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Introduction

For over a century Christian ethics has been deeply influenced by the social sciences and, in particular, by social theories of the kind developed by Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, but it has not engaged in an analogous enterprise when it comes to the natural sciences.¹ In this book I intend to explore the relevance of science, and specifically the information and insights of evolutionary theory, for Christian ethics.

The theory of evolution is now the primary explanatory context for understanding the origin of species.² Scientists and writers in the last thirty years have produced a significant body of literature dealing with “evolutionary ethics” and the “evolution of morality,” but Christian ethics has for the most part ignored it. This inattentiveness takes place at a time when popular evolution-based writers represent the public face of science. The “sociobiology” proposed by Robert Trivers, E. O. Wilson, and Richard

¹ The term “science” will be taken to refer to the activities in which scientists seek to arrive at a relatively reliable understanding of the natural world. On the meaning of “science,” see George F. R. Ellis, “The Thinking Underlying the New ‘Scientific’ World-Views,” in Robert John Russell, William R. Stoeger, SJ, and Francisco J. Ayala, eds., *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action* (Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications, and Berkeley, CA: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, 1998), pp. 251–280.

² This book provides neither a theoretical justification of the theory of evolution to convince Christian fundamentalists or other religiously based skeptics of its plausibility, nor an attempt to counter the popular misunderstanding and fear of the theory of evolution. Competent scientists have already dedicated many works to explaining the abundant evidence for evolution. For scientific arguments against “scientific creationism,” see Tim M. Berra, *Evolution and the Myth of Creationism: A Basic Guide to the Facts in the Evolution Debate* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990); Kenneth Miller, *Finding Darwin’s God: A Scientist’s Search for Common Ground between God and Evolution* (New York: Cliff Street Books/HarperCollins, 1999); and Stephen Jay Gould, *Hens’ Teeth and Horses’ Toes: Reflections on Natural History* (New York: Norton, 1983), pp. 247–264. For a major, if somewhat dated, Catholic theological response to evolutionary theory, see Karl Rahner, *Hominization: The Evolutionary Origin of Man as a Theological Problem* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965); Karl Rahner, “Natural Science and Reasonable Faith,” trans. Hugh M. Riley, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. XXI: *Science and Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 16–55. A helpful survey has been provided by Don O’Leary, *Roman Catholicism and Modern Science* (New York: Continuum, 2006).

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Dawkins attempts to provide the comprehensive explanation of social behavior in terms of evolutionary theory.³ The slightly less overtly political “evolutionary psychology” developed in the 1980s by Leda Cosmides, John Tooby, and Donald Symons, and popularized by Steven Pinker and Robert Wright, strives to explain the deepest roots of human behavior in evolutionary terms, primarily through an understanding of the functioning of “evolved psychological mechanisms.”⁴

In this book I argue that, despite various difficulties, Christian ethics and evolutionary theories are in principle consonant with one another. Distinct vantage points do not have to compete with one another if interpreted properly. If one accepts the axiom that, ultimately, “truth cannot conflict with truth,”⁵ then one can argue that the knowledge provided by the natural sciences, including that pertaining to human evolution, is consistent with, and can help to shed light on, the truth affirmed in Christian faith.

Science of course does not provide Christian faith with direct and unambiguous intellectual justification, such that a person without faith would be convinced to adopt Christian belief solely or primarily on the basis of evidence given in the natural world. One cannot argue from evolutionary biology to Christianity, or vice versa. Since theology is an essentially interpretative enterprise, none of us can pretend to work from the vantage point of presuppositionless objectivity. Functioning within a tradition that is mediated historically, the study of theology involves both careful interpretation of magisterial texts and respectful dialogue with present forms of knowledge, including scientific findings about human evolution.

From a Christian standpoint, faith in the Creator requires theology to extend its range of sources to include science and other non-theological

³ See Robert Trivers, *Social Evolution* (Menlo Park, CA: Benjamin/Cummings, 1985); E. O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975); and Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford, 1976).

⁴ See Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

⁵ John Paul II, “Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences on Evolution,” *Origins* 26 (November 1996): 349, citing Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*. See also Thomas Aquinas, *De Veritate* 1.8. As the pope put it in what was his best discussion of the science–religion relation, “Both religion and science must preserve their own autonomy and their distinctiveness. Religion is not founded on science nor is science an extension of religion. Each should possess its own principles, its pattern of procedures, its diversities of interpretation and its own conclusions . . . While each can and should support the other as distinct dimensions of a common human culture, neither ought to assume that it forms a necessary premise for the other.” John Paul II, “Letter to the Rev. George V. Coyne, S.J.,” *Origins* 18 (November 1988): 377.

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sources. Christian faith ought neither to interfere with the pursuit of scientific knowledge nor to require scientists to ignore relevant data, nor to encourage breaches of the procedures proper to scientific inquiry. As physicist Howard Van Till explains, “Linking a specific scientific theory with some religious belief system in such a way that one entails the other, for example, has a serious strategic disadvantage in that any discrediting of that scientific theory automatically tends to call into question the entire belief system attached to it.”⁶ The goal of science, he notes, is “to gain knowledge, not to reinforce preconceptions.”⁷

The most popular term in the academy for the science–theology relation is “dialogue.” Yet scientists and theologians do not learn from one another in the ways that microbiologists learn from biochemists or moral theologians learn from moral philosophers. In fact, scientists *qua* scientists have nothing to learn from theologians about how to conduct scientific research or about the scientific implications of their findings. Inserting theological questions into scientific inquiry is distracting as well as beside the point.

Scientists *qua* thoughtful human beings, on the other hand, are inclined to raise questions about the deeper meaning of their scientific work and to delve into matters that lie outside the domains with which the methods of science are suited to function. Some insights of science have important theological implications but, as wondering, imagining, feeling human beings, scientists raise kinds of questions that their professional training and specialization do not equip them to address. Theologians can alert scientists to ways in which they have attempted to exceed the proper limits of their disciplines and to the intellectual hazards of doing so. Christian ethicists can play a valuable role in disentangling evolutionary science from its ideological misuses, pointing out the shortcomings of distorted applications of evolutionary theory to various kinds of human behavior, and showing that moral and religious implications of evolutionary accounts of humanity can be interpreted nonreductionistically.

The unity of truth suggests that the findings of science and the insights of theology are ultimately compatible and, at certain points, mutually enlightening. Scientific perspectives on nature can clarify, enrich, and deepen the minds of those who view the natural world with the eyes of faith. Yet the wellspring of Christian convictions lies not in science but in

⁶ Howard J. Van Till, Robert E. Snow, John H. Steck, and Davis A. Young, *Portraits of Creation: Biblical and Scientific Perspectives on the World's Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 149.

⁷ *Ibid.*

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the personal religious experience made possible by living communities of faith. Approached in this way, knowledge of human evolution need not have the devastating impact on Christian ethics sometimes depicted by evolutionists such as Wilson and Dawkins. On the contrary, knowledge of evolution, and especially understood in terms of the notion of “emergent complexity,” can make an important constructive contribution to Christian ethics, particularly with regard to our thinking about the natural law and the virtues. Science can help us understand the biological factors that allow for the human capacities that provide the basis for morality and religion.

AUDIENCE AND GOAL

We live in an increasingly secular culture in which many people find no grounds for taking seriously belief in God, never mind Christian faith. For some of those deeply influenced by evolutionary biology, Darwin’s refutation of Paley’s argument from design was the last nail in the coffin of theism.⁸ Yet a number of scholars argue that knowledge of human evolution does not have to lead to this skeptical conclusion. What is sometimes characterized as a simple intellectual stand-off between science and religion is actually a much more complex and varied relationship. As historian of science John Brooke points out,

There is no such thing as *the* relationship between science and religion. It is what different individuals and communities have made of it in a plethora of different contexts. Not only has the problematic interface between them shifted over time, but there is also a high degree of artificiality in abstracting from the science and religion of earlier centuries to see how they were related.⁹

What Brooke says here about the general categories of science and religion also applies to the categories of evolutionary theory and Christian ethics.

Coming from the opposite direction, some Christian ethicists insist so stridently that scientific (or other non-theological) modes of thought not be allowed to set the agenda for theology that they end up ignoring science altogether. But this stance obscures the fact that serious engagement with contemporary science need not diminish Christian identity. The Christian tradition itself generated a profound theological impetus for the

⁸ See John Dupré, *Darwin’s Legacy: What Evolution Means Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹ John H. Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 321.

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development of modern science.¹⁰ Its colleges and universities were the places of many of the most ground-breaking scientific discoveries, and many of the greatest Christian theologians – from Augustine and Thomas Aquinas to Jonathan Edwards and Karl Rahner – developed their theologies in light of available knowledge regarding the natural world.¹¹ The policy of ignoring the natural sciences on grounds of Christian identity actually constitutes a break with the mainstream of the Christian tradition, not its continuation.¹²

While critical of evolutionary ideology, Christian ethics needs to engage evolutionary knowledge because it can help us better to understand important aspects of human nature and some of the enduring constituents of human flourishing. Christian ethics, especially as developed in the natural-law tradition engaged here, gives moral significance to the central constituents of human nature, so it must take seriously the massive body of literature and significant discoveries about where we come from, who we are, and what we need and desire as human beings. Knowledge of human evolution is a necessary source of insight for any contemporary Christian ethics that takes human nature seriously.

This book attempts to address fundamental questions of Christian ethics more than it considers practical or “applied” matters. One might think that a book on Christian ethics and human evolution would place these evolutionary writings in relation to Christian treatments of the same topics, for example to relate E. O. Wilson on the evolution of deception to Augustine’s analysis of lying or contrast ethological treatments of aggression with the Sermon on the Mount. Yet this kind of analysis is neither particularly interesting nor intellectually fruitful. The most significant level of interchange concerns more fundamental questions about the nature of reality (metaphysics, and especially ontology) and God (theology), rather than practical moral questions. When a given evolutionist disagrees with a Christian moral teaching about sex or lying, for example, the point in

¹⁰ See John H. Brooke, David C. Lindberg, and Ronald L. Numbers, eds., *God and Nature: Historical Essays on the Encounter between Christianity and Science* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

¹¹ The term “nature” can be used in many ways, including three major uses of the term found in this book: the “nature” or essence of an entity, the totality of the physical world, the world of creation as distinct from supernatural grace. Context will indicate which of these meanings of the term is intended.

¹² It might be added that while the Reformed theologian Karl Barth has often been regarded as indifferent to science, it is possible to develop his theology in a way that includes a more constructive relation to it. See Thomas Torrance: *Theological Science* (New York: Oxford, 1969; reissued in 1996 by T. & T. Clark); *Space, Time, and Resurrection* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1976); and *Reality and Scientific Theology* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1985).

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dispute is more often based on how he or she views human society or human nature and not only about the morality of sexual relations or speech.

The deepest moral disagreements are rooted in competing presuppositions about what is most real, how we can come to understand what is most real, and how this knowledge provides guidance for leading good lives and developing good communities. This book deals with the dispute between Christian moral realism – which holds that the world is intrinsically morally meaningful – and evolutionary ontological naturalism, which denies that it has any meaning other than what we human beings choose to make of it. It will devote some time to considering fundamental theological issues such as faith, creation, and providence, and metaphysical concerns regarding the place of teleology, directionality, and progress in the evolutionary process. Christian ethics cannot participate in dialogue with evolutionary theory without some, even if cursory, prior examination of these themes.

Theories of evolution do not make a direct contribution to Christian ethics. Evolutionary biology can provide neither a “foundation” for Christian ethics nor scientific “backing” to the contents of Christian ethics, even within the natural-law tradition. Our knowledge of nature, including evolution, cannot determine the content of theological or moral affirmations.

Knowledge of human evolution, however, can play a valuable role in helping us to understand important aspects of human nature and human flourishing. The natural-law tradition regards the moral life as the way to move toward the human good, and any account of the human good reflects some account of human nature and the conditions that make for its flourishing.

OVERVIEW

The basic structure of the book falls into three parts: the first part argues for the importance of current knowledge of evolution for Christian ethics in general (chs. 1–6), the second part examines ways in which evolution can enrich and inform our understanding of human nature and specifically regarding the themes of freedom, love, and human dignity (chs. 7–9), and the third part discusses the relevance of evolution to the natural-law tradition (chs. 10–12).

One of my central convictions is that Christian ethics can fruitfully employ evolutionary insights into human behavior as long as these are not

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distorted by unjustifiable kinds of reductionism. A nonreductionistic reading of evolution that recognizes its inherent directionality is consonant with Christian belief in creation and providence. The human race is the product of a process that has generated unprecedented forms of emergent complexity. Christian theologians have long maintained that God operates through the “secondary causes” made available by the evolutionary process. The account of human nature as constituted by emergent complexity helps us understand aspects of key notions in Christian ethics, particularly human freedom, love of neighbor, human dignity, morality, and natural law.

The twofold audience of this book causes a certain imbalance in the presentation of the material examined. It requires an explanation of some things that Christian ethicists already know but that scientifically inclined readers do not, and vice versa. A certain amount of introductory explanation is needed for each group, though not, it is hoped, to the point of tedium. Like most interdisciplinary projects, reading this book will require a certain amount of patience and intellectual generosity on the part of the expert reader.

The attempt to engage in interdisciplinary reflection that joins such diverse disciplines, or, more accurately, sets of disciplines, necessarily involves wading into discussions that lie outside any given author’s expertise. This is particularly the case when a Christian wades into the study of human evolution, which, as Simon Conway Morris notes, is a field “riven with controversy.”¹³

My own training is in Christian theological ethics rather than in the natural sciences. Anyone who is willing to engage in materials that so far outstrip his or her competence as I do here, as a Christian ethicist, has to compensate with a heavy reliance on respected authorities in various scientific fields. I realize that the issues broached in this discussion are of far greater complexity than I may appreciate, and that widely respected authorities frequently disagree with one another. As much as possible, I strive not to take a stand on major debates in the field of evolutionary biology, such as group selection, the extent of adaptation, the pace of evolution, and other issues. While attempting to avoid misrepresenting the authors whom I discuss, I no doubt make generalizations that are, from the point of view of scientific experts, coarse-grained, incomplete, and oversimplified. I believe nevertheless that the importance of the topic warrants the risk of gaffes, missteps, and even serious errors that others can correct.

¹³ Simon Conway Morris, *Life’s Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 270.

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CHAPTER I

Evolution and religion

This chapter examines four evolutionary theories regarding religion, offers a critique of them, and then argues that our knowledge of human evolution can be compatible with Christian ethics and the religious faith that it reflects. It begins with a discussion of the place of evil in nature because that presents the central objection to Christian faith.

RELIGION REJECTED BY EVOLUTION: THE “PROBLEM OF EVIL”

The challenge posed by the “problem of evil” was based not only in a growing awareness of the pervasiveness of pain, competition, and wastefulness in the natural world but also in the recognition that these are “built into” the very structure of nature itself. The advent of evolutionary theory brought with it the question of whether a good God could be the Creator and providential Governor of such a natural order.

Young Darwin assumed the truth of conventional Anglican Christianity, and as a college student he was impressed by the argument of design put forth in William Paley’s *Natural Theology*. His reading of Lyell’s *Principles of Geology* on the *Beagle*, however, convinced him that the earth changed gradually over a much longer period of time than either conventional science or religion had been aware. Malthus’ *Essay on the Principle of Population* significantly shaped his view of human society as marked by the same ruthless “struggle for existence” that he found in the world of biological organisms.

Some of the seeds of Darwin’s doubts about the Christian doctrine of God came from his increased awareness of both the inaccuracies of scriptural accounts of human origins and the philosophical weaknesses of natural theology. He gradually came to reject what he took to be the religious content of Scripture, particularly its attribution to God of the

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“feelings of a revengeful tyrant.”¹ “Thus disbelief crept over me at a slow rate, but was at last complete,” he confessed in his *Autobiography*.²

Darwin’s views of science, his own life experience, and his philosophical proclivities all made it exceedingly difficult for him to reconcile divine benevolence with the harshness, randomness, and selfishness at the heart of the “struggle for existence.” He experienced the heartlessness of nature and the human suffering it causes in a very personal way with the death of his beloved daughter Anne.³ The experience of the fact that the world does not consistently reward virtue and punish vice led Darwin to reject the providential Creator of orthodox Christianity. Instead of benefiting the “greater good,” nature rewards individuals who survive and their offspring.⁴ The laws that govern the natural order, Darwin came to believe, could not have been created, or the course of evolution supervised, by a benevolent deity.⁵

Darwin’s moral objections to major strains of biblical narratives were balanced by his admiration of some of its major ethical teachings, particularly those of Jesus in the Gospels. He gave no credence to the miracles and supernatural intervention into nature asserted by “revealed” theology. Some scholars believe that Darwin continued to use “God-language” to avoid scandal and outrage, despite the fact that he came to suspect that agnosticism (a term coined by his intellectual ally T.H. Huxley) was intellectually inescapable.⁶ Yet others held that Darwin continued to use “God-language” as a way of expressing his sense of awe at the wonders of the natural world.⁷ Thus he wrote of

the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity of looking far backwards and far into futurity, as a result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man, and I deserve to be called a theist.⁸

¹ *Autobiography*, in *Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley: Autobiographies*, ed. Gavin de Beer (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 49.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87. See also A. Desmond and J. Moore, *Darwin* (New York: Penguin, 1992).

³ See *Autobiography*, ed. de Beer, pp. 97–98.

⁴ Neil Gillespie, however, argues that Darwin did not abandon theism. See *Charles Darwin and the Problem of Creation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979). Gillespie holds that Darwin came to believe that the laws of nature work for the greater good of the whole of nature.

⁵ See John Hedley Brooke, “The Relations between Darwin’s Science and His Religion,” in John Durant, ed., *Darwinism and Divinity: Essays on Evolution and Religious Belief* (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 40–75.

⁶ See Ernst Mayr, *One Long Argument: Charles Darwin and the Genesis of Modern Evolutionary Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 85.

⁷ See Gillespie, *Charles Darwin and the Problem of Creation*, pp. 143–145.

⁸ *Autobiography*, ed. de Beer, p. 54. See William E. Phipps, *Darwin’s Religious Odyssey* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

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At the same time, Darwin confessed an increase of “skepticism or rationalism”⁹ in his adult years and growing reservation toward religion, and particularly regarding belief in a “personal God” and any “future existence with reward and retribution.”¹⁰

Some of Darwin’s theistic successors, given to a more benign interpretation of nature, argued that Darwin’s science is fully compatible with theism as long as evolution is understood to be the natural means employed by God to create new species.¹¹ They regarded the evil present in the evolutionary process as a necessary component of a process that was generally good. Other followers of Darwin, however, argued that Darwinism implied the end of theism.¹² Psalm 19:2 announces, “The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork,”¹³ but T. H. Huxley did not think so. The earth is anything but the peaceful garden of the Yahwist creation account in Genesis, and the “survival of the fittest” without the corrections of culture inevitably destroys the finest moral impulses of the human race. Moral virtue for Huxley, then, entailed a course of conduct that “in all respects” runs directly contrary to the “struggle for existence.”¹⁴

The objection to Christian faith from the evil in nature was repeated with even greater intensity in the writings of some neo-Darwinians. Sociobiologists are essentially the latter-day heirs to Huxley in this regard. George C. Williams, author of *Adaptation and Natural Selection*, argues that genes are concerned only with self-replication, and that organic life follows suit by exploiting any opportunity for inclusive fitness maximization, whatever the cost in pain and suffering for other organisms: “Nothing resembling the Golden Rule or other widely preached ethical principle is operating in living nature.”¹⁵ Nature is simply a “process of maximizing short-sighted selfishness” that leads to results that are “grossly immoral”¹⁶

⁹ *Autobiography*, ed. de Beer, p. 55. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹¹ For example, Henry Drummond, *The Ascent of Man* (New York: James Pott and Company, 1894). See Stephen J. Pope, “Neither Enemy nor Friend: Nature as Creation in the Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *Zygon* 32 (1997): 219–230.

¹² See James R. Moore, “Herbert Spencer’s Henchmen: The Evolution of Protestant Liberals in Late Nineteenth-Century America,” in John Durant, ed., *Darwinism and Divinity: Essays on Evolution and Religious Belief* (New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), pp. 76–100.

¹³ Scriptural citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

¹⁴ *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays*, reprinted in *Issues in Evolutionary Ethics*, ed. Paul Thompson (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), p. 133. See Moore, “Herbert Spencer’s Henchmen,” pp. 76–100.

¹⁵ George C. Williams, “Huxley’s Evolution and Ethics in Sociobiological Perspective,” *Zygon* 23 (1988): 391.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 385.