Dawkins, has given us a possible initial combinations from which, through natural selection, a society of “cheats” (extreme egotists, such as the Ik) may emerge is a winner:

In a population consisting largely of cheats, the cheats will do better than the others and both suckers and grudgers will die out. But in a population that starts off with more than a certain proportion of grudgers, the cheats will first wipe out the suckers, but will then themselves become rare and eventually extinct: Cheats can flourish only while they have suckers to take advantage of, and yet by going so they tend to eliminate those suckers.²⁷

But Mackie rightly notices that although a strategy may be seen to be stable in the sense that it is favoured against alternatives, it is not one that will necessarily “survive and multiply”.²⁸ This means that a stable strategy, for it to be strictly defined as such, must be one of indefinite success, and not temporary survival. The Icen system would not have emerged as an evolutionary stable strategy, if as Turnbull predicts, they will inevitably “die out completely” (p. 234). But still, the system fits into Mackie’s analysis in which a society of egotists (with no altruists of any kind to take advantage of) necessarily tends to extinction.

This, however, is not the point Turnbull would want to stress.

²⁶ J. L. Mackie tries various combinations and gives what he thinks the outcome will be. See his “The Law of the Jungle” in *Philosophy*, num. 206, vol. 53, October 1978, pp. 460-462.

²⁷ Mackie, J. L., *op. cit.*, p. 460.

²⁸ *Id.*, pp. 458-459.

Indeed, the basis of his appeal for a change of the concept of human nature is the emphasis he places on the possibility that the Ik would survive indefinitely, having abandoned what were thought erroneously to be human necessities (i.e. all kinds of altruism). This according to Turnbull, is evident from what he observed about Icier patterns of behaviour: “they survive without seeming, if we are honest, to be greatly different from ourselves in terms of behaviour” (p. 193). What this means is that the Ik do not seem to feel the loss of anything and this alone is an index to the continued success of their strategy. But this is not compatible with Mackie’s thesis that a society of completely egotistic individuals, once it emerges as a successful strategy in the process of selection, is itself doomed to extinction.

Dawkins and Mackie may still be right. In fact, they cannot be legitimately criticized for the failure of their thesis to account for the evolution of the individuals moral attitudes since they clearly separate the “selfishgene” from the individual that carry them. Whether or not such a separation is possible, remains another issue. It could just be an expression of what Mary Midgley describes as man’s general tendency to always project that which is deemed evil in him into some “scapegoat”,²⁹ whose imperatives, as it were, are beyond human control. Dawkins attributes his “strategies” to genes and genes not being humans, albeit they form part of man, demand a paradigm essentially different from that used in explaining human behaviour. Many would even insist strongly that the difference is such that the language of natural selection is totally inapplicable to the human species. To them, man is no longer living in the state of nature or at the mercy of the crude principles of natural selection.

Dawkins seems to be conceding to this view that man has transcended (or is capable of transcending) his biological givens, when he suggests that man is able to rebel against his genes and “upset their designs”³⁰. This suggests that there is more to human moral evolution than can be accounted for by mere “gene-juggling”. It will not do either to simply shift planes and talk of “memes” as Dawkins would suggest,³¹ for this itself carries the same element of blind determinism as that involved in the theory of genetically imposed imperatives. The mechanisms involved in man’s moral evolution may be similar to those of natural selection in some respects, but I suggest they are different in principles.

²⁹ See her “The Concept of Beastliness”, in *Philosophy*, vol. 48 and chapter 2 of her *Beast and Man*, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-49.

³⁰ Dawkins, R., *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³¹ *Id.*, p. 206.

Arguments for the claim that natural selection has been practically done away with among civilized human beings can be as unconvincing as those against it, except that even strong exponents of biological determinism such as Charles Darwin, would not ignore the importance of non-biological factors. Man's moral qualities, Darwin says, "are advanced, either directly or indirectly much more through the effects of habits, the reasoning power, instructions, religion, and so on. than through natural selection".³² The involvement of such non-biological factors may account for the new direction taken by the Ik, particularly if we are to follow Colin McGinn in seeing morality as "a necessary corollary of advanced intelligence".³³ Once natural selection at the human level is understood to mean a process whereby man modifies his culture to meet new demands, the *reasoning* faculty immediately comes into play. But it is still natural selection whether or not it involves any such unnatural conditions.

Now, let us go back to the case of the Ik and consider how rationality and the ability to comprehend their situation could have helped in their struggle for survival. Dawkins' strategy of "cheats" as it was defined earlier, refers to that tendency to receive favour and not giving the same in return. As long as such a characteristic is attributed to a gene, what is expected is a rather rigidly patterned display of such a tendency, never giving room for modifications or adaptations. Again the tendency to cheat would be so *overtly* displayed that, were it possible for a fellow gene to judge, the detection of a cheat would constitute no problem.

But the cheat as a human character is very different. He could, for instance, be so subtle or even deceitful in his behaviour that he could be pretending to cooperate or act altruistically whereas he is really not doing so. As far as natural selection sharpens the individual ability for deceit in this way and provided the equivalent capacity for detecting cheats is not developed, this could result in an evolutionary stable strategy. However, it might be argued that a society composed entirely of cheats of this kind, who are always pretending to act altruistically but really not doing so, will tend to extinction (since in Mackie's analysis there will be no sincere altruists of whom to take advantage).

And it is at this stage that we begin to uncover our error, which is that of taking a mere conceptual possibility for an empirical one.

³² Darwin, Charles, *On The Origin of Species*, London, Murray, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1964, Chapter 3, p. 62.

³³ McGinn, Colin, "Evolution: Animals and the Basis of Morality" in *Inquiry*, núms. 1-2, vol. 22, 1979, p. 81.

Human behavioral traits cannot be rigidly categorized as those of non-human entities. In practice, no human society can be said to be composed exclusively of one or the other of Dawkins' strategies. Only biological organism other than humans may fall into such compartments. Turnbull is therefore wrong to think that with the Ik, "the much vaunted gap between man and the so-called 'lesser' animals suddenly shrinks to nothingness" (p. 27). On the contrary, what the Ik experience suggests is the extent to which human nature varies.