

SPINOZA'S UNDERSTANDING OF 'CONATUS' AND EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS: TWO APPROACHES FOR SEARCH OF THE SOURCE OF MORALITY*

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Abstract

In this paper, two ethical theories are discussed: Spinozistic ethics and evolutionary ethics. The reason for evaluating these theories is because both of them start with the very same question: "what is good?" and they both underlie the importance of the benefits of morality. According to Spinoza's conatus doctrine, people called the thing as good which are good for their power to survive (conatus). While he points out the personal conatus, he also supports that living in a society is best for their personal conatus. For evolutionary ethics, social norms like morals are the result of living in a society. Moral judgments are crucial for cooperation and thus survival. With the light of these two ethical theories, in this paper, it will be argued that the main purpose of moral traits was to increase the collaboration and survival of the society and so to provide a more livable surrounding for the individuals. Therefore, today's multicultural societies the best thing for us to do is to capture the essence of the reason why we need morality in the first place. This will help us to create a more collaborative society.

Keywords: Ethics, Spinozistic Ethics, Evolutionary Ethics, Conatus Doctrine.

SPİNOZA'NIN CONATUS ANLAYIŞI VE EVRİMSEL ETİK: AHLAKIN KAYNAĞINA DAİR İKİ YAKLAŞIM

Özet

Bu makalede ahlakın kaynağına dair sorgulamalarda bulunan iki yaklaşım ele alınmaktadır. Bu yaklaşımlardan ilki felsefe tarihinde rasyonalizm akımının bir temsilcisi olarak bilinen Spinoza'nın yaklaşımı, ikincisi ise evrimin ahlakın kökeniyle ilgili getirmiş olduğu yaklaşımdır. Bu iki yaklaşım da ahlakın ortaya çıkışında insan rolüne vurgu yapmaktadırlar. Her ne kadar felsefe tarihinde ahlakın insan ihtiyaçlarıyla ilişkili olarak doğduğunu öne süren

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daha pek çok görüş bulunsa da, bu yazıda özellikle bu iki yaklaşımın seçilmesi tartışmanın sıhhati nedeniyledir. Spinoza'nın ahlak ile ilgili görüşleri onun 'conatus' doktrini ile yakından ilişkilidir. Buna göre ahlaki yargılarımız temelde varlığımızı devam ettirme isteğiyle açıklanmıştır. Spinoza'ya göre bir şey varlığını devam ettirmeme katkı sağlıyorsa 'iyi' olarak adlandırılmıştır. Evrimsel ahlak anlayışında ise hayatta kalmak için ahlaki yargıların önemli olduğu vurgusu yapılmaktadır. Bu iki yaklaşım ile ilgili belirtilmesi gereken en kritik hususlardan biri, ikisi de ahlaki reddetmemektedir. Yalnızca ahlakın çıkış noktalarıyla ilgili açıklamalar getirme gayretinde olan bu yaklaşımların temel farkı ise Spinoza'nın görüşü ahlakın daha çok bireysel yönüne vurgu yaparken, evrimsel ahlak görüşü toplumsal yönüne dikkat çekmektedir. Buna göre Spinoza ahlaki yargıların oluşmasında bireysel çıkar ve faydaların öncelikli rol oynadığını önermektedir. Ancak evrimsel ahlak görüşü ise bir toplumun çıkar ve faydalarının birincil rolü üstlendiğini savunmaktadır. Ahlakın kaynağına dair getirdikleri bu açıklamalar doğrultusunda, bu yazının ana gayesi öncelikle bu iki yaklaşımın temel dayanak noktalarını ve argümanlarını açıklamaktır. Buradan hareketler ahlaki yargıların ilk çıkış noktaları ve nedenleri tartışılacaktır. Ahlakın çıkış nedenlerini hatırlamak bugün çok kültürlü toplumlardaki farklılıklar dolayısıyla yaşanan sorunlara bir çözüm üretmede ve daha beraberlik içinde yaşayan bir toplum oluşmasına katkı sunacaktır.

Geleneksel ahlaktan biraz daha farklı bir ahlak teorisi öneren Spinoza'nın ahlaka dair görüşleri onun metafiziğe ve Tanrı'ya dair görüşleriyle bir uyum içerisindedir. Buna göre Spinoza *Ethica* adlı eserinde öncelikli olarak metafizik argümanlar öne sürmektedir. Onun evren görüşünün merkezinde Tanrı anlayışı yer almaktadır. Bu eserinde Spinoza yalnızca tek bir tözün olduğunu savunmuş, geri kalan her şeyin bu tözün bir yansıması ve sıfatı olduğunu belirtmiştir. Oldukça monist bir tutuma sahip olan Spinoza'ya göre bu töz Tanrı ya da ona eş anlamlı olarak kullandığı Doğa'dır. Ona göre Tanrı evrende herhangi bir amaca sahip olmaksızın yaratımda bulunur. Eğer Tanrı'nın bir gayesi olsaydı, bunun O'nda bir eksikliğin olduğu anlamına gelirdi. Dolayısıyla Tanrı'nın herhangi bir amacı bulunmamaktadır. O varlığı gereği zorunlu olarak yaratır. Ancak insanlar bu duruma cahil oldukları için O'nun tüm bu yaratımda bir amacı olduğuna inanmaktadırlar. Bu yanlış inanç sonucu insanoğlu Tanrı'nın yapılmasını istediği ve istemedi hatta yasakladığı bazı insan eylemleri olduğunu düşündüler. Aslında, Spinoza'ya göre, tüm bu yanlış inançlar insanların şeylerin gerçek nedenlerini bilmemelerinden kaynaklanmaktadır. Bu cehalet onları her şeyin kendileri için yaratılmış olduğu ve bunları yaratanın kendilerinden bir beklentisi olduğu sonucuna götürdü. Ancak Tanrı mükemmel olduğu için yaratması bir neden

dayanmaz. Her şeyin kendileri için yaratıldığını düşünen insanlar kendilerine iyi gibi görünen şeylere iyi, kötü gelen şeylere ise kötü demişlerdir. Spinoza bu 'iyi gelme' ve 'kötü gelme'yi kişinin varlığını devam ettirme gücüne (*conatus*) katkı ya da zarar veren olarak tanımlamaktadır. Dolayısıyla bir kişi kendi *conatus'*una olumlu etkilerde bulunan şeylere ya da aksiyonlara iyi, olumsuz etkilerde bulunanlara ise kötü demektedir. Görüldüğü üzere Spinoza'da ah-laki yargılar oldukça subjektif bir yapıdadır. Ancak Spinoza'nın bu ahlak gö-rüşü, onu ideal insan modeline uygun bir ahlak teorisi geliştirmekten de alı-koymamıştır. Ona göre bu kişisel yargılara uygun olarak ortak iyiler de bulu-nabilir. Bir toplum içinde yaşamak kişinin kendi varlığını devam ettirmesi için oldukça faydalıdır ve ortak iyi olarak belirlenebilir. Spinoza'ya göre or-taya konulacak her ahlak teorisinin akla bağlı/akıl ürünü (mind-dependent) olduğu bilinirse, felsefi bir geçerliliğe sahip bir ahlak teorisi de geliştirilebilir.

İnsanlarda ahlaki duyarlılığın nasıl geliştiği konusu evrimsel ahlaka göre toplum içinde yaşamının getirmiş olduğu bir özellik dolayısıyladır. Evrimsel ahlak görüşü temelde ahlaki yargıların da diğer pek çok insan özelliği gibi doğal seçim yoluyla atalarımızdan aktarıldığını öne sürmektedir. Bu görüşe göre insanlar sosyal varlık olmaları gereği toplu içinde yaşamak durumunda-dırlar. Toplum içinde yaşamının getirmiş olduğu yararlar bireylerin hayatta kalmaları için oldukça kritiktir. Ancak toplum içinde yaşamın beraberinde ge-tirdiği birtakım sosyal normlar da mevcuttur. Ahlak kuralları da bu normlar-dan biridir. Bu kurallara uyum sağlayamayan bireyler toplumdan dışlanmak ve tek başlarına hayatta kalıp nesillerini devam ettirmeye çalışmak durumun-dadır. Ancak tek başına hayat buna elverişli olmadığı için, toplumsal norm-lara uyum sağlayamayan bireyler zamanla elenmiş oldular. Dolayısıyla ev-rimsel ahlak için ahlak sosyal ihtiyaçlara cevap olarak doğmuştur. Toplumun çıkarlarına uyum olarak şekillenmiştir.

Evrimsel ahlak da Spinoza'nın ahlak anlayışı da ahlakın pratik faydala-rını göz önüne sermektedir. Ahlakın insan aklından başka (özellikle ilahi) bir kaynağı olmadığını ve bu yüzden dogmatlaştırılması da yine insan ürünü ol-duğunu vurgulamaktadır. Bu yazıda vurgulanmak istenen asıl nokta da bu-dur. Ahlakın insanları ortak bir paydada toparlayan yapısı bu iki görüş aracılı-lığıyla belirtilmiştir. Bugünün çok kültürlü toplumlarında daha sağlıklı bir toplum hayatı için ahlakın dogmatlaşmasını değil, pratik faydaları daha çok

konusulmalıdır. Ahlaki yargıların ilk baştan neden ortaya çıktığı anlaşılırsa daha kooperatif toplum hayatı oluşturulabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ahlak Felsefesi, Spinoza, Evrimsel Ahlak, Conatus Doktrini

Introduction

Ethics had been arguing from different perspectives, firstly it was a topic of religions and philosophy, then science got in the work of searching of ethics. In this paper, we will focus on Spinoza's doctrine of conatus and the suggestions of evolutionary ethics. We will try to find what the similarities are and the differences between these two views, about their suggestions of what are the causes of why we are making moral judgments. The reason to search for these two ethical approaches is to come up with a different perspective on the source of moral judgments and to shed light on to the problems of today's multicultural society. Besides these two approaches, there are some other philosophical theories which suggest that ethics emerged by human needs; Nietzsche's understanding of will to power may be given as an example of these. However, for the sake of argument, we choose only two of these theories.

One possible question on this might be that how there can be a comparison between Spinozistic ethics and evolutionary ethics, since even though the fact that evolutionary thesis began in the ancient philosophy, it had not a clear cut argument which put forwards the evolutionary thought concerning ethics. The time for the clear argumentation of the evolutionary thesis should wait for Charles Darwin's works. It is right to say that Spinoza was aware of the evolutionary ethics is obviously wrong, though one can see some similar points in his arguments with evolutionary ethics. Both of the arguments focus on the causes that why we call something or some actions as good and bad, and both of them suggest that there is anything that is inherently good or there is nothing bad in itself. What could be said for both of the arguments is that they claim that we call the things which are beneficial for us or society as good and harmful for us or the society bad. On the other hand, Spinoza's doctrine of conatus mainly stresses on the personal advantage while the evolutionary thesis focused on the group's advantage for calling the things as good or bad. Thereby, in this paper, the first thing for us to do is to focus on Spinoza's ethical arguments, secondly we will turn to evolutionary ethics, and lastly we will compare these two arguments. In the light of these two approaches to moral judgments, we will see that there are no good or bad things in themselves. By enlightening the shadows of the moral judgments, we could see the

reason why we built them in the first place and by this, we could generate a more collaborative and empathetic society.

1. Spinoza's Approach to Morals

If ethics would be considered not just as it is a traditional judgment, Spinoza would be one of the first destinations with his understanding of morality under the scope of "conatus". His ethical theory is sharply different from modern ethical theories and also from the ethical perspective that religions found, as well. He does not purpose such a theory in which there are obligatory rules which are ethically good, if one obeys and bad, if he or she does not obey this rule. Spinoza claims that these kinds of obligatory theories about morals are based on inadequate knowledge on final cause and free will. His theory suggests that moral judgments depend on "conatus" which is the desire to continue one's existence. In other words, morality and enlightened self-interests converge in upon a common point. Our moral judgments are shaped by the effects of the objects or events on our power to continue our existence. We are basically claiming that the objects as good if they are helpful for us to continue our existence. Therefore, our conatus and morality encounter at the same point. The emotions, desires, and bodies of human beings are essential in Spinoza's moral view. In this respect, in this part of the paper the notions of good and bad (or perfection and imperfection) and the misunderstandings about the final cause, nature, and free will, will be examined under the scope of the understanding of conatus. Firstly, the importance of Spinoza's view and its difference from the other classical moral systems will be mentioned. Secondly, our misunderstanding about the nature and its aims will be discussed. Then, briefly conatus doctrine will be explained and in this respect, the questions of what is good and what is bad, will be answered.

In many theological books, in some various ways, generally, we see a kind of hierarchical relationship, between the figures or sources of this theology, is founded. Sometimes God is at the top of this hierarchy and all other creatures are determined with his volition. In addition to this, they act with this determination. In these systems they act good and bad; acquire merits and sin according to the rules of God. In many holy books, the scenario is more or less similar. Sometimes, we see that in this hierarchy human beings are aggrandized and this time it is said that there are just moral values that are endemic to human beings. These values again will be called good and bad.

On the other hand, Spinoza, in *Ethics*, starts with a very general step which is there is only one substance that everything, that is happening, is generated from it. This substance directly exists without depending on any other thing or persona. This only substance as a thing in itself is nothing but God or in the same meaning Nature. Human beings are just mere modes of this

substance. The creation of the things in nature is not a creation that is caused by God's free will; rather it is caused by the nature of this substance. For Spinoza "that eternal and infinite being we call God, or Nature, acts from the same necessity from which he exists" (qtd in Nadler, 2006: 216).

From this totally different understanding of God or Nature, Spinoza builds a different concept for the morality in which he claims that our whole established systems are just based on wrong interpretation of God or Nature and its ends. In fact, Spinoza (1992) clearly mentions that there is no end of Nature, this is just a wrong belief caused by our misunderstanding. What Spinoza claims is that "so the reason or cause why God, or Nature, acts and the reason or cause why he exists, are one and the same" (153). Likewise, there is no reason for the existence of God, there is no reason or cause for his acting. When we consider that God has an end, this misunderstanding leads us to form some definitions for the terms "good" and "bad". The good things or acts, as we sometimes perceive, are the acts that Gods wants us to do, and the bad acts are the ones that Gods does not want or sometimes forbid us to perform. For instance, some people understand the terms 'good' and 'bad' in terms of conformity/violation of divine law. However, since God doesn't act on a reason or cause, such an understanding will be misleading.

According to Spinoza, people are actually ignorant of the causes of the things but because of the misunderstandings, they consider themselves as conscious. Hence, they believe that they have free will. Men thought that everything around them is acting with some ends like us. That is why they assume that Nature also has an end. However, Spinoza claims that to think that Nature has an end is just a human imagination. If Nature has an end then that would mean that it is not perfect. Since, if God or Nature seeks for an end, he would lack something. Therefore, God should not have an end. To give an example, consider that there is a river and people try to get one coast from the other by boats. The first boat goes with no problem, but while the second boat is going cross, the wind changes its velocity and volume, or a tree fell into the river. That is why the second boat could not go cross. In this case, will we ask the Nature that what its aim is? Such a question would seem very ridiculous for Spinoza; we rather would say that this is its nature. The same thing is valid for when we are supposing that God has an end.

In the appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*, Spinoza enlightened humans' misunderstandings about God and Nature. What he says briefly is as follows: we are as human beings came to this world and opened our eyes here. When we opened our eyes, we saw the sun to give us light; we saw the animals for us to eat meat, the water for us to drink. We wrongly imagined that everything was created for us to survive/stay alive. Because we comprehend

that everything for our interest and for the reasons that we did not have any effects these things to become a body, we started to believe that there should be someone else who created these things as a grace for ourselves. We created, as a result, some rules in order to worship the governor of the nature; this is why men try to understand the final causes of the things. Spinoza (1992) thinks that "everything is predetermined by God, not from his free will or absolute pleasure but from the absolute nature of God, his infinite power" (57). Therefore, since God actually follows no end, he created everything by its nature; our attempt to search final causes is rather empty trials which is the result of our interpretation of the Nature or God.

After men believed that whole things around them are created for their advantage, then they start to think that the most beneficial things for themselves—in other words, the things that affect me in pleasure—are the things which are the most excellent ones. Therefore, they found some categories to identify the "nature of things" (Spinoza, 1992: 60). In this respect "good", "bad", "beauty", "ugliness" become as forms of things. Human beings think that a thing which is good for them is good from its nature, and a bad thing for them is considered as bad from its nature. Humans just imagine things but do not intellect and understand the nature of things.

Spinoza understands the word perfection as complete and the word imperfection as incomplete. If we called something perfect then we should know its conclusion— it is complete. If I claim that something is imperfect, then this means that I know its complete version or the intention of the author. However, this cannot be valid for the nature because we do not have a chance to guess the intention of the Nature. That is why we cannot make judgments about its perfection or imperfection. Hence, humans use these terms just because of the preconceptions by habit, but our judgments do not base on true knowledge (Spinoza, 1992: 153). These concepts are our inventions generated from our comparison of kinds. The terms "good" and "bad" could be mentioned in the same way. Rather, they call them as good and bad in accordance with their effects on us, if they give us pleasure they are consequently good, and if they give us pain they will be called as bad. They are just modes of things that we gain from the comparisons with other modes of things. Spinoza gives some examples like music is good for one but not good for another man. In other words, imaginations are shaped by the accustomed considerations about the subjects' own point of view, and they could change one person to another. By this, he shows that the relative nature of ethics.

Additionally, he makes a connection between our use of the terms of "good" and "bad" with the desire to continue to our existence. With this respect, Spinoza's views about ethics are important for the field. In *Theological-*

Political Treatise Spinoza (2012) mentions that “each person thinks he alone knows everything and wants everything done his way and judges a thing fair or unfair, right or wrong, to the extent he believes it works for his own gain or loss” (210). With these actually it looks like though he offers us a subjective understanding of the terms “good” and “bad” or “right” and “wrong”.

With the light of this understanding, good and bad do not involve any transcendental or divine meaning which comes from outside of the Nature. They merely have meaning by their relation between its nature and one's body. They will have beneficial or harmful as a result of their correspondence with me. That is why our understanding of good and bad have a close relation with our conatus which is the desire to continue my existence. The conatus doctrine claims that “the tendency towards self- preservation (perseverance in being) becomes, a priori, an essential and defining features of the nature of all individual things, including all human beings” (Garrett, 1996: 271). If something beneficial for my conatus, or if something gives me pleasure, then I will claim this thing as good. If, however, this thing is not beneficial or it is harmful to my conatus, then I will assume that this is bad. He claims that the things that have the same or similar effects with the things that are good for my conatus will be called as good because of my imagination. The first danger in here, according to Spinoza, is that these kinds of judgments are based on imaginations and thus they can be wrong. These terms will be representing my desires about the object (LeBuffe, 2010: 154). The second danger is people can call different things as good and bad so this can end up with conflict between people. For him, these terms are closely related to our understandings. For example, a piece of music could be good for me but it is neither good nor bad for a deaf. Spinoza (1992) states that “So we see that men are in the habit of calling natural phenomena perfect or imperfect from their own preconceptions rather than from true knowledge” (153). This habit is caused by our misunderstanding of the Nature so that we established some rules for morality. Spinoza states that we do not desire anything because it is good; rather we call something good because we want to gain it, or desire it. Thereby, there is not a transcendental “good” that we have a duty to reach it because the term good takes its reference from the desire to exist of the implicit modes of nature. Moreover, it is an occasional and relative notion.

According to Spinoza just and unjust, merit and sin will not have a place in the ethical usage. “These terms receive an ethical use in Ethics, and they are applied to ethical questions in his other writings only in connection with the imaginative idea of that God is himself a law-giver” (Garrett, 1996: 286). From this, it is declared that there is a sovereign right for all the individuals who allow them to do everything that they can do, because of the fact that the

supreme law of the nature permits the individuals to exist or behave in a way in which what their nature determined to act like (Spinoza, 2012: 196).

Even though Spinoza's understanding of morality could be seen too subjective, his task at the end of the day is to submit a concept for a better model of human nature. In Nadler's words his aim "is to show human beings how to achieve a model of life that largely transcends merely transitory desires and which has as its natural consequences autonomous control over the passions and particular in an eternal blessedness" (Nadler, 2006: 268). He does not deny the possibility of a common good, even for him it could be indicated that because we have a common nature, we could also share a "common good, be beneficial to one another, and together compose a more powerful society" (Hübner, 2014: 127). Even if we know that every model for human nature will be a mind-dependent model, we could establish a philosophically legitimate model. According to this model, human beings get nearer to reasoning if they are getting closer to their nature. This model will be permitting us to determine the real nature of things. The things which make us closer to our nature are the things which make us more powerful and perfect. The reason why this theory puts emphasis on reason is that we are using our rationality to build our judgments about what is good and bad which are not merely imaginative generalizations. Spinoza describes his model of human nature as the wise man will be the one who is free and reasons. Since he thinks that it will be useful to have such a "model of human nature we set before ourselves". The men are perfect or imperfect in accordance with the closeness of that model. In this sense, reason plays a huge role because as Spinoza states that reason cannot demand anything contrary to nature, it demands from the man to get the greater perfection. Perfection has the meaning of power which is the capacity to continue one's own existence (Garrett, 1996: 276; Nadler, 2006: 215).

In this sense, in order to survive or to become more perfect, one should try to increase his or her power, and the more power he has, the longer he will survive. The next step Spinoza's reasoning is just to say that the best way to become more powerful for human beings is to cooperate with each other. In this way, to make sure that every individual member of the group can depend on the power of the group for their protection. The basic idea of the model is that it is true that living in a society where people support each other is the best way if we want to survive or become more powerful in terms of survival. Then, what is good for us to do is to behave in a way that will allow cooperation and a society which is free from conflict. In the fourth book of *Ethics*, Spinoza recommends about what is truly good and bad that a person should act in such a way that maintains the cooperative nature of society. Since it is always the case that living in such a society will be better for one's survival

than to conflict with others. If this is the case then, all behaviors that support our collaborative environment will be called good.

What Spinoza suggests about how one can be a virtuous person is that there is good and bad even they are relative. He calls the term good as one's approaching to get closer to the model of human nature. If something is decreasing the possibility of producing this model, then this thing will be called as "bad". According to this, there is an objective understanding of "good" and "bad" that people could follow. He states that the answer of the question of what is good underlies the concept of perfectionism. This suggests that "the good is whatever makes us more perfect" (LeBuffe, 2015) and the reverse will be called as bad. By the knowledge, we can become more powerful since true knowledge which gained by reason will "go directly to the good". Also, Spinoza claims that the power of a single man would not be sufficient to conceive lots of things in nature because those men are needed other men, in other words, they need cooperation to reach the knowledge of nature. According to Spinoza's doctrine, altruistic behaviors could be answered as follows: people should want the best for themselves and cooperation, as seen before, is the best for people, it is also the best for the society. Being more perfect means that being complete which means that getting closer to one's own nature. He mentions that perfection implies a "model of human nature that we set before ourselves" (LeBuffe, 2015). If I am acting in accordance with my nature, then this means that I am acting on my form without any change. By acting like this I am in the way to be more perfect because I am making real my existence. If I am trying to change my form, basically I am trying to change my nature. That is why I am getting less perfect. Spinoza explains this with an example in the preface of the book 4 in Ethics. According to this example, if a horse completely changes itself as a man, then this means that it destroyed itself and thus we cannot talk about it anymore. That is why according to Spinoza the main thing is that we should not try to change ourselves rather we should act in accordance with our nature. In addition to this, he states that perfection is about the duration of a force that makes a thing itself, and by the essence of a thing this duration is already determined by its nature. That is why there is nothing more perfect or less perfect thing.

Spinoza is a philosopher whose task is to build a philosophically legitimate theory of morality in accordance with human nature. That is why he illustrates a model of human nature. As it is mentioned before, Spinoza offers a totally rigid theory of ethics. He claims that there is only one substance which is God or Nature. From this beginning, he founds a different relation between human beings and things around them. Human beings wrongly believed that everything should have an end, even God has an end. However, if

God had an end, then he would be imperfect because he would lack something. According to Spinoza God created the world without any certain aim but just because of his nature. Human beings wrongly think that the thing which is good for them is good from its nature, and the bad for them is considered as bad from its nature. These terms are relative and changes in accordance with the nature of the perceiver. Spinoza states that we do not desire anything because it is good; rather we call something good because we desire it. We think that there are some good things and bad things from their nature, but we perceive that as good or bad just because their accordance with our conatus. There is not a fundamental form for good and bad, which we have to act on them, that established by God. Even though there is another understanding of the terms "good" and "bad" which is objective and related to human nature and also that could lead us to good or morally good people. According to Spinoza, the claim is that the rules of society are always good. This is the objectivity of Spinoza's understanding of morality. With this in mind, if we also think about the idea of evolutionary ethics we could find a connection between these two ideas and find an answer to the aforementioned question.

2. Suggestions of Evolutionary Ethics

Many questions about human behavior find their answer in an evolutionary aspect. Even though some of the evolutionary accounts seem speculative, many scientists suggest that now it is time to look at ethics with a biologist's glasses (FitzPatrick, 2006). There is a broad spectrum of the issues in ethics that are now being discussed by Darwinian accounts. One of the issues is about the discussion of how human beings came to have a moral sensibility or faculty of moral judgment on evolutionary grounds. Another issue is about what evolutionary theory would suggest about meta-ethical questions. In this part of the paper, the concern will be mainly on the evolutionary accounts of human understanding of morality and what the source of our moral judgments would be. We will start with the very basic concept of the quick judgments of human beings and continue with some evolutionary explanations of such quick judgments.

Human beings, in their daily life, have to make quick judgments about the situations that they encounter. Consider that I show you two pictures of two different kinds of snakes, one of them has unnatural shiny colors (like reddish and yellowish colors), the other snake, however, has relatively natural colors (let us say brownish colors). Your reaction toward the first snake, as might be expected, would be "Oh my God, that shiny snake looks dangerous; I should stay away from that". What is the thing that makes you think like that? Maybe an instinct? One might easily accept that these kinds of quick

judgments were seriously important for our ancestors. How about today's people?

Edward O. Wilson (2013) starts his book called *In Search of Nature* by mentioning human attitudes toward snakes and why the myths about snakes and dragons are so widespread (11-37). Even in eastern part of Turkey, there is a myth about basilisk, who is a half-snake, half-woman. Wilson (2013) states that snakes, spiders, and those kinds of creatures are the main objects of human phobias. Today there are more dangerous objects like our cell phones with radiation waves or electricity, but there are no such common phobias like electro phobia or radiophobia (37). This claim basically points out how important our instincts, which are transmitted from our ancestors by natural selection, for *Homo sapiens'* life even today, 21st century. There is a danger about these instincts, which constitute our moral understandings, that is they can sometimes be misleading like the imaginative generalizations as Spinoza claims.

Wilson (2013) claims that if termites could organize a civil and developed culture, morally good actions and bad actions would be totally different. For instance, they would support to eat the injured and sick members of the group, refuse individual reproduction and the exchange of excrements would be a religious ceremony. With this point of view moral judgments settle in a society with learning; they give the tendency to people obtain certain kinds of knowledge. These are genetically come into existence since in human culture they provide reproduction and survival (Wilson, 2013: 187; Kitcher, 2006a: 166,170).

What basically evolutionary accounts of morality claim is that our moral understanding comes from our ancestors' social intuitions by natural selection. "Darwin believed that the human moral sense grew out of the social instincts of other animals, and modern primatological research supports him" (Haidt, 2001: 826). In other words, humans and other hominid species are social creatures and tend to live with a society. While living in a society they established some social norms. According to Darwinian theories, "natural selection led to the development of some basic psychological capacities and dispositions in our remote ancestors. And as a result, we have a non-reflective tendency to form certain basic moral beliefs" (Copp, 2008: 188). If we consider some examples we can get how natural selection works here. For many people, incestuous relations between people are immoral or at least distracting. Since in these kinds of relations there might be dangerous results such as death birth or babies with disability could be born. These kinds of members obviously will not help for this society to survive. That is why, the members try not to get in such relations and in time this became a trait of human beings

(Haidt, 2001: 826). From this perspective, one can infer that there is an adaptive link, which causes us to have some certain moral belief. If we consider some social norms, we can see that many of them have practical benefits for the society and evolutionary ethics does not deny this reality. However, its aim is to enlighten and understand the reasons sources of such norms. For some biologists, like Frans De Waal (2009), that if we understand these norms in such a perspective, we can build a more empathetic and open-minded society. Since every culture has different argumentation about morality, also they have different evolutionary history. That is why, if we understand the reasons why we came to have different moral judgments, this will make our collaboration increase.

Many psychologists and biologists support that people have a tendency to have moral behaviors –like altruism- because of the fact that reciprocal expectations, (see Copp, 2008; Kitcher, 2006a and Williams, 1993) which is the expectations that a certain action will have a similar response in return. In the case of altruism, we can think of a mother who tries to protect her children whatever happens. Why does she do this? Since it is important to continue to her generations. Obviously, this lays out in our sub-conscious. Consider another type of social intuition, which will find its source in natural selection, kin selection. People like other animals have a tendency to help or protect the member of their own kin groups.

One might ask that how natural selection works. Consider the snake example again. If one is not able to distinguish the poisonous one from the other, then his chance to survive will decrease. By this, the one who can distinguish two kinds of snakes from each other will have a higher chance to reproduce. Since they may have a longer life. In time, members of the first group will disappear and the second group will increase. As a result, we are able to guess the difference between the snakes. This scenario is not very different for the social life of *Homo sapiens*. Since, in order to survive, they have to live together and need to fit into the group norms. The ones who adapted to these norms stayed alive and increased their chance of reproduction because if one has a bad reputation about being a parent other members would refute to mate with that member. Hence, today we give importance to parental care and judge the “bad” and “good” parents. All these traits that we have now came with natural selection (Ruse and Wilson, 1986: 176). From an evolutionary perspective morality like other traits is created because of the needs of the society. Cooperation is crucial for social societies like ours. That is why evolutionary thought gives emphasis on morality as well. “... Morality is located in a group's efforts to solve cooperation and commitment problems” (Haidt, 2001: 826). Therefore, we have a tendency to recognize the behaviors

that are beneficial for group as “required” social norms. An example will be helpful to illustrate this claim, which is the Selfish Gene theory. According to the Selfish Gene theory, natural selection enhances or pushes the member to pick to the option which is good for their kin group in order for their genes to reproduce even if it is individually bad. By this, their generation would survive and continue to exist (Joyce, 2013: 5). That is why, many male members spent their time to compete and fight, rather than live in peace (Harari, 2016: 384).

Let us back to the example of snakes. If one says that this is because of an instinct, many of us would easily expect that. However, when it comes to ethics many people deny that our understanding of morality which are based on some social norms is because of evolutionary roots, even if they cannot know what the reasons for morality are. Jonathan Haidt (2001), in his paper called “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgments” mentions about incest relations between brothers and sisters. Even though there is no harm to both of the sides, they state that they will never do this again. This story makes people feel disgusted and any of the people will say that this is wrong. When the reason is asked why it is wrong, people reply that “I do not know, I cannot explain it, I just know that it is wrong.” Actually, according to Haidt this is not because of reasoning and not knowledge (814). Frans De Waal (2009) claims that when they are saying that it's wrong, people are trying to say that incest relations can cause the birth of abnormal children, but basically they are not aware of it (20). They are insisting that the incest relations are immoral; even though do not know why. According to the evolutionary thesis, the reason of the incest taboo is that there were happening child births with disabilities, and the members who have disabilities are not very useful for the society. Since they cannot escape in a dangerous situation, and also they needed care. Obviously, those members and who have the responsibility over them, could not fit into the group, thus they did not survive. By the natural selection, it is implemented into the society that incest relations are not good for the society. Therefore, it became a taboo. This will have a different explanation of Spinoza's arguments. The moral conviction for Spinoza would be that they are the result of habituation of men in accordance with their experience of pleasure or pain.

To find rational reasons for our behaviors a typical human behavior. Consider the following example: An English man, Clive Wearing was an

amnesia patient; he lost his short term memory. When he turns his head, he thinks that people change their clothes. He writes his dairy these lines:

8.31: Now, I am completely aware of myself.

9.06: Now, I am absolutely regaining my consciousness.

9.34: Now, I am truly aware of myself.

When his doctors showed one of his videos in which he plays piano, he admits that he is himself but he denies that he was conscious while playing the piano. When doctors ask questions about that time, he gets angry and said "how can I know? I was not aware of myself" (Kean, 2014: 332). The point of this example is to illustrate that our brain has a tendency to rationalize everything and could not admit something irrational. That is why; it could be hard to believe that our behaviors are not based on a kind of reasoning. Thereby, we can just say that "I do not know why but I know that incest is wrong." whereas, many of our moral judgments about good and bad caused by our cultures which are transmitted by our ancestors and dated back to a very long time. This example shows that we have tendency to find the so-called rational reasons to make ourselves believe and when someone appears and says that this reason is not a very good explanation we find this unacceptable. This can be related to what Spinoza claims about how we came to believe that some things are good and bad. In both cases we are not aware of the actual reasons but just assume that this is the case.

"Our coffee habit comes from our genes." "Psychologists state that the children who have crime genes should be educated differently." We are encountering in newspapers or journals many of these kinds of debates, in every day new connections between our behaviors and our genes are being found. On the evolutionary accounts, we are not really different from other hominids, but because of different psychological capacities, we believe that our behaviors are directed by our reasoning procedures. What evolutionary ethics offer is that some of our social norms are encoded in our genes, and come via natural selection. The question of what is good and bad finds an answer as follows; we get used to calling the things which help us to reproduce and survive as good.

On the other hand, this does not mean that morality should be eliminated our lives. Rather for evolutionary thought when we find sources of moral judgments, we can become more open-minded towards the others. This will obviously enhance the cooperation and empathy in the society. It is essential in a society to have more cooperation and thus the aim of the evolutionary

perspective on morality is just to analyze the relation between the strength of the society and social norms like moral judgments.

3. Comparison of Spinozistic Ethics and Evolutionary Ethics

After mentioning these two accounts of morality, it is time to turn to discuss about whether there can be similar points that evolutionary ethics and Spinozistic ethics share. There are some points that both accounts offer, but there are also different suggestions of these two views. Firstly, the differences will be mentioned. The main difference of these accounts is that while evolutionary ethics' focus is more social effects to our understanding of moral judgments, Spinozistic account of ethics generally focused on personal judgments. In evolutionary perspective, we have moral judgments with respect to social benefits but in Spinozistic account, our moral judgments are shaped by our personal "conatus". For instance; for the second case, I am claiming that the action "x" is morally bad since it affects my conatus in a negative way, and in the first case I am saying the same action is morally bad since, its effect to the kin group is negative. The first claim could be count as a Spinozistic attribution but the second claim obviously belongs to the evolutionary ethics. Evolutionary explanations of morality, our understanding of morals comes from thousands and hundred years ago by natural selection. Sometimes the selective mechanism is group selection, sometimes gene selection or sometimes species selection (Mackie,1978: 456). That is why; people could sacrifice themselves for the sake of their group. On the other hand, Spinoza would claim that the basis for moral understanding comes from the individual instinct of survival. There could be cooperation but again they are helpful for the individual survival, not for the sake of the group benefits. Therefore, the difference of these two accounts is about the basis of our moral judgments.

The main point on these two approaches is to illuminate the source of ethics and what we can say for today. Even though they both show that the benefits of society and individual are crucial for ethics, they try to provide some answers for problems in their times. I think the most important and remarkable similarity is about the goodness and badness of the things or actions. Actually both of the accounts clearly state that there is no moral value of the things' or actions' itself. We claim that certain things as morally good or bad in accordance with the social returns or our "conatus". There are morally good things and morally bad things just because our attributions to them. By this it is clear that none of the views rejects the existence of such attributions, besides both of admits and stresses that there are practical advantages of making such judgments. However, there is still a difference for the basis of how they are beneficial. Spinoza states that it is about reflectiveness and evolutionary ethics stresses the instinctiveness. Since, if we do not have such

judgments, it would be seriously hard to live because in order to live we need to recognize that which actions are good for us and which of them bad for us or which cause to a decrease in my power to live and which are cause to an increase in my "conatus".

According to Spinoza's point of view, there is a universal power of nature, and this power is nothing but the sum of the power of each individual. Therefore, the essence of anything depends on the power to be and behave, of the same thing (Curley, 1979: 369; Hübner, 2014: 131). Hence being in a group will always become with individual benefits as well. Evolution always looks for a benefit for the society. Since for evolutionary thought if one human trait is common in the society, there is almost always some practical utility for society.

Analyzing the source of moral judgments, none of these theories suggest that moral judgments and morality should be removed. While evolutionary ethics emphasize the source and thus relativity of moral judgments, Spinozistic ethics tries to offer a philosophically legitimate theory on ethics.

From both of these theories, it could be concluded that the source of ethical judgments depends on us individual or social. These ethical judgments exist for us to continue our lives and generations. If this is so, one thing for us to do is to question how moral judgments work today. Even though they are helping for us to share common values as a group, they do not always work as they should do. It may be because of our multicultural societies today. When multicultural groups come across, the moral values of these groups also clash. In order to solve these problems we should reconsider the aim of morality. These two ethical theories provide a way to a better understanding of morality without eliminating it. This way might lead us to a much more harmonious society.

Conclusion

Obviously, to find a connection between Spinoza's claims and evolutionary theory would seem very speculative attempt because of the time difference. Spinoza had nothing to do with the evolutionary theory but the main concern of this paper, as shown that both of the theories actually do mention that even though the fact that there is a practical usage of the moral judgments, there is not a good or bad thing in its essence. In our daily life, we are concerning their effects on our life in terms of our social group's chance of reproduction or conatus. From these suggestions, it could be stated that our moral judgments based on so relative grounds, there is no certain absolutely morally bad thing or absolute morally good thing. Since, as Wilson (2013) states in his book that if ant's civilization would be the most developed civilization, our moral judgments would be totally different (185), for example we

would be giving each other our excrements and this would be called morally good action since it would be caused an increase our conatus, or as in the example of music and deaf person. If this relativity would be understood, then it would be easier for us to live and enable us to build a more collaborative society.

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