

REPLY TO COMMENTS ON "HUXLEY'S EVOLUTION AND ETHICS IN SOCIOBIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE"

by George C. Williams

Abstract. I agree with comments suggesting that humans must make an unremitting effort to expand a circle of sympathy for others. However, I disagree with the idea, expressed by everyone except Sarah Hrdy, that evolution is in some sense consistently good.

Keywords: development; evolution; Thomas H. Huxley; morality; sociobiology.

I am grateful to the four respondents for their thoughtful comments, and encouraged by their acceptance of so much of what I had to say. Even in some of the criticisms there is much that I find agreeable, most notably John Cobb's recognizing that an unremitting effort is required to expand the circle of sympathy for others. This effort is in opposition to much of human nature and is surely the struggle proposed by Thomas Huxley and seconded by me. I can also concur in his pointing out parallels between my position and that of traditional Christianity, and in Sarah Hrdy's account of simian morality and its relevance to an understanding of our own species-biased morality. I can identify with all of her baboons.

There are many disagreements, and my most basic conflict is with the idea that evolution is good in general or on the average, as stated or implied by everyone except Hrdy. Cobb views kin selection as a morally hopeful process, a view that I have already attacked at length. Here I will merely add that it favors the neglect or abuse of stepchildren, and remind him that *nepotism* usually denotes something mischievous. Michael Ruse labels my position inconsistent, either in denying that the moral impulse has a biological basis, or that it is really moral. In fact I

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require no such denials. I account for morality as an accidental capability produced, in its boundless stupidity, by a biological process that is normally opposed to the expression of such a capability. Cobb characterizes my position here quite accurately.

I am also unconvinced by Ralph Burhoe's argument that we can look forward to evolution seeking out new preferred states that we will find morally preferable to any we now have. Whether evolution has an arrowhead or a barb provides little encouragement unless it heads in the right direction, and I see no reason to believe that it normally does. Cultural evolution is no more hopeful. Group selection based on culturetypes is no more benign than that based on gene pools. Superior morality is less likely to prevail than superior economics or military technology. Within a society a meme may indeed enhance the happiness or fitness of its bearer, or it may not. If it can be horizontally transmitted at a greater rate than its bearer can reproduce, that bearer's fitness becomes largely irrelevant. The progress of cigarette smoking leaves a trail of corpses no less dead than those felled by a clone of spirochetes.

A few other matters. All respondents raised the broad issues of what kind of world is worth striving for, and what would be appropriate tactics for such striving. Like Huxley, I avoided such matters in my essay and will also ignore them here. In Burhoe's comments I detect a possible confusion between evolutionary and developmental processes. The evolution of the Earth's biota is purely historical. Every disturbance redirects the process. There is never any corrective feedback that keeps it going in any preferred direction. Embryogenesis, by contrast, is controlled by feedback loops that constantly minimize the effects of disturbance. Perhaps ecological succession is often an intermediate process, partly developmental and partly historical.

I object to Ruse's treatment of my treatment of rattlesnakes and lightning. There is nothing metaphorical in my recognizing that the snake's fangs are designed as weapons. The snake makes use of a strategy for killing its victim (poison it). In endless details the observable features of the machinery conform to the predictable design requirements for an envenomating apparatus. What else can one mean by functional design other than such mapping of observable engineering onto functional requirements? Nothing is implied about the nature of the designer. It could be a divine engineer or an inanimate trial and error process (natural selection) or anything else that can be imagined to suffice. If this recognition of functional design is Aristotelian teleology, so be it.