

# Darwin's Genealogy of Morality

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We have become used to the fact that humans have descended from what Darwin calls “some lower form”. More specifically, we have become used to the fact that we ourselves are animals, and that we share a long line of common progenitors with apes and other primates. All but the least enlightened now accept that human history is but a minute in the history of life; that we were not created in the image of God, because we were not, in any interesting sense, created at all, but came into being as the result of a natural, purpose-blind process of evolution; that we have much in common with other animals, both with respect to our bodies and our minds; that we are in fact closely related to many other animals, having branched off in the tree of life only recently; and that much of that animal history, for better or worse, is still with us today as our common share of biological and, indeed, cultural inheritance.

But have we really understood the implications, for us, of these by now exceedingly familiar facts? In particular, have we fully grasped what it means to think of ourselves as descended from animals, and what this entails for our conception of ourselves and our own lives?

There is no simple answer to these questions, but a good case can be made for saying that Darwin and his followers still have some work to do in helping to expose some of our less transparent and, in some cases, more cherished illusions. In what follows, I consider one aspect of these larger questions that Darwin himself not only discussed, but rightly thought of as very important. My question is what it means, for us, to think of morality as a natural and evolved institution. More precisely, my question is

what the fact that morality *is* a natural and evolved institution means for morality itself and our conception of it.

I will not consider many other interesting questions that might be asked in this connection, and that are undoubtedly relevant to a full investigation of what it means to think of ourselves, and of our moral life, as a product of evolution. I will not, for instance, discuss any normative implications of the Darwinian account. Some of these implications have been claimed to concern our relations to other animals, some our relations to fellow humans. In my view, the account Darwin offers has few, if any, implications of a strictly moral nature, whereas it has substantial implications for the way we think about the nature of morality itself.

The paper falls into two parts. In the first, I will try to convey a sense, if only in outline, of what Darwin thought about the nature and the origin of what he calls the “moral sense”, and how he portrayed its development on the basis of a set of “social instincts”. This part of my discussion follows closely chapters IV and V of *The Descent of Man*. In the second part of the paper, I turn to questions of moral philosophy proper that arise once we accept something like the Darwinian account. The question whether and to what extent Darwin was right about the details of the early evolution of morality does not matter for my present purpose, as long as the framework he sets up is accepted. The questions I discuss on that basis concern, first, the inescapable historical contingency of moral thought and moral institutions; second, the possibility of truth and objectivity in moral discourse; and third, the relations between the Darwinian account, with its emphasis on beneficial consequences, and utilitarianism as a system of normative ethics.

## **Origins**

## 1. Continuity

Borrowing a term from Nietzsche, we may call any hypothesis as to how moral thought and moral institutions originated, or may have originated, a “genealogy of morality”. If we are to understand his views about the origin of what Darwin calls our “moral sense”, by which he means something like a sense of moral guidance, or conscience, it is important to remember why he enters into a discussion of the topic in the first place. Apart from its inherent interest, the genealogy Darwin presents is crucial for his larger project. Darwin shows up the continuities between man and “lower animals”. This, in turn, is of interest for Darwin because it helps to show that men did in fact descend from lower animals, and that this must be so despite the fact that the difference between man and all other known animals is undisputedly vast, and there are few records of intermediate stages.

This is the context in which his investigation of the human moral sense is set. Darwin assembles a catalogue of continuities between men and other animals. He contends that the human body and mind, and the way we live our lives are by no means as radically different compared to other animals as some traditions in philosophy and theology would have us expect. But if the powers of humans are continuous with the powers of other animals, it is not implausible to suggest, as Darwin does, that man has descended from them.

Now Darwin thinks, like many writers before him, “that of all of the differences between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important” (97). The question, then, is how we can account for it in genealogical terms. In particular, the question is how we can account for its origin in terms of human and animal nature, as opposed to some supernatural source. Of course there never was a shortage of the latter kind of answer to the question, either in philosophy or in theology. There have also been answers to the question in a spirit that may properly be called

naturalistic. Darwin himself refers throughout chapters IV and V to David Hume, Adam Smith and, in particular, Herbert Spencer in that connection. But no one, Darwin insists, “has approached it exclusively from the side of natural history” (97).

## **2. Inevitability**

Darwin declares that the following “fundamental” proposition seems to him “in a high degree probable” - namely, “that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as in man” (98). In other words, there is an element of inevitability in our moral development, as soon as certain social instincts and intellectual powers are supposed to be in place. If this is so, it shows two things of great importance. First, there is no mystery in the fact that our moral life, vastly different from the social behaviour of animals as it undoubtedly is, is a natural extension of that animal behaviour. Similarly, the dispositions, emotions and instincts by which it is driven are natural extensions of the dispositions, emotions and instincts by which the social life of many animals is driven.

Secondly, and relatedly, if there is that element of inevitability in the evolution of a moral sense, there is no need to invoke any supernatural sources to explain either the origin or the authority of moral thought and conscience. In particular, there is no need to think of our conscience as the “voice of God”, and so as something transcendent; nor is there a need to think of it as the voice of “pure practical reason”, or to invoke some other philosophical successor to God instead. Given social instincts and well-developed rational powers, nothing more was needed to get us into something we can recognize as the moral sphere. If so, no God, no fear of punishment, no intuition of the good, no law

and no real or imagined contract were required for us to become the moral beings that we are.

This, I think, is the real force of the proposition that seemed to Darwin “in a high degree probable”, and that is precisely that, for reasons Darwin identifies. Darwin argues for his fundamental proposition by identifying four conditions of the evolutionary process. These four elements combined provide substantial support for his conclusion.

First, and most fundamentally, Darwin places social instincts. Their chief characteristics are that they lead an animal that possesses them “to take pleasure in the society of its fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them, and to perform various services for them” (98). However, unlike moral dispositions, “these feelings and services are by no means extended to all the individuals of the same species, only those of the same association” (98). Second, developing “mental powers” reinforce the social instincts even when these have temporarily failed to be effective in action. Third, language and, along with it, the development of further cognitive powers would allow for social settings in which norms and expectations could be formulated, sanctioned and followed. These norms would tend towards promoting the good of the tribe or community, but reason is also involved in extending the sphere of proper objects of moral concern. Fourth and finally, habit is required to develop stable moral institutions. It maintains the stable dispositions on which every moral institution rests.

### **3. Reinforcement**

Throughout chapters IV and V, Darwin discusses these elements and the ways in which they interact in more detail. I will confine myself to cursory remarks concerning the forces that Darwin identifies.

First, it is hardly disputable that social instincts are present throughout the animal kingdom, and it is more than likely that they are also present in man, and present for that very reason. As Darwin observes, “horses nibble, and cows lick each other, on any spot which itches” (101); wolves hunt in packs, pelicans fish in concert; some baboons help each other to turn over stones in order to find hidden insects; having found them, they share the booty. Mature male baboons defend the offspring of the troop, often at a significant risk to themselves; and so on (101). A point of interest from the point of view of genealogy is that these basic instincts and abilities and resulting patterns of behaviour soon lead to more complex abilities and behavioural patterns. Thus, Darwin observes, “all animals living in a body, which defend themselves or attack their enemies in concert, must indeed be in some degree faithful to one another; and those who follow a leader must be in some degree obedient” (104). Traits like these would then continue to be reinforced by natural selection.

In humans, the psychological landscape has become much harder to survey, but there is every reason to think that the same general model of explanation applies. Darwin is clear that “with mankind, selfishness, experience, and imitation, probably add to the power of sympathy” (106-7). There is certainly an element of convention built into the basis of morality, “for we are led by the hope of receiving good in return to perform acts of sympathetic kindness to others; and sympathy is much strengthened by habit” (107). Again, these tendencies are reinforced by natural selection. In particular, the mechanism of group selection is likely to have ensured that communities in which individuals had stable tendencies to cooperate and to help one another in need had better chances of rearing offspring, which would in turn tend to inherit those tendencies.

Instinct, habit, reason and experience combined yield a strong, if not always predominant, disposition to obey moral rules, thus enabling humans to conform to the

norms and expectations of others. This disposition is reliable, but only up to a point. As a social animal, man would “inherit a tendency to be faithful to his comrades, and obedient to the leader of his tribe”. Moreover, he would “from an inherited tendency be willing to defend, in concert with others, his fellow-men; and would be ready to aid them in any way, which did not too greatly interfere with his own welfare or his own strong desires” (109).

A question that arises at this point is why the strong selfish desires in man do not ultimately prevail. What explains the predominance of social instincts over the strong selfish motives that are undoubtedly present in man? Darwin has an ingenious answer, once again based on the instinct of sympathy. “Instinctive sympathy”, he writes, causes man to be “influenced in the highest degree by the wishes, approbation, and blame” of his fellows, as expressed by their gestures and language (109). In other words, there is no deeper explanation for the fact that we do what we do other than the explanation in terms of basic motives and instincts, and the social practices to which they give rise. According to Darwin, the “more persistent” social instincts eventually “conquer” the “less persistent”, selfish ones. This outcome is “the simple result of the greater strength of the social or maternal instincts than that of any other instinct or motive” (110). In this sense, sympathy is indeed the “foundation-stone” of morality, as Darwin puts it (99).

### **Implications**

There is more to be said about these mechanisms, not only in the light of evolutionary biology and its more recent developments, but in the light of cultural history, human psychology and philosophy. As importantly, there is more to be said about the further development of morality, since human life evidently became involved in a process of

cultural evolution that soon surpassed anything we could hope to explain purely in terms of social instincts, habit, experience and reason. Still, what emerges from chapters IV and V of *The Descent of Man* is a brief but compelling account of the forces that drove the first social arrangements that we recognize as “moral”, and that continue to drive them, at some basic level, today. The question to which we must now turn is what this entails for our view of ourselves as involved in such social arrangements. What Darwin says about its origins has implications for morality itself. In particular, it has implications for some of the views we are inclined to hold about it.

#### 4. Contingency

The first important point to note is the radical contingency of our moral outlook. The fundamental proposition tells us that no more was needed for morality to evolve than what was already present in nature. In particular, nothing more was needed than a number of instincts and dispositions still found in the animal kingdom, and the general framework of progressive change described by Darwin's theory of evolution. Darwin was aware of this, and to prevent misunderstanding, he qualifies his “fundamental proposition” in important ways. He claims that any animal whatever, endowed with social instincts, would “inevitably acquire” a moral sense or conscience as soon as its intellect had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as that of man. But this should not be taken to mean that there is no room for fundamentally different ways of developing that moral sense or conscience. Darwin is clear that he does not wish to be understood as claiming that the evolution of morality ends with the forces that he identifies: “In the same manner as various animals have some sense of beauty, though they admire widely different objects, so they might have a sense of right and wrong, though led by it to follow widely different lines of conduct” (99).



Here, it is important to remember that Darwin confines himself to the beginnings of the evolutionary process. This limitation is due to the fact that his primary goal in chapters IV and V of *The Descent of Man* is not to give an account of morality and its cultural history. His goal is to remove an obstacle to the theory of evolution as applied to men, and for that reason, Darwin refers us to the early stages of the development of what he calls the “moral sense”. He emphasizes continuities, rather than differences, between humans and other animals, but this should not be taken to mean that there are no differences. The common objection that Darwin fails to explain morality as we now know it entirely misses the point of his discussion. It is correct, and Darwin does not for a moment deny that there has been a complex cultural evolution that further developed, extended and refined the social instincts that provide the biological basis for that evolution, and that at different times and in different places, the cultural evolution that followed has taken a number of different turns. Darwin may have a tendency to overestimate the explanatory power of that biological basis, but this does not show that there is no such basis, and that is what matters to Darwin.

If we have a sense that despite the differences, some values and moral rules are respected in similar ways in nearly every culture, then we have found, not so many counterexamples to the contingency of values and moral rules, but a starting point for their explanation in genealogical terms. The fact is that some values and moral rules are essential to the survival of any group or association. This explains why they are respected in similar ways in nearly every culture, while others are not. The latter can, while the former cannot, differ considerably without immediate evolutionary losses or payoffs. In other words, we have confirmed, not refuted, the basic contingency claim.

Again, Darwin himself was quite clear on this point. Obviously, no tribe could hold together if murder, robbery, treachery, and so on were common. Consequently, such

crimes within the limits of the same tribe “are branded with everlasting infamy” (117). If we take this explanation seriously, it lets us see a range of basic virtues and the moral rules associated with them in an entirely different light than some traditional conceptions of morality would have us see them. As Darwin points out, the “virtues which must be practised, at least generally, by rude men, so that they may associate in a body, are those which are still recognised as the most important” (117). By contrast, selfish and contentious people “will not cohere, and without coherence nothing can be effected” (130). Similar considerations apply to virtues like truthfulness, courage, obedience, self-command, self-sacrifice and the power of endurance (118).

Does this radical contingency affect us? This is a large and difficult question that I will not try to pursue any further, except by noting an ambivalence that surrounds every sensible answer. At times, we might feel a vertigo when we consider the cultural lore that we accept without rational justification, and we might feel that some security we once had, or thought we had, is irretrievably lost. This sense of loss goes hand in hand with an increased and perhaps distinctly modern sense of responsibility that is not always easy to bear. But we might also feel more independent, encouraged to pursue our moral lives as we think we should pursue them, and without fear of judgment from some higher court.

If so, we might feel more free precisely because we feel freed from religious and metaphysical fantasies. Most of these lost their credibility long ago, but have long afterwards been thought to be needed to explain the nature of morality and to maintain its firm hold over us. This can be a liberating experience. It can enhance our sense of living a meaningful life, and it can make our moral life richer and more rewarding. In this way, morality can indeed be what Kant thought it had to be, a characteristic expression of human freedom and dignity. But by the time we have come to experience it in this way, and have come to experience it from a Darwinian perspective, our conception of

morality, both with respect to its nature and origin, will have undergone a fundamental change.

## **5. Truth and Objectivity**

The second implication that I want to mention arises out of the first. Its force is best appreciated on the basis of a simple observation concerning ethical discourse. When we say of an act that it was wrong, courageous, deceitful, or honest, others frequently call what we say true or false. In this respect, ethical statements resemble other statements of fact. But if statements of fact are made true when true, or false when false, by the facts as they are independently of that statement, then this thought leads us immediately to the idea that there are ethical facts, and that these ethical facts are as they are independently of those ethical statements. In other words, we are inclined to think that there is such a thing as objective moral truth.

The trouble with this line of thought from a Darwinian perspective is that nothing in the story Darwin tells us, and nothing in the sequel of the story that we can spin in his spirit even remotely suggests that our ethical thought answers to some such reality or objective moral truth. Of course, ethical thought answers in many ways to reality as discovered by science, and to describe morality as a product of biological and, at a later stage, increasingly cultural evolution is evidently to locate it in the midst of an objective world, that is to say, a world that is as it is independently of our local conceptions. The world as described by physics exists independently of us, if anything does. But all we have been told is how animals and humans respond to this world, not whether those responses are true or false as measured by objective moral standards.

It may be said that this is irrelevant, since nothing in the story rules out the idea of that objective standard. This is correct as far as it goes, but it entirely misses the point of

the argument. The argument is not, after all, that no objectivist account *could* be true given what Darwin says, but rather that we have been given no reason whatever to *think* that it is true. All the same, our ethical experience suggests this fundamentally mistaken picture. If that is so, then a Darwinian view of that experience once more calls for a fundamental change in our moral preconceptions.

Can we live with those changes? As before, I can only mention, but not pursue this difficult question, except by making one point about it. It does not follow from the fact that there is no objective truth in ethics that anything goes, because everything is allowed, and nothing forbidden. This would be a misunderstanding, somewhat analogous to the infamous “If God is dead, everything is permitted”. Nor does it follow that what people take to be right is, for us, above censure, or right absolutely because it is “right for them”. This is the confused doctrine of relativism, and the denial of ethical objectivity has nothing whatever to do with that doctrine. Again, nothing in the story as Darwin presents it forces us to abandon our moral standpoint, even in clashes with people whose moral development has taken a number of different turns. In this way, too, a Darwinian perspective can help us to appreciate the nature and the significance of our commitment to morality, and it can also highlight its limits.

## **6. Utility**

This brings me to the third and final implication of the Darwinian perspective that I want to discuss. It has to do with the content, as opposed to the status, of moral thought as we now know it. One striking fact about the genealogy suggested by Darwin is that if it is correct, the primary point and purpose of the social instincts that form the basis for moral rules is to promote the common good - in particular, the good of the family, community or tribe. Thus, Darwin presumes that “actions are regarded by savages, and

were probably so regarded by primeval man, as good or bad, solely as they obviously affect the welfare of the tribe" (119). The social instincts "no doubt were acquired by man as by the lower animals for the good of the community" (124). Similarly, when faced with selfish or reckless behaviour, "the members of the same tribe would approve of conduct which appeared to them to be for the general good, and would reprobate that which appeared evil" (131).

This is not, of course, where it ended. As man advances in civilisation, and small tribes are united into larger communities, his social instincts and sympathies are extended "to all the members of the same nation" (122). This point being once reached, "there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races" (122). At the limit, the circle of human concern that originated with the family or tribe and did not even include other members of the same species, extends to include "all sentient beings" (123).

I think that it is natural to think of this view of morality as leading to, and even encouraging, a form of utilitarianism. Darwin is notably careful not to commit himself clearly to this doctrine, so prominent in the writings of his contemporaries, such as Mill and Spencer. Still, while Darwin is quite clear that the "greatest happiness principle" should not be misconstrued as a theory about the actual motives of human action and is itself based on sympathy and social instincts, he appears to accept it as "the standard of conduct" (120).

It is a good question what Darwin means when he says this. If he is taking an ethical stance, he is seriously underestimating the difficulties that are involved in giving a sufficiently clear, coherent and convincing account of "the greatest happiness principle" to even consider it as a candidate for the overall moral standard. After all, as a principle of moral theory it must provide the sole criterion of moral right and wrong, and it is most

doubtful that the greatest happiness principle, or any other, can do this. In this, Darwin need not be culpable. These difficulties were also seriously underestimated by the best utilitarians of his time, including Mill and Spencer, and it took until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to draw the deepest difficulties surrounding utilitarian and consequentialist doctrines to the surface. But that is where they are now, and for most, myself included, utilitarianism is now completely discredited.

In fact, Darwin himself provided the materials to argue that there is no reason to expect to find a single moral principle that could have the foundational role utilitarians ascribe to the “greatest happiness principle”. Again, the problem with this idea is not so much that an evolutionary account of the kind developed by Darwin is inconsistent with the very idea of such a principle. Darwin tells us something about the origin of morality, while a moral principle would tell us something about the right or true morality, and these factual and normative claims are not in logical conflict; they pass each other by. But there is more to it than that. As before, we might ask what reason we have for thinking that a right or true morality is there to be found.

The answer is: none whatever. As Darwin shows, we have evolved with a number of different ethical standards, some of which cohere, and some of which conflict, and his explanation is particularly powerful when it comes to understanding ethical coherence and conflict. On the one hand, we have a special concern for those who are close to us, in particular our families and people with whom we interact on a regular basis. In the case of our families, this concern has a firm biological basis, while in the case of those with whom we interact, the expectation of mutual profit from our interactions is likely to come closer to the fore. But even here, there is a basic instinct at work that ensures our willingness to cooperate and to sacrifice our own immediate good for the benefit of others. These dispositions run deep, and they can come into conflict with more impartial

concerns, such as those for all mankind, who deserve equal consideration, and at the limit, our concern for “all sentient beings”, whether or not that concern is beneficial for us. So there is a deep egalitarian drive in our moral outlook. At the same time, there are important openly partial concerns, and in addition to these, there is what Darwin calls the “inherited tendency” in man “to be faithful to his comrades, and obedient to the leader of his tribe”. Evidently, egalitarian tendencies come into conflict with such partial concerns. This is undoubtedly the situation in which we find ourselves, and there is no hope of finding a theoretically simple ethical system that would account for all those concerns, their coherence and conflict. It is a fact of moral life that various claims are made on us, that we care about different things to a different degree, and that we have no reliable method for adjudicating between these different claims and commitments.

It may be objected that this does not show that no ethical system has normative force and should be followed, whether or not we follow it or ever did. But even this claim sounds hollow, and there is a good reason why we are rightly sceptical on that score. For what reason have we got to believe in the truth of some ethical system? The only reason there could possibly be is that the system is best suited to make sense of our ethical claims and commitments, and these are the claims that we actually recognize and the commitments we actually have. The situation here is similar to the problem of divine revelation. It is all very well to say, as Kierkegaard does, that if God told Abraham to kill his son, then he should do it. The question, as Locke and Kant had rightly insisted, is what reason he has for believing that this is what God really said, as opposed to being the product of his imagination. This question cannot be settled, once more, by the appeal to what God supposedly said, but has to be given some independent foundation.

Even Kant, whose claims concerning the rational basis and systematic ordering of moral claims are notoriously ambitious, accepts the methodological point that such a

system has to make sense of the moral convictions we share. If it did not, it would fail as an ethical theory. The reason for that is, as Kant rightly saw, that the more revisionary an ethical theory becomes, the more independent reasons we need to be given to be convinced of that theory, and in the case of ethics, it is extremely unclear where these reasons could come from. Appeals to “insight” or “intuition” will clearly not do.

If that is so, then there are fairly narrow limits to how far any ethical theory can diverge from the ethical claims that we accept and the commitments we share. And if these claims and commitments are heterogeneous, as Darwin shows they must be, then there is very little hope for ethical theory, if what ethical theory sets out to do is to provide a theoretically simple normative standard.

It is worth noting that this claim overlaps, but is not identical with the point noted earlier concerning ethical truth and objectivity. Even if we let go of the hope that there is a true and objectively binding ethical standard, we could still hold out hopes for a theoretically simple ethical outlook that could guide us in ethical thought. If what Darwin says is correct, and if the argument to the effect that divergence can only occur within narrow limits is also accepted, then these hopes turn out to be what they are, that is, illusions. So I believe that Darwin was right not to commit himself explicitly to the utilitarian doctrine, if that is understood as it normally is, that is to say, as setting a normative standard.

By contrast, Darwin may have made a claim about what people *take* to be right or wrong, as opposed to what *is* right and wrong. In this case, he would be seriously underestimating the many deep and persistent dimensions of moral thought that resist utilitarian treatment. Again, Darwin need not be culpable in this, since the best utilitarians of his time, including Mill and Spencer, did not fully appreciate the force and depth of that resistance either.



If that is so, we need an explanation of how we got, or may have got, from the limited and purpose-bound beginnings of morality to a more impartial outlook of the kind described by Darwin; and we also need an explanation of how we moved on from the limited concerns of that impartial outlook, reminiscent of utilitarianism, to where we are now. But we also need an explanation of how we can stay where we are now, once we have come to understand how we got there. What, one might ask, gives us the right to resist moving in a more utilitarian direction, if we accept what Darwin says?

It is not enough to point out, though it is of course correct and important, that normative conclusions cannot be straightforwardly derived from purely factual premises. This is the point noted earlier, and that point is clearly correct: we cannot derive any substantial conclusions about what is right and wrong from premises that merely tell us how morality came to be and what its point and purpose once was. But if we can tell a story of how we got here that does not discredit our moral standpoint, but rather shows it to be a further extension, and substantial refinement, of the beginnings that Darwin describes, then we will have everything that we need to defend ourselves against further intrusions of utilitarian doctrine.

In particular, we must show that concerns such as those for justice, equality, and fairness, but also concerns such as those for the welfare of one's own family and of those to whom one feels close, are a source of powerful reasons for action. To be such reasons, they need not be based on anything deeper, or seemingly more fundamental, than those concerns. At the same time, we will have to learn to see morality as a social institution that protects important human goods and retains that as a main part of its purpose. This may sound simple and obvious, but it is in fact something that morality itself, and in particular, certain conceptions of it, tend to conceal from our view.

In sum, I think there is good reason to be moderately optimistic. Darwin himself does not seem to have feared the consequences of his views about the evolution of morality. Indeed, in chapter IV of *The Descent of Man*, he quotes a certain Miss Cobbe, who had criticized the views advanced in that chapter in the *Theological Review*. She claimed “that if the theory of ethics advocated in this chapter were ever generally accepted, ‘I cannot but believe that in the hour of their triumph would be sounded the knell of the virtue of mankind!’” Darwin replies, with a dry sense of humour: “It is to be hoped that the belief in the permanence of virtue on this earth is not held by many persons on so weak a tenure” (99-100). If what Darwin says about the nature and the origin of virtue is roughly on the right lines, then we have every reason to believe that this hope is justified.

## **References**

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