Mill, Darwin, and Utilitarian Moral Science

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When the prominent Victorian contemporaries J.S. Mill and Charles Darwin are read together today they are often put in opposition to one another. Commentators have good reason for this. Darwin is seen as founding a tradition of natural science that informs modern theories of human nature, and Mill as founding a tradition of social science that is skeptical of such theories. And Darwin in his Descent of Man explicitly opposes his evolutionary ethics to Mill’s utilitarianism, in order to counter the insufficient naturalism of utilitarian rationalism.

Mill and Darwin have also been opposed to one another on questions of gender and sexuality. In Descent of Man, Darwin expresses skepticism about Mill’s feminism. And late in his life Darwin provided testimony against the defendants in a birth-control trial, defendants who had partly justified their actions using Mill as an authority. In discussing both of these examples, commentators tend to relate them back to a strong contrast between Darwin and Mill on nature, human nature, and equality.

In my essay I propose to counter this received wisdom with a reading that brings Mill and Darwin much closer together, as joint proponents of a progressive human nature understood in terms of a utilitarian moral science. Reading them in this way is by no means new when done separately. Within the specialist communities of Mill and Darwin scholarship Mill is recognized as a naturalist (e.g. Skorupski) and Darwin as a social thinker (e.g. Desmond and Moore). But these readings have not been sufficiently brought together, and thus the implications of doing so have not been thought through.

Our distinction between the natural and social sciences was not Mill’s or Darwin’s or that of their immediate contemporaries. Mill, in the Logic, distinguishes instead between the physical and moral sciences, which do not quite map the natural and the social. What Mill and Darwin share as moral scientists is a preoccupation with character. This preoccupation has significant implications for the art and science of government—Mill’s project, if not Darwin’s—and Mill and Darwin’s shared fascination with character both reveals subtle pitfalls for utilitarian ethics and government, and contrasts importantly with other utilitarian possibilities. Just how is it that we do think, and how is it we should think, about the relationship between psychology on the one hand, and moral and political philosophy on the other? I propose to revisit Mill and Darwin through the lens of moral science in order to discuss this and related questions.