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Biology and Christian Ethics

This stimulating and wide-ranging book mounts a profound enquiry into some of the most pressing questions of our age, by examining the relationship between biological science and Christianity. The history of biological discovery is explored from the point of view of a leading philosopher and ethicist.

What effect should modern biological theory and practice have on Christian understanding of ethics? How much of that theory and practice should Christians endorse? Can Christians, for example, agree that biological changes are not governed by transcendent values, or that there are no clear or essential boundaries between species? To what extent can 'Nature' set our standards? Stephen R. L. Clark takes a reasoned look at biological theory since Darwin and argues that an orthodox Christian philosophy is better able to accommodate the truth of such theory than is the sort of progressive, meliorist interpretation of Christian doctrine which has usually been offered as the properly 'modern' option.

Orthodox Christianity and sensible biological theory alike can agree that we are sinners, that every individual is an end in itself, and that the true values to which we should direct ourselves transcend the needs of survival.

STEPHEN R. L. CLARK is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Liverpool. He is the author of *Aristotle's Man* (1975), *The Moral Status of Animals* (1977), *The Nature of the Beast* (1982), *Civil Peace and Sacred Order* (1989), *Animals and their Moral Standing* (1997), *God, Religion and Reality* (1988) and *The Political Animal* (1999), as well as articles in *Philosophy*, *Inquiry*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, *The Monist* and others.

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NEW STUDIES IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS 17

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Christian ethics has increasingly assumed a central place within academic theology. At the same time the growing power and ambiguity of modern science and the rising dissatisfaction within the social sciences about claims to value-neutrality have prompted renewed interest in ethics within the secular academic world. There is, therefore, a need for studies in Christian ethics which, as well as being concerned with the relevance of Christian ethics to the present day secular debate are well informed about parallel discussions in recent philosophy, science or social science. New Studies in Christian Ethics aims to provide books that do this at the highest intellectual level and demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate – either in moral substance or in terms of underlying moral justifications.

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General editor's preface

This book is the seventeenth in the series *New Studies in Christian Ethics*. A number of books in the series have combined philosophical and theological skills as this book does, notably Kieran Cronin's *Rights and Christian Ethics*, Jean Porter's *Moral Action and Christian Ethics*, Garth Hallett's *Priorities and Christian Ethics* and David Fergusson's *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics*. In addition, the wider issues of biology have also been the concern of Michael Northcott's well received *The Environment and Christian Ethics*. All of these books closely reflect the two key aims of the series – namely to promote monographs in Christian ethics which engage centrally with the present secular moral debate at the highest possible intellectual level and, secondly, to encourage contributors to demonstrate that Christian ethics can make a distinctive contribution to this debate.

Stephen Clark's reputation both as a philosopher of real distinction and as a Christian ethicist is very high. He is a very productive author who always writes thought-provoking books which challenge many dominant orthodoxies. His early books soon established that his was an unusual and distinctive voice – notably his *The Moral Status of Animals* (1977) and *The Nature of the Beast* (1982) – with a particular concern about animals and the environment. His interest in the philosophy of religion and in theological concerns was clearly established in his subsequent books *From Athens to Jerusalem* (1984) and *The Mysteries of Religion* (1986). His most famous ambitious project to date has been the three volumes *Civil Peace and Sacred Order* (1989), *A Parliament of Souls* (1990) and *God's World and the great Awakening* (1991). They

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are by no means easy books – highly literate and lyrical in style – but offer many sharp and unexpected insights. His next book, *How To Think About the Earth* (1993), focused upon some of the ecological issues of his early books. Until he wrote the present book, I regarded *How To Think About the Earth* as the most significant theological book to have emerged in the recent ethical debate about ecology.

His new book *Biology and Christian Ethics* clearly develops from the issues examined in these earlier books. It responds to the challenges of such writers as Richard Dawkins and E. O. Wilson, and to such issues as social Darwinism, orthogenesis, species essentialism, ‘selfish genes’, human biotechnology, and (crucially) ethical anthropocentrism. He approaches these writers and issues as a philosopher and theologian, rather than as a scientist; however, his earlier writings show that he has the intelligence to read carefully in areas other than his own. He is well able to unmask some of the implicit ideological commitments of those who imagine that they carry none.

The challenge that Stephen Clark offers here is a double one. A large part of what he writes is a challenge to those who claim too much in the name of science. By reducing ethics simply to evolutionary or socio-biological impulses writers such as Dawkins and Wilson produce a highly distorted account of what it is to be a moral (let alone a religious) human being. In the process, so Stephen Clark successfully argues, they proffer a highly questionable series of ‘scientific’ explanations. Even Darwin, as will be seen in two chapters that follow, was given to some scientifically and ethically flawed claims in his paradigmatic account of evolution.

The other challenge is to scientists and theologians alike. Stephen Clark argues that many of us have a deeply distorted and contradictory relationship with other animals. In his theological account of creation all animals are our neighbours. Scientists should not, he believes, regard them as the proper subject of experiments, let alone biotechnological manipulations, and the rest of us should not eat them. Instead, we should learn to value and respect them as neighbours who share to a greater or lesser degree many of the qualities and capacities that

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we regard as characteristically human. Stephen Clark's own theological commitment to both ecology and vegetarianism is apparent at many points of his argument.

On almost every page of this book there are distinctive, challenging and creative insights. In short the book is a delight.

ROBIN GILL

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Preface

My first extended work of philosophy was a study of Aristotle's ethics in the light of his biology (*Aristotle's Man*). My second was an impassioned work on the moral status of non-human animals (*The Moral Status of Animals*), and my third, a more decorous study of non-human experience and motivation, in the light of current biological theory and ethological reports (*The Nature of the Beast*). Later books were directed rather at cosmological and epistemological aspects of the philosophy of religion, though almost all of them also made some glancing reference to our biological nature, and to the treatment of non-human animals and our 'environment' (see especially *How to Think about the Earth*). Various essays on non-human animals have been collected in *Animals and their Moral Standing*, and on the political life of the *human* animal in *The Political Animal*. Other papers on matters relevant to this present volume include 'The Lack of a Gap between Fact and Value' in *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 54.1980, pp. 245ff.; 'Sexual Ontology and the Group Marriage' in *Philosophy* 58.1983, pp. 215–27; 'Richard Dawkins's *Blind Watchmaker*' in *Times Literary Supplement*, 26 September 1986, pp. 1047–9; 'Orwell and the Anti-Realists' in *Philosophy* 67.1992, pp. 141–54; 'Does the Burgess Shale have Moral Implications?' in *Inquiry* 36.1993, pp. 357–80; 'Natural Goods and Moral Beauty' in D. Knowles and J. Skorupski, eds., *Virtue and Taste: essays on politics, ethics and aesthetics in memory of Flint Schier* (Blackwell: Oxford 1993), pp. 83–97; 'Tools, Machines and Marvels' in Roger Fellows, ed., *Philosophy and Technology* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1995), pp. 159–57; 'Environmental Ethics' in

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Peter Byrne and Leslie Houlden, eds., *Companion Encyclopedia of Theology* (Routledge: London 1995), pp. 843–70; ‘Objective Values, Final Causes’ in *Electronic Journal of Analytical Philosophy* 3.1995, pp. 65–78 (<http://www.phil.indiana.edu/ejap/>); ‘Ecology and the Transformation of Nature’ in *Theology in Green* 3.1995, pp. 28–46; ‘Status and Contract Societies: the non-human dimension’ in *National Geographical Journal of India* 41.1995, pp. 225–30; ‘Natural Integrity and Biotechnology’ in Jacqueline A. Laing and David S. Oderberg, eds., *Human Lives* (Macmillan: London 1997), pp. 58–76; ‘Making up Animals: the view from science fiction’ in Alan Holland and Andrew Johnson, eds., *Animal Biotechnology and Ethics* (Chapman & Hall: London 1997), pp. 209–24; ‘Platonism and the Gods of Place’ in Tim Chappell, ed., *The Philosophy of Environmentalism* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh 1997), pp. 19–37; ‘Objectivism and the Alternatives’ in E. Morscher, O. Neumaier and P. Simons, eds., *Applied Ethics in a Troubled World* (Kluwer: Dordrecht, Boston and London 1998), pp. 285–94; ‘Pantheism’ in David E. Cooper and Joy A. Palmer, eds., *Spirit of the Environment* (Routledge: London 1998), pp. 42–56; ‘Is Nature God’s Will?’ in Andrew Linzey and Dorothy Yamamoto, eds., *Animals in Christian Religion* (SCM Press: London 1998), pp. 123–36; ‘Understanding Animals’ in Michael Tobias and Kate Solisti Mattelon, eds., *Kinship with the Animals* (Beyond Words Publishing: Hillsborough, Oreg. 1998), pp. 99–111; ‘Dangerous Conservatives: a reply to Daniel Dombrowski’ in *Sophia* 37.1998, pp. 44–69; and ‘Conducta decente hacia los animales: un enfoque tradicional’ in *Teorema* 18/3.1999, pp. 61–83.

These and other papers have been read at conferences, to students and to philosophy societies in the United Kingdom, the United States, India and the Netherlands. An earlier version of chapter 6, on ‘The goals of goodness’, composed for the Anglo-Indian Convivium in Panchgani in January 1998, was published in *Studies in World Christianity* 4.1998, pp. 228–44. One brief paper, ‘Deconstructing Darwin’ was originally delivered at a conference on Ethics at Yale University, and is due to be published by Rowman and Littlefield in the Proceedings of that conference. It has served as a basis both for the Alan

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Richardson Lecture at Durham University in spring 1999, and for this volume. The first full draft of the book was composed during a happy period as Alan Richardson Fellow in the Department of Theology at the University of Durham. I am extremely grateful to the Richardson Committee, to the Department of Theology and to Van Mildert College for giving me the opportunity to devote myself whole-heartedly (or as whole-heartedly as can reasonably be managed) to a single project, as well as access to a different University Library. I should also express my gratitude to the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the University of Liverpool, who together enabled me to take a whole year's sabbatical (part of it spent at Durham). Gillian and Verity allowed me both physical and mental absence despite the extra burdens this placed on them; Gillian, Samuel and Alexandra contributed commentary and information from their own expertise.

Other philosophers, theologians and scientists have influenced me over many years through their writings and their emailed or spoken word, especially George Berkeley, G. K. Chesterton, Vernard Eller, Marshall Massey, Mary Midgley, Simon Conway Morris, Oliver O'Donovan and Plotinus. There have certainly been many others, most of whom would probably not wish to be associated with anything I have chosen to learn from them! Amongst the many whose wisdom I now miss, I count my cousin David Phillips of Ellesmere, and my friends Flint Schier, Hilary Torrance and Michael Vasey. Finally, I should also like to thank Robin Gill and the Cambridge University Press for encouraging me to undertake and complete so large an enterprise.