

“Morality as an Evolutionary Result” by Charles A. Ellwood

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Charles A. Ellwood, American Sociological Association

About the author...

Charles A. Ellwood (1873-1946) served as the 14th President of the American Sociological Society, now the American Sociological Association. As a Professor of Sociology at the University of Missouri, he studied the conditions of the local county almshouses and jails before moving to Duke University. Throughout his life he was engaged in social reform. Ellwood’s textbook *Sociology and Modern Social Problems* was widely used in colleges and helped establish sociology as a separate field of study. He argued that sociology as an extension of biological science might alter social progress

through education and culture. Ellwood was well known internationally as he sought to ground the basis of morality, religion and politics in sociology. His historical approach to sociology was overshadowed by the quantitative scientific approach of contemporary sociological inquiry.

About the work...

In his *Sociology and Modern Social Problems*,¹ Ellwood outlines the origin of moral codes and ethics in terms of the competition and conflict inherent in the evolution and development of sociological groups. He maintains that morality is a consequence of survival, and, in light of these studies, the study of morality can now be considered an essential part of sociology. The consequences of this reading would seem to imply that ethics is culturally relative to the specific times and conditions of disparate societies—a sociological view expounded also by Edward Westermarck, William Graham Sumner, and Ruth Benedict. In the short reading selection below, Ellwood explains why “Morality... is not anything arbitrarily designed by the group, but is a standard of conduct which necessities of social survival require.”

From the reading...

“This text therefore, will not attempt to exclude ethical implications and judgments from sociological discussions, because that would be futile and childish...”

Ideas of Interest from *Sociology and Modern Social Problems*

1. Explain Ellwood’s definition of ethics. Does he implicitly distinguish between morals and ethics?
2. Describe Ellwood’s conception of the relation between ethics and sociology. Does he consider both disciplines to be normative?

1. Charles A. Ellwood, *Sociology and Modern Social Problems* (New York: American Book Company, 1910), 20-12; 42-50.

3. According to Ellwood, what are the major factors occasioning war? Why is this so?
4. Summarize the five major social consequences Ellwood enumerates that arise from conflict among human groups.
5. How does Ellwood account for the origin of morality within human groups?
6. What are the reasons Ellwood offers for the view that social progress depends upon competition and cooperation. Explain whether a society can thrive by cooperation alone. Does it follow that Ellwood thinks competition is a necessary condition for moral progress?
7. To what extent does Ellwood believe human beings can overcome the evolutionary forces of natural selection and survival of the fittest?

The Reading Selection from *Sociology and Modern Social Problems*

[Sociology’s Relation to Ethics]

Ethics is the science which deals with the right or wrong of human conduct. Its problems are the nature of morality and of moral obligation, the validity of moral ideals, the norms by which conduct is to be judged, and the like. While ethics was once considered to be a science of individual conduct it is now generally conceived as being essentially a social science. The moral and the social are indeed not clearly separable, but we may consider the moral to be the ideal aspect of the social.

From the reading...

“It needs to be emphasized, however, that the most primitive groups are not warlike”

This view of morality, which, for the most part, is indorsed by modern thought, makes ethics dependent upon sociology for its criteria of rightness or wrongness. Indeed, we cannot argue any moral question nowadays unless we argue it in social terms. If we discuss the rightness or wrongness of the drink habit we try to show its social consequences. So, too, if we discuss the rightness or wrongness of such an institution as polygamy we find ourselves forced to do so mainly in social terms. This is not denying, of course, that

there are religious and metaphysical aspects to morality,—these are not necessarily in conflict with the social aspects,—but it is saying that modern ethical theory is coming more and more to base itself upon the study of the remote social consequences of conduct, and that we cannot judge what is right or wrong in our complex society unless we know something of the social consequences.

Ethics must be regarded, therefore, as a normative science to which sociology and the other social sciences lead up. It is, indeed, very difficult to separate ethics from sociology. It is the business of sociology to furnish norms and standards to ethics, and it is the business of ethics as a science to take the norms and standards furnished by the social sciences, to develop them, and to criticize them. This text therefore, will not attempt to exclude ethical implications and judgments from sociological discussions, because that would be futile and childish...

[Social Evolution From the Biological Standpoint]

From the very beginning there has been no such thing as unmitigated individual struggle among animals. Nowhere in nature does pure individualism exist in the sense that the individual animal struggles alone, except perhaps in a few solitary species which are apparently on the way to extinction. The assumption of such a primitive individual struggle has been at the bottom of many erroneous views of human society. The primary conflict is between species. A secondary conflict, however, is always found between the members of the same species. Usually this conflict within the species is a competition between groups. The human species exactly illustrates these statements. Primitively its great conflict was with other species of animals. The supremacy of man over the rest of the animal world was won only after an age-long conflict between man and his animal rivals. While this conflict went on there was apparently but little struggle within the species itself. The lowest groups of which we have knowledge, while continually struggling against nature, are rarely at war with one another. But after man had won his supremacy and the population of groups came to increase so as to encroach seriously upon food supply, and even on territorial limits of space, then a conflict between human groups, which we call war, broke out and became almost second nature to man. It needs to be emphasized, however, that the most primitive groups are not warlike, but only those that have achieved their supremacy over nature and attained considerable size. In other words, the struggle between groups which we call war was occasioned very largely by numbers and food supply. To this extent at least war primitively arose from economic conditions, and it is remarkable how economic conditions have been instrumental in bringing about all the great wars of recorded human history.

The conflict among human groups, which we call war, has had an immense effect upon human social evolution. Five chief effects must be noted.

(1) Intergroup struggle gave rise to higher forms of social organization, because only those groups could succeed in competition with other groups that were well organized, and especially only those that had competent leadership.



Frightful Outrages Perpetrated by the Huguenots in France, (Persecution of Catholics by Huguenots), detail from Richard Verstegen, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D. C.

(2) Government, as we understand the word, was very largely an outcome of the necessities of this intergroup struggle, or war. As we have already seen, the groups that were best organized, that had the most competent leadership, would stand the best chance of surviving. Consequently the war leader or chief soon came, through habit, to be looked upon as the head of the group in all matters. Moreover, the exigencies and stresses of war frequently necessitated giving the war chief supreme authority in times of danger, and from this, without doubt, arose despotism in all of its forms. The most primitive tribes are republican or democratic in their form of government, but it has been found that despotic forms of government rapidly take the place of the primitive democratic type, where a people are continually at war with other peoples.

(3) A third result of war in primitive times was the creation of social classes.

After a certain stage was reached groups tried not so much to exterminate one another as to conquer and absorb one another. This was, of course, after agriculture had been developed and slave labor had reached a considerable value. Under such circumstances a conquered group would be incorporated by the conquerors as a slave or subject class. Later, this enslaved class may have become partially free as compared with some more recently subjugated or enslaved classes, and several classes in this way could emerge in a group through war or conquest. Moreover, the presence of these alien and subject elements in a group necessitated a stronger and more centralized government to keep them in control, and this was again one way in which war favored a development of despotic governments. Later, of course, economic conditions gave rise to classes, and to certain struggles between the classes composing a people.

From the reading...

“The number of peoples that have perished in the past is impossible to estimate. But we can get some inkling of the number by the fact that philologists estimate that for every living language there are twenty dead languages.”

(4) Not only was social and political organization and the evolution of classes favored by intergroup struggle, but also the evolution of morality. The group that could be most efficiently organized would be, other things being equal, the group which had the most loyal and most self-sacrificing membership. The group that lacked a group spirit, that is, strong sentiments of solidarity and harmonious relations between its members, would be the group that would be apt to lose in conflict with other groups, and so its type would tend to be eliminated. Consequently in all human groups we find recognition of certain standards of conduct which are binding as between members of the same group. For example, while a savage might incur no odium through killing a member of another group, he was almost always certain to incur either death or exile through killing a member of his own group. Hence arose a group code of ethics founded very largely upon the conceptions of kinship or blood relationship, which bound all members of a primitive group to one another.

(5) A final consequence of war among human groups has been the absorption of weaker groups and the growth of larger and larger political groups, until in modern times a few great nations dominate the population of the whole world. That this was not the primitive condition, we know from human history and from other facts which indicate the disappearance of a vast number of human groups in the past. The earth is a burial ground of tribes and nations as well as of individuals. In the competition between human groups,

only a few that have had efficient organization and government, loyal membership and high standards of conduct within the group, have survived. The number of peoples that have perished in the past is impossible to estimate. But we can get some inkling of the number by the fact that philologists estimate that for every living language there are twenty dead languages. When we remember that a language not infrequently stands for several groups with related cultures, we can guess the immense number of human societies that have perished in the past in this intergroup competition.

Even though war passes away entirely, nations can never escape this competition with one another. While the competition may not be upon the low and brutal plane of war, it will certainly go on upon the higher plane of commerce and industry, and will probably be on this higher plane quite as decisive in the life of peoples in future as war was in the past.

While the primary struggle within the human species has been in the historic period between nations and races, this is not saying, of course, that struggle and competition have not gone on within these larger groups. On the contrary, as has already been implied, a continual struggle has gone on between classes, first perhaps of racial origin, and later of economic origin. Also there is within the nation a struggle between parties and sects, and sometimes between “sections” and communities. Usually, however, the struggle within the nation is a peaceful one and does not come to bloodshed.

[W]e may consider the moral to be the ideal aspect of the social.

Again, within each of these minor groups that we have mentioned struggle and competition in some modified form goes on between its members. Thus within a party or class there is apt to be a struggle or competition between factions. There is, indeed, no human group that is free from struggle or competition between its members, unless it be the family. The family seems to be so constituted that normally there is no competition between its members,—at least, there is good ground for believing that competition between the members of a family is to be considered exceptional, or even abnormal.

From what has been said it is evident that competition and coöperation are twin principles in the evolution of social groups. While competition characterizes in the main the relation between groups, especially independent political groups, and while coöperation characterizes in the main the relation of the members of a given group to one another, still competition and coöperation are correlatives in practically every phase of the social life. Some degree of competition, for example, has to be maintained by every group between its members if it is going to maintain high standards of efficiency or of loyalty. If there were no competition with respect to the matters that concern the

inner life of groups, it is evident that the groups would soon lose efficiency in leadership and in membership and would sooner or later be eliminated. Consequently society, from certain points of view, presents itself to the student at the present time as a vast competition, while from other standpoints it presents itself as a vast coöperation.

From the reading...

“If a social group were to check all competition between its members, it... would soon cease to progress.”

It follows from this that competition and coöperation are both equally important in the life of society. It has been a favorite idea that competition among human beings should be done away with, and that coöperation should be substituted to take its place entirely. It is evident, however, that this idea is impossible of realization. If a social group were to check all competition between its members, it would stop thereby the process of natural selection or of the elimination of the unfit, and, as a consequence, would soon cease to progress. If some scheme of artificial selection were substituted to take the place of natural selection, it is evident that competition would still have to be retained to determine who were the fittest. A society that would give positions of trust and responsibility to individuals without imposing some competitive test upon them would be like a ship built partially of good and partially of rotten wood,—it would soon go to pieces.

[Morality as a Result of Natural Selection]

This leads us to emphasize the continued necessity of selection in society. No doubt natural selection is often a brutal and wasteful means of eliminating the weak in human societies, and no doubt human reason might devise superior means of bringing about the selection of individuals which society must maintain. To some extent it has done this through systems of education and the like, which are, in the main, selective processes for picking out the most competent individuals to perform certain social functions. But the natural competition, or struggle between individuals, has not been done away with, especially in economic matters, and it is evidently impossible to do away with it until some vast scheme of artificial selection can take its place. Such a scheme is so far in the future that it is hardly worth talking about. The best that society can apparently do at the present time is to regulate the natural competition between individuals, and this it is doing increasingly.

From the reading...

“A society that would give positions of trust and responsibility to individuals without imposing some competitive test upon them would be like a ship built partially of good and partially of rotten wood. . . ”

What people rightfully object to is, not competition, but unregulated or unfair competition. In the interest of solidarity, that is, in the interest of the life of the group as a whole, all forms of competition in human society should be so regulated that the rules governing the competition may be known and the competition itself public. It is evident that in politics and in business we are very far from this ideal as yet, although society is unquestionably moving toward it.

A word in conclusion about the nature of moral codes and standards from the social point of view. It is evident that moral codes from the social point of view are simply formulations of standards of conduct which groups find it convenient or necessary to impose upon their members. Even morality, in an idealistic sense, seems from a sociological standpoint to be those forms of conduct which conduce to social harmony, to social efficiency, and so to the survival of the group. Groups, however, as we have already pointed out, cannot do as they please. They are always hard-pressed in competition by other groups and have to meet the standards of efficiency which nature imposes. Morality, therefore, is not anything arbitrarily designed by the group, but is a standard of conduct which necessities of social survival require. In other words, the right, from the point of view of natural science, is that which ultimately conduces to survival, not of the individual, but of the group or of the species. This is looking at morality, of course, from the sociological point of view, and in no way denies the religious and metaphysical view of morality, which may be equally valid from a different standpoint.

From the reading...

“Morality, therefore, is not anything arbitrarily designed by the group, but is a standard of conduct which necessities of social survival require.”

Finally, we need to note that natural selection does not necessitate in any mechanical sense certain conduct on the part of individuals or groups. Rather, natural selection marks the limits of variation which nature permits, and within those limits of variation there is a large amount of freedom of choice, both to individuals and to groups. Human societies, therefore, may be con-

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ceivably free to take one of several paths of development at any particular point. But in the long run they must conform to the ultimate conditions of survival; and this probably means that the goal of their evolution is largely fixed for them. Human groups are free only in the sense that they may go either backward or forward on the path which the conditions of survival mark out for them. They are free to progress or to perish. But social evolution in any case, in the sense of social change either toward higher or toward lower social adaptation, is a necessity that cannot be escaped. Sociology and all social science is, therefore, a study not of what human groups would like to do, but of what they must do in order to survive, that is, how they can control their environment by utilizing the laws which govern universal evolution.

From this brief and most elementary consideration of the bearings of evolutionary theory upon social problems it is evident that evolution, in the sense of what we know about the development of life and society in the past, must be the guidepost of the sociologist. Human social evolution, we repeat, rests upon and is conditioned by biological evolution at every point. There is, therefore, scarcely any sanity in sociology without the biological point of view.



Massacre Fait a Sens en Bourgagne par la Populace, (Persecution of Huguenots by Catholics at Burgundy, 1562), A. Challe, Library of Congress

Related Ideas

Charles Ellwood, “Aristotle as Sociologist” in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 19, No. 2 (March, 1902): 63-74.² In this paper on the *McMaster University Archive for the History of Economic Thought* Ellwood makes the case that Aristotle is the first sociologist and the *Politica* is an excellent primer for the beginning student of sociology.

Charles Ellwood, “The Origin of Society,” *American Journal of Sociology* 15 (1909): 394-404.³ In this paper Ellwood argues that social development of human beings is based on natural selection but is to some degree modifiable by education.

Charles Ellwood, “Prolegomena to Social Psychology”⁴ Ellwood’s four-part introduction to social psychology as first presented in the *American Journal of Sociology* is presented by Brock University as part of their Mead Project.

American Anthropological Association, *The Association’s Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology*⁵ are readings compiled by Joan Cassell and Sue-Ellen Jacoby. See especially Murray L. Wax’s “Some Issues and Sources on Ethics in Anthropology” for current approaches and sources.

Topics Worth Investigating

1. When viewing ethics as part of social science, Ellwood writes, “[W]e may consider the moral to be the ideal aspect of the social.” Explain what is meant by this statement. Since Ellwood sees competition essential to moral progress in a society, do you think he would disagree with George Trumbull Ladd who writes:

Selfhood, must seek to promote the same good in others, must seek to serve the social ideal of moral goodness; but, on the other hand, he who seeks the highest service to the ethico-social Ideal must realize that service primarily in conforming his own life to his own moral ideal.⁶

Is the ideal good of society realized by each individual seeking his or her own ideal good?

2. “Aristotle” (<http://socserv2.socsci.mcmaster.ca/~econ/ugcm/3ll3/aristotle/ellwood.html>)

3. “Origin of Society” (http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Ellwood/Ellwood_1909c.html)

4. “Prolegomena” (<http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/inventory5.html#sectE>)

5. American Anthropological Association, *The Association’s Handbook on Ethical Issues in Anthropology* (<http://www.aaanet.org/committees/ethics/toc.htm>)

6. George Trumbull Ladd, *Philosophy of Conduct* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902), 640.

2. Somewhat puzzlingly, Ellwood states, “[I]t is the business of ethics as a science to take the norms and standards furnished by the social sciences, to develop them, and to criticize them.” Does Ellwood mean the descriptive laws of science need be critically employed as standards for society to follow? Is he implying for ethics, “what is” is “what ought to be”? How can Ellwood to close the gap described here:

Theoretically, descriptive evolved ethics tells us what ethical dispositions may have evolved in any evolved beings. It tells us what is. Prescriptive evolved ethics, on the other hand, tell us what ought to be, that is, what beings ought, ethically to do. It is generally considered to be the case that there is a logical gap between “is” and “ought,” such that one cannot have a valid argument with only “is” standing in the premises, yet “ought” emerging in the conclusion.⁷

Does Ellwood make the mistake of concluding how we should behave from how behavior evolved?

3. Contrast Ellwood’s account of the origins or war necessitated by human socialization, whereas Thomas Hobbes concludes war is necessitated prior to socialization:

For before constitution of sovereign power (as has already been shown) all men had right to all things, which necessarily causeth war, and therefore, this propriety, being necessary to peace, and depending on sovereign power, is the act of that power, in order to the public peace.⁸

How do these authors differ in their discussion of a state of nature? Assuming the proximate cause of war is economic, which of the accounts for the origin of war in human history would be better confirmed? Assuming the proximate cause of war is the innate aggressiveness of human beings, which of the accounts would be better confirmed?

4. Ellwood notes that the “twin principles in the evolution of social groups” to greater efficiency and better organization are competition and cooperation. Is this statement tautologous? Isn’t non-cooperation competition and non-competition cooperation? Does the question, “Is cooperation more socially efficient when there is competition or is competition more socially efficient when there is cooperation?” make sense?
5. Ellwood defines morality from the standpoint of sociology as the kinds of conduct which lead to efficiency and survivability of the group by cooperation and conflict. He states in our reading, “Morality, therefore, is not anything arbitrarily designed by the group, but is a standard of

7. Patricia A. Williams, “Can Beings Whose Ethics Evolved Be Ethical Beings” in *Evolutionary Ethics*, ed. Matthew H. and Doris V. Nitecki (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 235.

8. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin M. Curley (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994), 114.

conduct which necessities of social survival require.”The right is that which is conducive to survival. At the same time, he believes competition should be regulated in the interest of fairness to society. Implicitly, doesn’t Ellwood’s conception of morality entail the inconsistency of not only what *is* done within a specific group but also what *should* be done within that group? What could possibly be the criterion to determine what is right when these two sources of the moral code conflict?⁹ Specifically, wouldn’t society utilize the laws which govern universal evolution by *not* interfering with the natural processes of nature.

6. If competition and conflict between individuals is now regulated by modern societies, does it follow on Ellwood’s premisses that societies cannot progress morally since moral progression is guided by natural selection? Or would it follow the invention of ethical ideals for society are themselves a result of natural evolutionary processes rather than a creative process disengaged from natural causes? For example, Ortega distinguishes between the innate or biological nature of human beings and the invented or extra-natural life of human beings:

Because man is a being forced, if he wants to exist, to exist immersed in nature; he is an animal. Zoologically, life means everything that must be done in order to exist in nature. But man arranges things in order to reduce to a minimum such a life, in order not to have to do all that the animal does. In the void left by advancement beyond the animal state, man vacillates in a series of non-biological duties which are imposed upon him not by nature, but which are invented by himself. And it is precisely this invented life, invented just as one invents a novel or a play, that man calls human life, well-being.¹⁰

In a word, is Ellwood’s conception of moral progress similar to Ortega’s in arguing that human beings, unlike other living things, are not limited by natural circumstance because they can, so to speak, reform nature through technical invention and accomplishment? Or is it closer to August Comte’s positivism which Ellwood describes this way:

[W]hat Comte really stands for in the history of social thought is the mechanical or physical theory of society. With Comte “social physics” and

9. Ellwood clarifies elsewhere: “When we study thoroughly, for example, the use of narcotics in human society, we are in position to see what a reasonable social standard regarding their use should be, despite the fact that the actual social standard may be very different. This illustration is sufficient to show that our value-judgments are, and should be, closely correlated with our fact-judgments. The social education of the future will recognize this and build upon the social sciences a social ethics; or rather the approach of education to social ethics will be through the social sciences.” Charles A. Ellwood, *Man’s Social Destiny* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1929), 172.

10. José Ortega y Gasset, “Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia” in *Ensimismamiento y alteración* (Buenos Aires: Espasa-Calpe, 1939). Passage translated by Samuel P. Moody.

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“sociology” were interchangeable terms, since in his view the phenomena of the physical world and of society are *of one sort*.¹¹

7. Does the existence of cultural relativity, as defined in the context of the evolution of societies by Ellwood, provide the basis for proving the legitimacy of ethical relativity? It may be of interest to note that anthropologists have rethought this question in light of the rise of Nazism. As Ted R. Vaughan, et al., notes, “The rise of Nazism and the resultant Holocaust undermined faith in ethical relativism.”¹²
8. Does Ellwood’s explanation of the progress of society preclude the possibility of establishing a stable society based on noncompetitive Utopian ideals? For this to occur, would the nature of man have to change or would not it be possible through social education and the judicious application of social norms?
9. Ellwood seems to assume that morality improves with social development, yet the results of each of his five chief effects of conflict on social evolution are negative: (1) Higher forms of social organization lead to more persons involved in conflict. (2) Despotic forms of government supercede the democratic and republican. (3) The inequality of social classes lead to class struggles. (4) Morality becomes a question of efficiently organizing against other groups. (5) The destruction of weaker groups result. On what basis does Ellwood extrapolate from these data to conclude first that there is moral progress and second to assume wars between nations represents an advance over wars among tribes? Would it be a reasonable inference from his account of the evolution to larger and more efficient organizations of government that world wars might result?
10. Ellwood presupposes that as groups consolidate through intergroup struggle, they give “rise to higher forms of social organization,” and “[a]fter a certain stage was reached groups tries not so much to exterminate one another as to conquer and absorb one another” which favored “the evolution of morality.” Are not the historical developments of the twentieth century a decisive counterexample to Ellwood’s argument?

It is a century which witnessed the Nazi Holocaust and Stalin’s Gulags, two world wars, well over 100 million killed in global and local conflicts, widespread unemployment and poverty, famines and epidemics, drug addiction and crime, ecological destruction and depletion of resources, tyrannies and dictatorships of all brands from fascism to communism, and, last

11. Charles A. Ellwood, “Aristotle as Sociologist” in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 19, No. 2 (March, 1902): 63-74.

12. Ted R. Vaughan, et al., *A Critique of Contemporary American Sociology* (Dix Hills, N.Y.: General Hall, 1993), 118. See also the extended argument given in Elvin Hatch, *Culture and Morality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

but not least, the ever present possibility of nuclear annihilation and global environmental catastrophe.¹³

Is it not arguable that the development of the identification of the group that is “most efficiently organized” and “with the most loyal and most self-sacrificing membership” is not at all what Ellwood asserts is “the evolution of morality” but, instead, quite the reverse?

*

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13. Piotr Sztompka, *The Sociology of Social Change* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993), 33.

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