

## BEFRIENDING AN AMORAL NATURE

by *John B. Cobb, Jr.*

*Abstract.* Contrary to George C. Williams, moral judgments of nature are not appropriate, whereas affirmation of the intrinsic value of creation is. The concern for offspring and kin identified by Williams as the principle force of evolution is not inherently evil in its operation in human society. Instead of juxtaposing it as enemy to justice and altruism, we should try to extend the scope of felt kinship to the whole human race.

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George Williams's learned and impassioned attack on nature constitutes fascinating and disturbing reading. Most of us have been aware that the evolutionary process has been extremely wasteful, extremely destructive of the vast majority of potential and actual creatures. However, Williams's detailed account of the means of destruction still has the power to shock us. It therefore constitutes yet another challenge to the theologian to rethink the doctrine of nature. Since most of the pressure for such re-thinking in recent times has been to overcome the widespread indifference and hostility to nature so common in our heritage, it is particularly interesting to find ourselves called by Williams to intensify this negativity. Although I am not prepared to follow him in that direction, I do recognize that the affirmation of nature, which I believe to be important, must be worked out without false sentimentality or romanticism.

Foundational to any Christian doctrine of nature should be the affirmation that creation as such, and especially life, is good. This may seem to be in diametric opposition to Williams, who sees the whole process as the enemy, and there is no doubt that there are great differences between us. Yet it is important to distinguish levels of discourse here. The affirmation of creation as good is not in any sense an ethical judgment. It leaves open the question of the moral goodness

John B. Cobb, Jr., is Ingraham professor of theology at the School of Theology at Claremont and Avery professor of religion at the Claremont Graduate School, Claremont, California 91711.

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of creatures. What it does affirm is the intrinsic value of existence as such, and especially of life and its self-enjoyment in all its forms. I do not think that Williams denies this. On the contrary, he presupposes it. If life were not good, there would be no reason to be horrified by its casual destruction. Indeed, if life were not good, there would be a simple way to destroy the enemy Williams identifies: a nuclear war could destroy the life-system on the planet and with it all the evil to which Williams points. However, I am confident that is quite the opposite of his aim.

I would press this matter a further step. There is some correlation, I think, between the amount of suffering creatures inflict on one another and their anatomical complexity. At least we are inclined to think that mammals suffer more than unicellular organisms, so that we are more disturbed by mutual destruction among monkeys than among amoeba. The moral evil in nature will be reduced, I presume, if we continue to destroy the habitat necessary for the survival of what we call the higher animals or hunt them to extinction. Yet I do not think this is Williams's recommendation. Something of the richness and complexity of the biosphere, evolved as it has in such morally unacceptable ways, should be preserved.

This suggests to me that even the evolutionary process, so bitterly denounced by Williams, has something to be said for it. From a lifeless planet it produced life and multiplied its species. In and through its ruthless procedures it produced a very rich and diversified biosphere that I cherish—and that I suspect Williams cherishes as well. It was only through this process that we ourselves came into being. Although the patterns of waste and mutual destructiveness within the non-human world continue, it is only human beings whose activities lead to massive simplification and limitation of the rich biosphere as a whole.

If there is an ontological goodness about the results of the process, perhaps we should look again at the means of its attainment. This has been, in Williams's view, especially the ordering of the behavior of each animal to the dissemination of its genes. Williams repeatedly identifies this as selfish and denounces it in no uncertain terms. He seems to imply either that it would have been better that evolution not occur at all or that some other course of events have occurred that might still have brought us into being. However, he gives no hint of what this alternative might have been.

We confront here two distinct views of ethics. On the one hand, it is possible to develop ethical ideals and then to use them to judge what happens irrespective of whether any other course of events was possible. This is Williams's procedure. He seems to adopt the motives of altruism, commitment to the larger group, and justice as his norms. He

finds none of these in non-human animals, so he condemns them all as selfish. The same approach has long led many people to declare that human infants are egregiously sinful.

Another view of ethics asks whether among real options the better is chosen. This makes ethical judgments both about the evolutionary process as a whole and about the behavior of individual animals extremely difficult if not impossible. Since I follow this second line of ethical reflection, I find myself put off by Williams's unrelieved moral condemnation of animals.

The real object of Williams's attack is not the individual animals but rather the process as a whole. He justifies this attack by analogy with the pacifist's moral denunciation of war which, he holds, can be distinguished from moral criticism of those who instigate war. Some pacifists reserve their *moral* criticism for those who could have acted in ways that would have avoided war, and I am most sympathetic with their approach. Yet they all rightly point out the horrible consequences of war, and most believe that better results are really possible when other ways of dealing with human conflict—possible ways which pacifists are prepared to identify—are adopted. Hence the analogy on which Williams relies so heavily seems to me not to support him.

Williams's moral outrage *would* be justified if we posited an omnipotent and omniscient determiner of the whole process. In that case, our inability to imagine better ways in which a rich biosphere could have been attained would be irrelevant. By hypothesis this goal could have been accomplished without the waste and suffering that have accompanied it. But since neither Williams nor I posits such a being, partly because evidence such as that which he cites is so overwhelmingly against such an hypothesis, I will not dwell on this problem.

The most important issue raised by Williams is not our view of animals as such or of the evolutionary process that has produced us but of our own natural proclivities. Williams reasons that if we present ourselves with an attractive view of the behavior of our animal ancestors, we may see our task as aligning ourselves with the same tendencies in ourselves. He calls us instead to fight against our natural tendencies and to reshape ourselves by transcendent ideals.

To Christians this sounds remarkably traditional. Many theologians have seen us as half brute and half angel, and as needing to suppress the brute within ourselves and to identify with the angelic possibilities of reason. More often the discussion has been in terms of nature and spirit. There has been a strong tendency to identify the natural and brutish with sexuality and selfishness, just as Williams does, and the spiritual and angelic with reason, transcendence, altruism, and justice. Hence Williams's argument has a very familiar ring and suggests that

this long Christian tradition had some keen insights into the human situation.

Nevertheless, in recent generations we have been struggling to free ourselves from these dualisms and to make friends with our animality. We have become suspicious of a spirit that seeks to dominate our nature and suppress it. We have learned to see the complex ways in which such suppression distorts our capacities for genuine love and joy. We have come to appreciate eros and see its continuity with agape.

Now it would not be accurate simply to read Williams as supporting traditional Christian dualism. Both sexuality and selfishness have for him a significantly changed character. The key point is that our natural tendency is to care about reproduction and to subordinate even our private interests, as well as the wider good, to this goal. Favoring close relatives over strangers, rather than simply self over others, becomes the essence of the enemy. The mother love, so often pointed to as limiting the validity of the charge that we are all selfish, here becomes the clearest evidence of selfishness as redefined.

The issue is, then, how to relate concern for relatives to concern for humanity as a whole. Are these to be sharply opposed to each other? Williams's language in general implies this. He agrees with Thomas Huxley that we should rebel against any tendency to serve the interests of our genes, which being translated means, against all family feeling and tribal loyalty.

Williams does acknowledge some positive contribution of the evolutionary process to our currently needed ideals, but it is important to him to argue that this contribution is wholly opposed to its intentions, a result of its stupidity. He affirms "that mechanisms evolved for practicing unfair nepotism or making self-seeking deals with others can be subverted in the interests of broad altruism" (Williams 1988, 400). This relationship *can* be formulated in less hostile language. It often has been in religious history. We can accept as good our family feeling and loyalty, our willingness to sacrifice private pleasures for our children, the enjoyment we take in their success. We can see in this relationship an element of altruism, even if it is in the service of our genetic reproduction. We can then extend the sense of family, viewing our wider community as a family of families. In this process, our personal genetic contribution becomes less important, but the concern to maintain the human gene pool and to continue it into the indefinite future need not be derided.

I would not suggest for a moment that this extension is easy. Genetically and culturally we cling to the division of the world into "us" and "them." The effort to encourage the inclusion of "them" among "us" must be unremitting. However, it does not involve the radical discontinuity of nature and spirit that Williams seems to favor. Indeed, since

in our interdependent world the chance for the survival of our children and their children is bound up with the chance for the survival of those of others all around the world, the development of a strong sense of identity with the species is truly continuous with what Williams regards as natural.

My suspicion is that Williams does not want this approach to the human crisis because the motives to which it appeals are tainted. They are still selfish. He wants pure commitment to justice and the general good to displace fellow feelings and local group loyalty. I share his belief that human beings *can* transcend nature more than I have thus far explicitly affirmed. My argument that the extension of the sense of "we" to include "them" requires unremitting effort presupposed that there would be those who would see the need of this extension, call it to the attention of others, and work hard for its realization. This requires the ability to view our situation with some detachment from family feeling and judge which aspects of our existing tendencies need to be encouraged. This capacity for transcendence has an important role to play, but its task is not to suppress or displace family and community. It is to call attention to the need for extending these and to ways of overcoming obstacles to that extension. The call to set our transcendent capacities for impartiality and altruism in fundamental opposition to our natural interests in those closest to us cannot succeed, and it would destroy the fabric of society if it did. We must make friends with nature in all its ambiguity and use our capacities for transcending it to shape the indeterminate potentialities it provides in healing ways. Declaring it our enemy will not help.

In the above argument against enmity toward nature I have not disputed Williams's account of evolution. I hope other respondents, better qualified than I, will enter into discussion there. It is possible to view animal purposes less reductively, to take complex patterns of symbiosis more seriously, to view the animal actors less individualistically, to assign a larger role to phenotypes, to attend to the role of information and its transmission. In such a fuller account the positive potentials of our genetic heritage could be expanded.

It is also possible to distinguish more sharply between genetic and cultural contributions to our "nature." Williams acknowledges a complexity here but in fact makes little of it. It is disturbing to find him listing the behavior of native Americans as if it were but another example of genetically determined animal behavior. It is almost as if it were only with the rise of "civilization" that the needed enmity to nature could be initiated.

My failure to raise any of these questions except in these final paragraphs reflects my concern to dispute Williams's conclusions on his own grounds. I do not think that the desirability of a friendly stance

toward nature depends on a more attractive vision of evolution or on elaboration of the distinction of nature and culture. Because such friendship is today an urgent need, I have opposed Williams's call for enmity even within the highly unfavorable context he has offered us.

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