WESTERMARCK AND BEYOND:
EVOLUTIONARY APPROACHES TO MORALITY AND THEIR CRITICS
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1 General Description of the Project
The present research project will focus on evolutionary approaches to human behaviour as objects of study. It is based on the recognition that such approaches are, in themselves, worth examining – historically, methodologically, and conceptually. In other words, our aim is neither to apply evolutionary perspectives nor to reject them, but to highlight their meaning and their role in contemporary debates. At present, the legitimacy and relevance of evolutionary approaches to human behaviour are intensely debated. We believe that, in this situation, there is a need to address conceptual issues, such as the question what it means to claim that a feature of human behaviour is ‘based’ on biology. And, in order fully to understand the conflicting claims, we also need to understand their background in history and society. Without such analysis, there is a risk that those who adopt or reject evolutionary approaches literally do not know what they are doing.

For this purpose, the project brings together researchers from philosophy, sociology, history, and psychology. The aim is to create surplus value by establishing connections between existing research efforts.

Such analytic work obviously needs to address specific examples of the use of evolutionary approaches. We have chosen to focus, in particular though not exclusively, on the work of Edward Westermarck, the Finnish sociologist, philosopher and anthropologist (1862 – 1939), possibly the most famous scholar or scientist that Finland has ever produced. This is in part because of the inherent interest of his work and in part because of our unique access to relevant manuscript material. Part of this material is currently being digitised (scanned and transcribed) and published on the initiative of the Finnish Philosophy Web Portal (www.filosofia.fi), in collaboration with the Manuscript Department of Åbo Akademi Library, which houses the Westermarck collections. The portal follows the Open Access principle, and the material (now including 84 posts: 5 articles, 4 diary entries, 75 letters) is available over the Internet without restrictions and free of charge.

Funding is sought for research work by three postdoctoral researchers, for two PhD dissertations, travel costs for conference participation, an international symposium, and the costs of research workshops, to be arranged twice a year. This includes travel costs for team members and international guest speakers. In addition, funding is sought for expanding the Westermarck database available on the Internet. The copyright holders have agreed to the publication within the project. The project is planned to cover the calendar years of 2009, 2010 and 2011. The expected results include a number of articles in international and Finnish scientific/scholarly journals, two doctoral dissertations, an international symposium open for the public, and a joint volume based on presentations at the symposium and the workshops.

2 Main Themes
2.1 Introduction
Some time ago, Westermarck was simply known as a representative of evolutionist and comparativist social anthropology in its late (and now faded) Victorian heyday. However, the last few years have seen a renewed interest in his work, for several good reasons:

(1) Westermarck can be seen as a precursor of evolutionary psychology and other modern attempts to explain social behaviour in terms of evolutionary survival value. There is interest both in his specific claims and findings (notably ‘the Westermarck Effect’ as an explanation of incest avoidance) and his general theory of the evolutionary basis of morality.

(2) In the Finnish context, Westermarck’s central role in the early development of sociology is recognised. His correspondence and other manuscript material by Westermarck and his students shed light on the rise and subsequent demise of Westermarckian sociology and anthropology in Finland.

(3) In moral philosophy, the role of emotions in morality and in the development of morality is currently intensely debated. As a carefully developed statement of a naturalist answer, Westermarck’s emotivist theory of morality should constitute an obvious point of reference in the debate.

Westermarck’s theory of morality contains unusually well-developed statements of ideas and principles that, in many cases, have a central role in current evolutionary approaches. This gives rise to several interesting questions.

(a) How close is the relation between Westermarck and modern approaches to evolutionary psychology?
(b) Connecting to this, what is the force of anti-Westermarckian (or generally anti-comparativist) arguments vis-à-vis later approaches (such as evolutionary psychology)? And vice versa, do modern objections to evolutionary psychology also apply to Westermarck’s theory? (For instance, Westermarck was accused of reducing social phenomena to individual psychology, and of neglecting their cultural and social context. Do such objections do justice to Westermarck; and are they applicable to subsequent approaches?)
(c) What were Westermarck’s (and his students’) own answers to the criticism? How do they compare with later, similar debates?
(d) What is the relevance of Westermarck’s emotivist theory of morality to the current debate on the relation between ethics and the emotions?

2.2 Morality and the Emotions
Westermarck believed that morality, strictly speaking, has no truth-value. In the last analysis, it is based on emotions. Emotions, in their turn, are based on instincts, developed in the course of the biological evolution of the human species. It was Westermarck’s ambition to ‘naturalise’ ethics by showing that it was based on our natural reactions. Our ideas of justice are not primarily a result of reasoning but of instinct (also see Stroup 1982, Cook 1999).

This theory still holds as a powerful statement of ethical naturalism. The strength of Westermarck’s philosophical position is in part due to the fact that he works out his own position in a careful critical dialogue with Kant’s deontic ethics (Kant 1996, 2000). In particular, he reveals the rationalist bias inherent in both Kantian and Utilitarian accounts
of our reasons for acting morally. What might strike the modern naturalist as inadequate is, however, the explicit teleology of Westermarck’s theory. He represents the development of morality as an ascent from simple retributive emotions (hostility and sympathy) towards ‘higher’ forms of moral sentiment (‘neighbourly love’, the idea of conscience) characterised by an increasing degree of universality, disinterestedness, and apparent impartiality. Such an idea of a hierarchy of moral values is not entirely arbitrary, as it seems to be present in a wide range of cultures including our own. But it is not clear how it can be defended within a purely naturalist framework.

The answers will, in part, depend on how the term ‘emotion’ is understood. If emotions are seen as they traditionally were in Western philosophy – as irrational or non-rational, devoid of truth content – it will be unclear why they should be taken seriously at all, and how any kind of morality could be based on them. However, some contemporary philosophers stress the role of emotions as responses to actually existing features of situations. Thus emotions may be assessed as adequate or inadequate, sincere, justified, shallow, or the like. The standard naturalist view is based on the idea that emotional life may be described from a neutral (non-historical and non-moral) perspective. Arguably, this is an illusion. Rather than saying that morality is based on emotions, it may be argued that our understanding of emotions is the expression of a perspective that is, in itself, already a moral one.

The depiction of certain emotional reactions as ‘primitive’ and others as ‘cognitive’ or ‘higher’ involves a picture where human life is divided into different evolutionary layers that somehow still exist within us. Our bodily spontaneity is generally assigned to the ‘primitive’ layer while language and understanding are defined as both non-primitive and non-bodily. In this context, calling certain emotional reactions ‘primitive’ is usually meant to imply that they are expressions of a basic survival instinct. Against this, it may be argued that, on the one hand, our use of language is not independent of the natural, bodily spontaneity that, in this picture, is considered primitive. On the other hand, spontaneity is not necessarily opposed to advanced expressions of understanding. It is by no means necessarily egocentric or exclusively directed at a basic strife for survival. Thus the dichotomy between ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ layers of human motivation may be misguided.

2.3 The Westermarck Effect

An example of Westermarck’s naturalism is seen in what has subsequently become his best-known legacy, known as ‘the Westermarck effect’. According to Westermarck, the incest prohibition is the outcome of a regulatory evolutionary mechanism. The avoidance of intra-familial sexual contact may spare us from obvious biological risks and, according to Westermarck, this is the primary cause of the incest taboo. Despite some empirical support (Wolf 1995), the claim is problematic.

First of all, it has been argued that the existing data from human societies are compatible with alternative biological and/or cultural explanations (e.g., Smith 2007).

Second, it has been argued that incest avoidance does not explain incest prohibition. Admittedly (as Westermarck himself pointed out), the existence of a prohibition does not imply that an instinctive aversion may not also exist (Westermarck 1921). It is not unusual
that things against which we have an aversion are also prohibited by law or custom. But the mere fact that an instinctive propensity exists does not determine human legal and cultural methods of dealing with this fact. Westermarck simply maintains that the instinctive propensity leads to the emergence of a prohibition. But we are left with the question why the social institutions of a given society support some instinctive propensities but discourage others. This still seems to require an analysis of the role of the institutions within the framework of the specific host societies.

Third, doubts about the explanatory value of analyses in terms of evolutionary survival value may be raised. In general, evolutionary psychology treats the spreading of one’s genes (heterosexual activity) whenever possible as the default course of action for any individual. An individual’s failure to do so stands out as an anomaly. But assumedly the anomalies are also to be explained in terms of evolutionary survival value. Thus the evolutionary framework could in principle accommodate both the existence of intra-familiar sexual relations and their absence.

Furthermore, there is the question how current interpretations of ‘the Westermarck effect’ are related to Westermarck’s own work. This is part of the general question to what extent it is correct to represent Westermarck as a precursor to modern evolutionary psychology.

2.4 The Rise, Fall, and New Rise of Evolutionary Approaches: What Are the Lessons?
Westermarck’s evolutionist and comparativist approach was criticised very early in the 20th century. In particular, Durkheim (1907) levelled a critique at his alleged neglect of social context. He argued that social phenomena should be explained in terms of their function in society, not in terms of human psychological propensities. The rise of Functionalism (including Malinowski’s work) led to the demise of the comparative method in anthropology. The new anthropology or sociology was not supposed to explore the origins of various social phenomena, but to analyse their roles in contemporary societies. Moreover, after WWII the social sciences would focus almost exclusively on the processes of contemporary industrial societies. Indeed, the research that Westermarck had identified as sociology was redefined as social anthropology, ethnology, or comparative religion.

Against the international background, it was surprising that Westermarck’s Finnish students would so stubbornly hold on to his aims and methods. In Finland, the change of paradigm occurred only in the early 1950’s. The existing manuscript material – mainly correspondence between Westermarck’s former students and colleagues – sheds light on the final countdown of the Westermarck school.

On the other hand, modern proponents of evolutionary approaches have claimed that Westermarck’s approach was basically sound and that its demise had, in any case, more to do with politics and intellectual fashion than its inherent weaknesses (Wolf 1995, Roos 2008). Whatever the truth may be, people’s reactions to evolutionary approaches to human behaviour surely depend on a complex array of factors. The 20th century saw a constant resurgence of debates where ‘Darwinists’ (evolutionists, human ethologists, sociobiologists, evolutionary psychologists) were pitted against self-proclaimed defenders of the autonomy of the social sciences (Segerstråle 2001). The debates were not narrowly
academic, but they traded on collective memories (Nazi eugenics, colonialism, class society), collective aspirations (various ideas of progress) and fears (war, environmental disasters, totalitarianism). Thus the present debate is part of an ongoing struggle over intellectual property rights to ‘Darwinism’ and its ‘correct’ social applications.

3 Members of the Project
3.1 Project Leader and Senior Supervising Members
Olli Lagerspetz, Acting Professor, Head of Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University. His research interests include philosophical anthropology, philosophical psychology and the philosophy of the humanities and the social sciences. He has published (with Suolinna) articles on the history of Finnish sociology. Lagerspetz will also be the leader of a related research project, *Emotions in Dialogue: Perspectives from the Humanities*, which has received funding from the Academy of Finland for 2009 – 2011. The two projects have several points of contact.

Kirsti Suolinna, Docent, the Department of Sociology, Åbo Akademi University. Her research interests include social anthropology, the methods of the social sciences, and the history of Finnish sociology. She is currently working on the history of Finnish sociology after WWII in the light of the correspondence by Westermarcks’ former students and colleagues.

Lars Hertzberg, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Åbo Akademi University. Hertzberg is an internationally recognised expert on Wittgenstein, writing mainly on philosophical psychology, the philosophy of language, and ethics. Hertzberg has led several research projects. He is the supervisor of Gustafsson’s work.

3.2 Postdoctoral Researchers
3.2.1 Nykänen
Hannes Nykänen, Docent, Philosophy, Åbo Akademi University. Nykänen’s research interests include moral philosophy (in particular, the idea of conscience). His aim is to compare Westermarck’s naturalism with modern evolutionary approaches in order to see (i) whether they can mutually locate strengths and weaknesses in each other and (ii) whether this comparison allows for general conclusions about the prospects of ethical naturalism.

In *Moral Minds*, Marc D. Hauser (2006) claims that we need a more detailed understanding of the empirical phenomenon of morality before we can trace its evolutionary origins. Developing Chomsky’s idea of generative grammar, Hauser suggests that behind our explicit moral reasoning and its particular cultural varieties, there is an unconscious universal moral grammar. In order to reveal this unconscious grammar Hauser thinks that we must go beyond everyday, ‘folk psychological’ moral reasoning (cf. Ratcliff 2007). According to Nykänen, this undertaking faces the problem of justifying the criteria by which alleged instances of universal moral grammar are isolated and identified. Since our everyday moral concepts, according to Hauser, are biased they will be unsuitable for this. Furthermore, the universal grammar is supposedly unconscious and hence not accessible to normal moral comprehension. Hauser thinks this
problem could be overcome by identifying relevant structures in the brain. But this raises the question by what criteria a certain structure would be identified as ‘moral’.

Westermarck’s theory escapes these problems as it works with our ordinary moral concepts. His theory appears to give a convincing description both of our current moral responses and of their development. However, his theory relies on an implicit idea of a hierarchy, which seems incompatible with naturalism. In his descriptions of ancient hominids or supposedly primitive cultures, he employs moral concepts that, on our current understanding, evoke ‘primitive’ associations (such as ‘causing pain’). As he approaches modern culture he prefers descriptions in terms of ‘higher’ concepts (‘moral indignation’, ‘neighbourly love’). What, then, is the status of Westermarck’s moral hierarchy? It is not entirely arbitrary. This is not to say that the concept of a moral hierarchy must be accepted, but it is important to find out exactly what role it plays in our moral understanding.

More generally, it is possible that the old philosophical opposition between reason and emotion reappears inside naturalist theory, causing fundamental methodological problems. It seems plausible that Westermarck’s emotivism is more in line with the way naturalism has been understood in philosophy, while Hauser’s notion of a universal, moral grammar appears to be a ‘rationalist intrusion’. Contemporary theories of emotion often recognise that emotions have a rational content; but this looks like a re-statement of the original problem. What is it that has a rational content? The reverse claim (‘rationality has an emotional aspect’) obviously faces the corresponding question.

Nykänen is writing a book on language and ethics. Within the present project, he is planning to write articles that will later be incorporated in the book as chapters.

3.2.2 Kronqvist
Camilla Kronqvist, Licentiate of Philosophy, Åbo Akademi University, will receive her doctorate before the new year of 2008/9. (Her *viva voce* examination for doctoral degree was held on 26 September, 2008. Prof Crary, the external examiner, has proposed the grade *laudatur*.) The role of emotions in ethics is a central theme in Kronqvist’s dissertation. In her future work, the topic will be explicitly discussed in the context of Westermarck’s evolutionary ethics. – Kronqvist will address two main questions:

The first part concerns the assumption (inherent in evolutionary accounts of emotion) that it is possible to give a naturalist description of emotion. In other words, supposedly there is a hard core of emotion, independent of social context but common to all human beings. Kronqvist will compare the approach to emotion and evolution by Westermarck with more recent research programmes that regard the basic emotions as adaptive behaviour, often aligning themselves with neuropsychological research on our emotional reactions (cf. LeDoux 1996, Prinz 2004, Griffiths 1997). One of Kronqvist’s main concerns is to investigate the underlying assumption that our current, non-scientific conceptions of emotion are expressions of a lay theory (or folk psychology), which might be replaced by others more easily compatible with the findings of neuroscience – theories that distinguish, e.g., between affect programmes, higher cognitive emotions and socially constructed emotions (Griffiths 1997; cf. Ratcliff 2007). Approaching the subject from the background of Wittgenstein’s (1953) remarks on family resemblance. Kronqvist will suggest that our uses of emotion words do not necessarily share a core that runs through
all our uses: rather, some uses of these words overlap to create patterns of response to other people and to what is happening to them and ourselves.

The second part of Kronqvist’s work will be specifically concerned with Westermarck’s emotivism and the relevance of the emotions in ethics. Westermarck treated the emotions as analogous with statements about taste, and thereby as not having any claim to truth, impartiality, etc. Thus he faced the dilemma of accounting for the apparent claim to disinterestedness and universality involved in moral judgments. Leaning back on her earlier research, Kronqvist argues that emotions cannot be understood as discrete phenomena but have to be seen in relation to the roles that emotional reactions may have in our lives with other people. It makes only sense to speak of emotions because of the significance we have to each other. In that sense, emotions have an intrinsically moral character, and they are formative in shaping our moral thought. The sense in which emotions are intrinsic to questions about who we are have largely been ignored in emotivist accounts of emotion. – Kronqvist will write 4 – 6 articles for national and international journals.

3.2.3 Gustafsson
Ylva Gustafsson is currently doctoral student in philosophy, Åbo Akademi University. She plans to join the project after the completion of her degree (projected date of viva voce examination: autumn 2009). Gustafsson has, i.a., taught courses in ethics, the philosophy of psychology, and the philosophy of social anthropology.

After the completion of her degree, she will continue her research on spontaneity and the dichotomy between ‘higher’ (or ‘cognitive’) and ‘primitive’ emotions. The traditional dichotomy implies that human life involves different evolutionary layers that still somehow exist within us, our bodily spontaneity being assigned to our ‘lower’ functions and language and understanding being seen as essentially non-bodily and independent of instinct.

Philosophical descriptions of emotions are also often coloured by reductivist language. Expressions such as ‘aggressive behaviour’ or ‘altruistic behaviour’ are used instead of ordinary emotion words such as ‘anger’ or ‘compassion’, and bodily expressions are treated as ‘signals’ of threat or well-meaning. These ways of talking are connected with certain reductivist employments of the evolutionary paradigm. We are said to strive for the well-being of ‘the group’ rather than helping our neighbour, mother or child. This connects to the general striving to explain human behaviour in terms of a survival instinct and human relations as a whole as having rational purposes. Language is seen as a useful device for the exchange of information.

The idea of primitivity has, however, also another dimension that Gustafsson will discuss. Her approach will focus on childhood instead of biological history. Our growing up with specific individual people (rather than with a ‘group’ simpliciter) who talk with each other, chat, laugh, quarrel and care for what others are saying, is essential for our ability to learn to talk and think in the first place. The meaning of human behaviour cannot be understood in separation from the meaningfulness of specific personal relations.
Gustafsson thus wants to dissolve the rationalizing, dualistic opposition between the primitive physical body and the ‘higher’, linguistic, rational mind. She will write 4 – 6 articles in national and international journals.

3.3 Doctoral Students
3.3.1 Lepistö
Antti Lepistö, BA (the Department of General History, the University of Helsinki) is in the process of completing his Master’s thesis on the role of the evolutionary perspective in the history of political thought and the humanities (MA degree to be completed in February, 2009).

Lepistö’s aim in his research for a doctoral dissertation is to describe the role of Darwinist scholars and theories as a challenge to the humanities and the social sciences in the second half of the 20th Century, and to elucidate the role of both Darwinists and their opponents in the great academic and political debates of the era in the U.S., the UK and Finland. In addition to the study of written sources, Lepistö will carry out interviews with key participants in the debates. The focus will be placed on the new breakthrough of evolutionary thinking in the 1960’s and ‘70’s. Throughout the Western world, this was a period of intense intellectual conflict both inside and outside Academia. Questions about war and peace, gender roles, human freedom and socialism will be themes of particular interest.

Secondly, Lepistö will describe the activities of the professed critics of biologism and biological determinism. Not only representatives of the traditional humanities were involved in opposing the ‘imperialist’ pretensions of ‘pop ethology’, ‘vulgar sociobiology’ and ‘Darwinist fundamentalism’. Professing evolutionist or Darwinist biologists and social scientists were strongly engaged in the critique of what they saw as incorrect applications of the evolutionist paradigm (see Segerstråle 2001, Degler 1991, Jumonville 2002). Thus there was a continuous struggle over the ownership of ‘Darwinism’ and its ‘correct’ social interpretation.

Thirdly, the debate can be described as a struggle for the interpretation of the collective past (or ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’) of the previous decades (cf. Le Goff 1992, Fentress & Wickham 1992). With the return of Darwinism, many academics ‘recognised’ or ‘remembered’ the unhappy shared history of Darwinism and the social sciences (Social Darwinism, eugenics, racial politics) rather than promises of new insights on man and society. What was the impact of the collective memories of the academic tribes involved, and how did the participants act to further their particular interests? Who turned the past of Darwinism into a political cause and what were their reasons?

Lepistö will write a doctoral thesis on Darwinism, Values and View of Man: The Debate on Animal Behaviour and the Human Sciences, 1945-2000. In addition, he will write approximately 4 articles on different aspects of the theme. Professor Hannes Saarinen (General History, the University of Helsinki) will supervise Lepistö’s work.

3.3.2 Antfolk
Jan Antfolk, BA, Philosophy, Åbo Akademi University (MA degree to be completed in December, 2008) is currently Research Assistant at the Department of Psychology. The
international research group aims at investigating sexual preferences by implicit measures, under the assumption that, through evolutionary mechanisms, humans have come to respond very quickly and unconsciously to sexually relevant stimuli. Antfolk has written his Master’s thesis on Westermarck and evolutionary ethics (the manuscript, with some corrections outstanding, was submitted in October, 2008).

Antfolk will be addressing the question what it means to say that our behaviour is based on evolution. In one sense, the claim is un controversial: the human being and his behaviour obviously have a history. It needs to be shown that evolutionary explanations enhance our understanding of human behaviour in specific cases. The Westermarck effect is a case in point. What are the background assumptions that make it plausible to ask for an explanation of our reluctance to have sex with nuclear family members? The question itself emerges from specific views on human motivation, largely shaped by the evolutionist paradigm (Wolf 1995).

Comparing contemporary evolutionary theories of human ethical behaviour with those of Westermarck and his contemporaries, Antfolk also argues that much the same arguments might be raised against both. Evolutionary psychology gives us historical hypotheses about the origins of moral decision making (Rossano 2003, Joyce 2006). The approach, however, does not directly increase our understanding of ethical concepts or the role of moral judgments; for that, we must turn to the meanings they have in everyday life. Evolution must here be, as it was for Westermarck, at the centre of explaining the social origin of our ethical concepts. However, it does not modify our understanding of their current role.

Antfolk will work on his doctoral dissertation on evolutionary ethics, while continuing his work half time for the Department of Psychology in 2009 – 2010. Thus his work involves a continuous interplay between empirical and philosophical material. He will write articles, approximately 2 –3 each year, later to be incorporated into the dissertation manuscript.

3.4 Associated Research Team Members
Juhani Ihanus, Lecturer, Docent of cultural psychology (the University of Helsinki), Docent of the history of science and ideas (the University of Oulu). Ihanus is a recognised authority on Westermarck’s evolutionary model. At present, Ihanus is writing on the Westermarck effect and the relation between Westermarck and modern evolutionary psychology. While not applying for research funding within the present project, Ihanus will participate in the joint seminars and other events.

Ullica Segerstråle, Professor of Sociology, Head of the Department of Social Sciences, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago. Segerstråle is internationally known for her research in the sociology of science, including the Sociobiology debate. Among other things, she is the author of the acclaimed Defenders of the Truth: The Sociobiology Debate (Oxford University Press, 2001). Segerstråle, who has previously taught at Åbo (and supervised Lagerspetz at the time), will communicate with project members about their ongoing work and come to Åbo for a joint seminar and guest lecture.
Tommy Lahtinen, MA, Master of Divinity, Amanuensis. Lahtinen is taking care of the Westermarck collections at the Åbo Akademi Library, Manuscripts Department and Picture Collections.

Yrsa Neuman, MA, editor of Filosofia.fi and doctoral student, Philosophy, Åbo Akademi University. Neuman is the head of the Swedish section of the Finnish philosophy web portal, in charge of the digitisation of Westermarck material in Filosofia.fi.

5 Literature
5.1 Relevant Work by Project Participants (Selection)


5.2 Works by Westmarck


5.3 Other Literature


