MYTH AND MORALITY: THE LOVE COMMAND

by Philip Hefner

Abstract. Following in general a history of religions analysis, the paper argues that myth lays a basis for morality in that it sets forth a picture of "how things really are" (the *is*), to which humans seek to conform their actions (morality, the *ought*). A parallel argument locates the capacity for morality and values orientation in the process of evolution itself. A hypothesis is formulated concerning the function of myth in the emergence of *Homo sapiens,* namely, to motivate the action required if creatures so culturally formed as humans were to survive. The Christian love command (understood as altruism) is interpreted as an example of the general hypothesis.

Keywords: altruism; Christian theology; culture; evolution; love command; morality; myth.

Our discussions in this symposium center on two terms that are often used, variously used, and much of the time ambiguously used. These terms are *value* and *morality.* I will make no claims to speaking with adequate clarity or correctness, but I will mention briefly what I mean by these two terms. By the term *value* I mean that which is or is thought to be worthwhile, desirable, or good; by *morality* I refer to a system which contains (*a*) beliefs about the nature of human beings in their world, (*b*) beliefs about what is good or desirable, and (*c*) rules laying down what ought to be done or what ought not to be done (see Nowell-Smith 1967, 150).

I will be using another term that is even more difficult, *myth.* Most plainly, I mean by myth a story that is of ultimate concern. More technically, I follow Paul Ricoeur's description of myth:

Myth will here be taken to mean what the history of religions now finds

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[*Zygon,* vol. 26, no. 1 (March 1991).]
 ISSN 0591-2385

in it: not a false explanation by means of images and fables, but (1) a traditional narration which (2) relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of (3) providing grounds for the ritual actions of men of today and, in a general manner, (4) establishing all the forms of action and thought by which we understand ourselves in our world. (Ricoeur 1967, 5)

It should be easy enough to draw a connection between the various aspects of Ricoeur's statement, to indicate that myth depicts the most basic character of the world, and that it has the direct intention of grounding thereby the forms of action that we call morality. This connection between myth and morality is central to my presentation, and I will elucidate and elaborate it.

My comments are divided into five parts. Parts one and two seek to clarify why it is appropriate to bring talk about myth into a discussion of values and morality. The third part moves into a discussion of the dynamics by which the relationship between myth, values, and morality functions. These sections will rely heavily upon the connection I have just called attention to. The fourth part will focus upon one particular moral injunction, the command to love, as interpreted by Christian tradition. The final section surveys some of the scientific reflection on altruism and relates it to the love command. In elaborating upon this one specific moral command, I hope to show how the more abstract issues that I discuss in the first two parts actually work themselves out in concrete existence.

I. Evolutionary Preparation for Values and Morality

Michael Levin, a philosopher at City College of New York, commented on morality in, of all places, the columns of a *New York Times* op-ed page. What he had to say is illustrative of the first point that I want to make about the relevance of myth to values and morality. He is speaking about academic courses in ethics, as they are offered nowadays in high schools, colleges, and professional schools.

. . . These ethics courses are an utterly pointless exercise. The idea behind them is that anyone can be taught to distinguish right from wrong in much the way medical students are taught to distinguish the pancreas from the liver. . . . But this whole exercise rests on a mistake about what makes people good. Moral behavior is the product of training, not reflection. . . . Indeed, abstract knowledge of right and wrong no more contributes to character than knowledge of physics contributes to bicycling. The idea in both cases is to build the proper responses into nerve and sinew: Bicyclists don't have to think about which way to lean and honest men don't have to think how to answer under oath.

> Psychologists have laboriously rediscovered the common sense observation that children first conceive morality as rules for pleasing their parents—only with the fullness of time comes a grasp of the idea of conscientious choice. (Levin 1989, 15)

Regardless of whether Professor Levin's critique of present-day ethics courses is correct, his comment that morality runs in very deep currents that are built into nerve and sinew before they are the object of academic reflection is both correct and essential.

If we survey our present understanding of values and morality, we shall see that their roots do indeed go very deep, even into the prehistory of nerve and sinew. We may be disturbed by the scientific discussions of morality today, precisely because they do dig so deeply into our evolutionary past. We sometimes like to think that only human beings, and for that matter, only highly civilized humans could give rise to genuine moral thinking and behavior. A good deal of effort has gone into our depiction of higher primates and early humans as brutes who mainly aimed at staying alive and satisfying their basest needs. We commonly speak of immorality as "animal," just as we speak of persons who engage in outrageous immoral actions as "animals."

The origin of values and morality cannot be separated, however, from our primordial past. It would be a natural move to subscribe to the belief that values and moral action are conditioned primarily or even solely by the current situation in which we live, the complex dilemma of global interrelatedness, freedom and ecological crisis, all occurring in the context of a high-tech ambience that is as pervasive as the air we breathe. Obviously, this current situation is the milieu in which we must act out our humanness, the context which provides the substance in which we must fashion our action. However, if we consider this current milieu to be the only component in the moral transactions that challenge us today, we shall be more ill-prepared than we can afford to be to undertake what is necessary for responsible action.

We must understand that although humans are in a unique position with respect both to the moral challenges that face them and their capacity for moral judgment, those challenges and those capacities for judgment are part and parcel of the evolutionary continuum in which they have emerged. Evolution proceeds, we might say, by the process of what the French call *bricolage*. It does not create new materials and parts as it adapts to new environments and produces new and more complex forms, but rather, like the sculptor who works with junk, it presses into service what lies at hand. The human brain and central nervous system are built on the base of components that

emerged in the reptilian and in the neomammalian phases of life's evolution on our planet. These prehuman components are active within us, and as Anthony Stevens has told us, we are still engaged in the ongoing struggle to teach them to function in a way that is appropriate to their human context (Stevens 1982, 267–71). It is also true that the physical environment in which we live bears the marks of its past. We cannot, for example, teach the ozone layer new tricks, precisely because it insists upon functioning in the ways it has learned millions of years ago. The same may be said of social environments, even though the time span of their history is significantly smaller. Ethnic groups do not cast aside behaviors generated millennia in the past and begin to practice love toward one another simply because the global community requires it; religious fundamentalists do not allow their beliefs and practices to be relativized by modern politics and technology and views of human rights, even when the tempting prize is a higher standard of living.

The potential for the relevance of values and morality emerged in evolutionary process long before humans (see Wicken 1989). The deterministic process itself proceeded to the point where it is clear that, strangely enough, freedom emerged. By *freedom* I mean the reflective judgment to choose between alternatives which do make a difference for our lives and/or the lives of those around us. Some read the potential for freedom all the way back to the Big Bang, locating it in the ongoing indeterminacy of physical processes. Equating freedom with indeterminacy is a controversial move on whose correctness I will not comment here, nor is it necessary to do so, because the emergence of freedom is clearer when we get to *Homo sapiens*. The human species is marked by what Theodosius Dobzhansky calls "genetically controlled adaptive plasticity," which gives us great ability to scan our environment and choose behaviors appropriate to it. Such a scanning process includes the self-conscious consideration of alternative decisions and behaviors, and it also requires a supportive social matrix which allows for free exploration by the individual and at the same time demands that group relationships and welfare of other individuals be respected.

The self-conscious consideration of alternatives and behaviors within a social context requires the making of judgments which in turn grounds the reality of what we humans call values and morality. The genetically controlled adaptive plasticity of humans is confronted continually with the demand that it make choices between alternatives. Among the alternatives are those that are not presently actual. Survival hinges upon these choices. Moreover, the choices will have consequences, necessitating further judgments as to how

those consequences will be dealt with. The chain of choice, feedback, consequences, and response is endless.

What I have just described is the evolutionary emergence of the ambience of values. Values emerged as a requirement for life and its evolution, with the complementary requirements of clarifying values, achieving consensus about specific values, and taking responsibility for actualizing them. The ambience of values is at the same time the ambience of morality, defined as Nowell-Smith did, including beliefs about the nature of humans in their world, beliefs about what is good or desirable, and rules for what ought and ought not to be done.

II. Some Current Scientific Viewpoints

There is presently a great deal of scientific thinking about the kinds of issues I have just mentioned. I will briefly focus on some of those issues for the purposes of my theme.

George Edgin Pugh, a physicist who has moved into artificial intelligence studies and research into values and decision-making processes, provides extensive analysis, in his 1977 book, *The Biological Origin of Human Values*. He defines *value* as that which drives a judgment, and he understands the human brain and central nervous system as a value-driven decision system that makes judgments. He follows in the train of the Nobel laureate in brain studies, Roger Sperry, who speaks of values as the most powerful thing in the world, because they drive decision. Thus the values of peace or war are more powerful than all of the nuclear arsenals, because it is these values that determine whether or not the arsenals will be used.

Pugh classifies values into two categories, *primary* and *secondary*. Primary values are those that are placed into the system prior to the creation of the system, over whose presence the system itself has no control. Secondary values arise within the lifetime of the system, by the system's own design, usually to assist in solving problems. Our evolutionary past has put in the primary values, over whose presence we have no say. Secondary values are created by us, through our culture; they are learned values, which in the long run, Pugh argues, must somehow live in reconciliation with the primary values. The urge to scratch an itch is primary; we cannot eradicate it. The judgment that it is better to stop scratching and apply an ointment, so that we will not develop infected sores by scratching, is based on secondary values that are culturally enabled and motivated.

We share some of our primary values with nonhuman primates. A keen sense of competition between males for status, acceptance,

or dominance, for example, is such a shared primary value. However, further cultural elaboration determines whether that competition or its redirection is encouraged, and whether it becomes discriminatory against women when the rewards for competition are passed out. On the other hand, the explicit desire to contribute to the group seems to be a distinctly and very deeply rooted human secondary value. Again, cultural elaboration determines whether that contribution is to destructive gang peers, to a Girl Scout troop, or to a football team for boys and a cooking class for girls.

Pugh's analysis sets the stage for a distinction which becomes a sharp tension, that between values that we have inherited from our prehuman past and those that have emerged within our journey as human beings through our own history. *This distinction and tension without question form the chief burden which that part of the scientific community that deals with our prehuman legacy is attempting to bring to the attention of the wider population today.* In shorthand, we might call this the tension between our genes and our cultures. It is the newest expression of the older "nature versus nurture" discussion.

No one has put this message more eloquently than Richard Dawkins, in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). This book proceeds according to the maxim that "natural selection has built us, and it is natural selection we must understand if we are to comprehend our own identities" (vii). He goes on to deliver this punch line:

> Be warned that if you wish, as I do, to build a society in which individuals cooperate generously and unselfishly towards a common good, you can expect little help from biological nature. Let us try to *teach* generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish. Let us understand what our own selfish genes are up to, because we may then at least have the chance to upset their designs, something which no other species has ever aspired to (3).

Dawkins stands within the group of scientists who state the genes/cultures conflict in the most bellicose manner (see Ghiselin 1974; Trivers 1971). Some of these are represented in the December 1988 issue of *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science,* particularly in the articles by biologist George C. Williams and the primatologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy. There is scarcely a scientist that I know of in this field, however, who does not focus upon this distinction as fundamental to understanding who we are as humans and the dynamics of our moral concerns.

William Irons has expounded one of the most sophisticated of the recent scientific works on this question, Richard D. Alexander's *The Biology of Moral Systems* (1987). Alexander, as Irons explicates him, does not set up the tension as simply genes versus culture. Rather, the primary "hostile force of nature" for humans has been other

humans, but the reason for conflict between humans rests on the conflicts of individual self-interest, which in turn are rooted in the genetic diversity of individuals which prevents an identity of reproductive interests (see Irons 1991, 49–89; Alexander 1987, 37–42). This individual diversity affects the life of groups. Alexander notes that "to say that we are *evolved* to serve the interests of our genes in no way suggests that we are *obliged* to serve them" (1987, 40). Culture can enable us to redirect our obligations, and for Alexander forming contracts by means of which we negotiate our self-interests across both individual and group lines is the most important means for dealing with the dire consequences that may come in the wake of the selfish gene. Irons both supports and criticizes this emphasis on contract forming, raising the worrisome question of whether it must always favor the stronger and the more powerful in a society (Irons 1991, 49–89).

Donald T. Campbell is one of the most influential researchers in this area and in his career has produced several significant sets of reflections on the genes/culture interface. In his 1975 Presidential Address, delivered to the American Psychological Association, he proposed two basic theses:

1. Human urban social complexity has been made possible by social evolution rather than biological evolution.
2. This social evolution has had to counter individual selfish tendencies which biological evolution has continued to select as a result of the genetic competition among the cooperators (Campbell 1976, 189).

This is not to say that he underestimates the significance of biological evolution in the shaping of the human, but rather that he devotes his chief attention to the interface between genes and culture and to the role of culture on that interface.

Ralph Wendell Burhoe goes further than Campbell's statement that human urban social complexity has been enabled more by cultural evolution than biological. It is cultural evolution that enabled the human to emerge at all. In his preface to the publication of Campbell's address in *Zygon,* Burhoe writes as follows:

> Thus one of the most exciting intellectual problems of our time has become how to explain the mystery of the emergence from a beastly ape into a civilized human. How could culture and cooperative behavioral values or motivations (beyond those within one's family) be grafted onto a beast whose genetic programming is known to be selected for the perpetuation of its own line? How could a beast whose brain's genetic programming could not tolerate a full awareness of the implications of its own demise evolve to cope with an increase of such awareness, even to the point of an occasional self-motivated sacrifice of his body for nonkinfolk? This fascinating problem for science is at

the same time an urgent problem for the health of humanity, at a time when eating too much of the fast-growing tree of scientific knowledge in the center of the garden of Eden is causing such an indigestion in moral and religious knowledge that civilizations and individual psyches increasingly are showing signs of approaching breakdowns, disintegration, and death (Burhoe 1976, 159).

Burhoe was to suggest answers to this question, even in the title of the article which accompanied Campbell's in that September 1976 issue of *Zygon:* "The Source of Civilization in the Natural Selection of Coadapted Information in Genes and Culture." He proposes the striking hypothesis that "humanity is not a single species but a new kind of symbiotic community" (Burhoe 1976, 282). The significant symbiosis that he is talking about is between the biological creature *Homo* and "a new creature such as the earth had never seen before, a creature that is only partly biological, only partly programmed by genetic information" (ibid.). Biological humans (Burhoe calls them *Homo,* without the *sapiens*) and sociocultural systems are living in symbiosis and undergoing the process of natural selection as a coevolving and coadapting supraorganism.

In one sense, Burhoe is underscoring the tension between genes and culture more than all the rest, since they represent two different organisms in a relationship. His basic understanding is of their cooperation and reciprocity, however, in the image of symbiosis. A successful symbiosis is necessary for the survival of both the human genes and its culture. Later he suggests that religion plays a special role in culture's contribution to this symbiosis, in an article titled "Religion's Role in Human Evolution: The Missing Link between Ape-Man's Selfish Genes and Civilized Altruism" (1979). I will refer to this article at greater length later.

III. Where Myth Enters In

This quick survey of scientific materials sets the stage for two fundamental conclusions: (1) Paraphrasing Dawkins, prehuman biological evolution has built us, and it is this evolution that we must understand if we are to comprehend our own concern for values and morality and their possibilities. (2) If the human community were to emerge and continue, cultural supplements had to begin from the very beginning of the emergence of *Homo sapiens* to manipulate the genetic heritage so that it could survive under the new conditions imposed upon it by human existence, without destroying the new human being, but on the contrary enhancing the new creature's survival.

Michael Levin sees things correctly when he points to values and morality residing deep within nerve and sinew—deeper, perhaps, than even he realizes. This primordial rootage provides energy for pursuing values; indeed, we may say that it is the engine that drives morality. What Levin does not, apparently, see so clearly is that this primordial rootage is also a major obstacle to the moral life, whether that rootage lies in our prehuman past or in our earlier human history. The rootage is an obstacle, because although the information that evolution bequeaths to us at any given point through the process of selection, whether natural or cultural, is genuine truth, it is the truth about past worlds and the life of those creatures in the past through whom the information was conveyed to us (D. T. Campbell 1975, 169; J. Campbell 1988, 13). To the extent that neither those creatures nor those worlds are appropriate for us today in our world, that information is obsolete, even detrimental to us. It is for this reason that the reptilian aspects of our central nervous system have to be taught what is appropriate for human living today. Even as we emphasize this obsolescence, we remember that the reptile in us has to be taught, not eradicated. If it were eradicated, we would die, because it is essential to us and to our life.

These considerations may help us to recognize how large a challenge confronted early human beings, as their humanity was wrestling at a primordial stage of history with the prehuman past out of which they were emerging. When I speak of early human beings, unless I indicate otherwise, I am speaking of Neanderthals, dating from 100,000 years ago (Pfeiffer 1982, chap. 6). Recall that the emergence of agriculture and civilization is usually dated at 10,000 years ago. I am also well aware that we cannot depict the emergence of the human, or the new conditions of human living, as breaking into view suddenly, as if on one day a hypothetical observer would detect no human beings at all, whereas the next day (or year or century) that same observer would suddenly see thousands of them. Nevertheless, over a longer period of time the observer would note a new species on the scene.

I will speak of the challenges facing early humans as twofold:

First, they had to develop a way of teaching their prehuman legacy how to behave appropriately under the new conditions of human existence. A moment ago I termed this human "cultural supplements" to the genetic and cultural legacy of their past. These supplements would not be suitable for their task unless they possessed power, power to match the engines of the genetic heritage.

Second, in developing these human cultural supplements, Homo sapiens *began an enterprise that has attained particular urgency in our time, that of fashioning a system of information, support, and guidance that is comparable*

to and integrated with the physico-biogenetic systems that preceded it in the evolutionary process and which continued to coexist with the Homo sapiens.

Of course, humans were not aware of these challenges as such, just as most humans today do not seem to be aware of them. They were simply responding to perceived environments as their genetic and cultural motivators directed them, under the increasing presence of rational thinking. However, the point is that certain of their cultural supplements survived through the processes of natural selection. Donald Campbell in his paper has given us important information on how the selection processes may work, incorporating the Boyd-Richerson work. Professor Csikszentmihalyi has also contributed a number of concepts as to how selection works at the level of socio-cultural evolution.

In the context of these considerations, I offer a thesis:

Since Neanderthal, 100,000 years ago, religious myth and its accompanying ritual formed one of the most significant cultural inputs by which the prehuman creature was taught to live under the conditions of being human.

For its survival, therefore, *Homo sapiens* could not exist only on the physical and genetic information that serves the welfare of all other forms of life. Humans were fashioned such that they require more information, and this information must be as compelling as the physical and genetic. When we recognize these facts, then we can understand more fully the appearance of myth and its functioning, in which three factors are particularly important.

1. Myth emerged very close to the primordial ground at which human life was grappling with the vulnerable workings of its complex scanning systems, which required judgment and which had to transcend the genetic motivators that humans had inherited. Furthermore, it had to appear and function in a way that was relevant to the dimensions of human existence at which the genetic motivators were relevant. Our skepticism about myth is predisposed to overlook the function of this primordiality, especially when our critique is based on a primarily intellectual and academic assessment.

Some recent researchers underscore the primordiality of myth by arguing that the structure and the processes of the human central nervous system are such that they not only are capable of receiving myth, but even require it (d'Aquili and Laughlin 1975, 1978, 1983; Turner 1983). E.O. Wilson speaks directly of the "mythopoeic requirements" of the human central nervous system, which inevitably result in the brain's ordering the information at its disposal finally into "some form of morality, religion, and mythology" (Wilson 1978, 200; see also Stevens 1983, chap. 13).

2. Myth presents itself as a statement of "what is," of "how

things really are." This *is* stands as the ground for the learning that the behaviors inherited from the evolutionary past must undergo, as well for the moral imperatives that follow from the myth. The situation in which humans find themselves is that of having to supplement physical and genetic information systems with cultural systems, which in turn are substantially reflective and self-aware. These cultural systems are powerful in large measure because they deliver information that is required, even though they themselves are not verifiable or falsifiable in the way that our self-consciousness might otherwise demand. Cultural information in the form of myth concerns that about which we cannot speak with certainty. It offers surplus conceptualization that deals with the ultimate ground and nature of reality, with statements about what the whole of reality is like. Such information is necessary (that is what E. O. Wilson means by the "mythopoeic requirements" of the human central nervous system), and myth supplies it. Metaphysical philosophy also provides this information, but not at the primordial level, and this accounts for this philosophy's lower level of existential relevance for most people. It also accounts for its not infrequent alliances with myth, as occurs in some schools of Platonism, Hegelianism, and Marxism, for example, thereby rendering those philosophies far more cogent to more persons than would otherwise be the case.

Since humans regularly find themselves working hard and committing themselves to projects, they need to know whether the nature of reality is such that this hard work and commitment really make sense. Demonstrating love beyond the kinship group is costly and often not pleasurable, thereby creating the need for humans to know whether such love is really justified on the grounds that it is more fully commensurate with the fundamental character of reality. Myth claims to provide information about the fundamental character of all of reality. It claims to be information about the *is* of reality and our lives in the most fundamental sense. Leszek Kolakowski speaks of this aspect of myth as the function by which it "refers the conditioned empirical realities to an unconditioned universe" (1989, 41).

3. Myth always expresses itself in direct discourse and in declarative sentences. This is the form in which information about "how things really are" comes to us. Again, this was a requirement if myth were to be relevant at the level where the vulnerabilities of life were being lived out. The cultural information of the *is*, which was essential to the flourishing of the distinctly human, could be no more conditional than the genetic programs that direct the biological components of the human animal.

The linguistic form of the declarative poses a great problem for modern persons. *We know that the myth is a myth.* We entertain the mythic information as if it were a hypothesis to be tested, and there are conditions under which this is required if we are to be faithful to our rational humanity, even those of us who are devout believers of a religious tradition. Human beings by their nature turn all information into hypothetical discourse. Declaration and command become hypothesis to the human being, because humans are creatures who participate in the ongoing processes of nature by self-conscious participation in and co-construction of those processes. Thus what is inviolable natural law to other entities is for the human a hypothesis that may or may not be adequate. This is true whether the issue is how babies are to be made and nurtured, whether genetic constitution is to be altered, or how rivers flow and subatomic particles react.

Paul Ricoeur has spoken of this situation:

> For us moderns, a myth is *only* a myth because we can no longer connect that time with the time of history as we write it, employing the critical method, nor can we connect mythical places with our geographical space. This is why the myth can no longer be an explanation; to exclude its etiological intention is the theme of all necessary demythologization. But in losing its explanatory pretensions the myth reveals its exploratory significance and its contribution to understanding, which we shall later call its symbolic function—that is to say, its power of discovering and revealing the bond between us and what we consider sacred (Ricoeur 1967, 5).

In Ricoeur's terms, we stand between the "first naïveté," which has been lost forever, and the "second naïveté," which comes through criticism and scientific exploration. "But if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we moderns, aim at a second naïveté in and through criticism" (Ricoeur 1967, 351). The myth presents itself as something to be believed as such as a picture of reality, because it first came to be in an epoch when humans exercised naive faith. Today, we may recognize that there is wisdom in the myths, but we cannot believe them naively; we are critical; we can entertain the myths only as proposals, as hypotheses. That is to say, we can believe only through the second naïveté, which requires critical philosophical analysis and, above all, *interpretation*. In the movement away from the etiologic role, myth becomes a *detector* of reality, rather than an *explanation* of reality.

As we are testing the hypothesis presented by myth, we are testing it in the commitment of our lives. The only persuasive ground for this commitment is the possibility that the hypothesis is a true,

declarative picture of the nature of things, of "how things really are." While Ricoeur emphasizes the critical philosophical level of this testing of myth, Søren Kierkegaard focuses his intense beam on its existential dimension. When we are hanging in faith over the 70,000 fathoms of water that he spoke of, we are willing to take the leap, willing to be suspended over nothing more solid than the water, because the object of our dialectical faith has to do with "the way things really are." Otherwise we would not be able to summon the energy and courage and strength to live by faith in images that are always underdetermined by the facts of our total experience.

IV. The Dynamics of Myth and Morality

We must consider more fully the working of myth to provide a picture of "the way things really are," because it is central to understanding the way in which myth and morality are related to each other. I opened with Ricoeur's statement that "myth provides grounds for our ritual actions and all forms of action and thought by which we understand ourselves in our world." Mircea Eliade makes the point even more forcefully when he says that "every ritual and every meaningful act that humans perform repeats a mythical archetype" (Eliade 1963, sec. 164). There is no other final ground for the power of the ritual and moral action.

All values finally receive their validity from their being rooted in and being in harmony with "the way things really are." Although we may not derive our *oughts* from our experience of the *is*, the *ought* would have no real substance if it were not rooted in the *is*. Humans want to know that their actions are in harmony with the fundamental character of reality. Ultimately that is what grounds both the mandates and the prohibitions of their moralities. It has often been observed, as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann do, that myth first of all projects a

> symbolic universe [that] is conceived of as the matrix of *all* socially objectivated and subjectively real meanings; the entire historic society and the entire biography of the individual are seen as events taking place *within* this universe. What is particularly important, the marginal situations of the life of the individual (marginal, that is, in not being included in the reality of everyday existence in society) are also encompassed by the symbolic universe (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 96).

Having projected this symbolic universe, the myth then provides imperatives for human action. The all-encompassing character of the symbolic universe it describes is what gives the myth its moral

power. Obviously, humans should act so as to be in harmony with this universe.

That "I am the Lord thy God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" is the most important thing you need to know about "how things really are." And therefore you will obey my commandments. To have stated an accurate historical, psychological, and sociological account of the appearance of Hebrews in the Sinai Peninsula would have provided little compelling ground for the moral injunctions that followed. To have spoken against thievery because it would weaken the urgently needed social contract, or against certain kinds of food and food preparation because they would cause physical illness, would have been just as unpersuasive, because of course no direct causal line could be drawn between the behaviors and the consequences.

It took many years for us even to convince Americans that they should take more seriously the causal links between smoking and alcohol consumption and poor health. The Seventh-Day Adventists had much more success in the same period by simply reminding their people that smoking and drinking violate the will of God. Drug and alcohol therapy do not focus chiefly on the deleterious effects of substance abuse; rather, they work to rehabilitate the user's sense of the world as an encompassing symbolic universe in which human life is worthwhile. The therapy thus acknowledges, at least implicitly, that it is not first of all ethics that will renew the user, so much as convictions about the meaningfulness of the symbolic universe—an unverifiable conviction, one about which we gain our information primarily in mythic form.

The abusive urge of a man to rape a woman does not address the man as a hypothesis to be considered or as a set of causal explanations, nor does the injunction against it. Consequently, the picture of the "is" which grounds the moral injunction does not present itself as a tentative proposal. To take a cue from Dan Rather, the Ten Commandments *would* have taken the form of the Ten Suggestions if the presence of Hebrews at Sinai had been explained as "quite possibly" due to the favor and action of a power that "upon further reflection one might arguably consider to be" the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

V. The Christian Interpretation of the Love Command

The essential Christian myth consists of the narrative that includes at least the following events. (1) God made the world, including

humans, in the image of the Maker; (2) human beings were created in the garden, in unity with their Maker and with one another, but they came to be alienated from both, and the alienation manifests itself in their actions; (3) the man Jesus of Nazareth conveyed in word and deed the grace of God and its moral consequence, unqualified love for what God created; thus he embodies both the revelation of God's will and also the redeeming action of God; (4) Jesus broke the boundary of death in his resurrection; we shall be raised also, in the context of God's bringing to perfection and consummation the entire created order. The elements of the myth correspond to the classical Christian doctrines of Creation, the Fall and Original Sin, the Incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth, who is the ground of Revelation and Redemption, and the Resurrection and Consummation. The myth sets before us a truly all-encompassing symbolic universe, in which God encompasses both the origin and final perfection of the universe and also is committed to the welfare of "even the littlest ones" in our world by illuminating and renewing activity throughout the process of history.

What is the most appropriate response that is prompted by this particular casting of the symbolic universe, its primary imperative for action? The most basic value and moral thrust of this myth is set forth in the Great Commandment: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:40). *Love for God* translates into awe and regard for the central reality (to use Gerd Theissen's term) which is the ground of all finite existence that we observe, and also into accountability by which we hold ourselves to the unreserved effort to adapt ourselves to the central reality which is God. It is the call to believe that our life in the nature that surrounds us is an awesome transaction, caught up in the fabric of mystery that is grounded finally in a coherent reality. Further, it urges us to conceive of our lives under the mandate to adapt ourselves to this coherent reality by taking regard for its ways. To love this reality with all of one's heart and soul and mind suggests an all-encompassing regard for it and, also, living in commitment and accountability to it. *Love for neighbor* translates into unreserved action in behalf of our fellow human beings. It enjoins the conviction that each of us exists in solidarity with the entire human community—the neighbor is explicitly defined in terms that are not limited by genetic similarities, or racial, national, or cultural ties—and that the purpose of our lives is to live for the well-being of the human community in a self-giving style. Today one would

want to speak, as Professor Csikszentmihalyi does, of solidarity with all created beings (1991, 7–26). When this command for love of neighbor is put in the mouth of Jesus, it cannot be disassociated from his own love, acted out in his earthly life, culminating in the Last Supper and on the cross.

It is the particular historic vocation of the Christian tradition in which I stand to call attention to the fact that this Command presupposes the prior love of God for us, just as the Ten Commandments, as they appear in the Hebrew Scriptures in the twentieth chapter of the Book of Exodus, are prefaced with God's declaration of intent to be the God of those people and a rehearsal of the major action of beneficence that that God had shown to the people: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). This prior presupposition is suggested by both the context of Jesus' enjoining this Commandment and that of the Hebrew background where the Command is also at home, as well as by the style of Jesus' presentation of it. We may interpret this message as the proposition that the reality system of nature in which we live is itself basically an ambience in which we truly belong, an ambience that has brought us into being and which enables us to fulfill the purposes for which we were brought into being. The central reality which undergirds all of concrete experience and to which we continually seek to adapt is disposed toward us in a way that we can interpret as graciousness and beneficent support. I cite Gerd Theissen's discussion of this love that is directed to us; he relates it to the Lutheran doctrine of Justification by Grace:

> The New Testament begins from this insight: in their lives all human beings have the "pre-programmed" task of living in harmony with God, i.e., adapting themselves to the central reality, but none of them achieves this aim. Harmony with God is achieved in quite another way: God takes the questionable attempts of human beings to adapt as successful. God affirms them independently of their success or failure. That is the content of the doctrine of justification. . . . The justification of the godless offers everyone that harmony with the ultimate reality which is the inner goal of evolution—regardless of how near to this goal they may be—or how far from it (Theissen 1985, 172–73).

This background conviction is powerful affirmation that our moral action of love for God and neighbor is our way of living in harmony with the way things really are. The total complex—the love of God for us and our love for God and for the neighbor—puts in place the all-encompassing symbolic universe which drives the Christian tradition. It establishes that the fullness of the Christian proposal functions unmistakably, as myth is supposed to function.

VI. Scientific Assessment of the Love Command

Scientific presentations such as those by Irons (1991) and Campbell (1991) reflect the intense concern that several of the sciences today are devoting attention to the substance of the Love Command. E.O. Wilson announced the importance of this concern (one might say,with fanfare) in his celebrated 1975 book, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*. There he states, on the very first page: "This brings us to the central theoretical problem of sociobiology: how can altruism, which by definition reduces personal fitness, possibly evolve by natural selection?" (Wilson 1975, 3). There has been an avalanche of papers, lectures, and books in the last two decades focusing on Wilson's question, a question that he was not the first to put. The finest minds in the sciences have reflected on this issue. Many theologians, ethicists, and philosophers argue that what the sociobiologists term *altruism* ought not be confused with what the religious tradition means by love for neighbor. I respect these arguments, but from the first moment that I read Wilson I felt that a religious tradition that centers on a man dying on a cross for the benefit of the whole world could not responsibly ignore a scientific discussion about how there emerged within the evolutionary process the possibility of living so as to put the welfare of others so high on the agenda that one creature would put its own welfare in jeopardy for the sake of others.

The scientists had no difficulty in establishing the genetic rules by which close relatives, or kin, could be altruistic toward one another. The problem arises when altruism is practiced toward persons and creatures that are not genetic kin. Why does such a behavior not die out with the death of the foolish individual who practices it? How can it be transmitted and actually flourish? What is its significance?

Professor Campbell has devoted a considerable portion of his published work to the thesis that it was such altruistic behavior that enabled the human community to develop a highly complex urban life. In another jargon, it is both a cause and a requirement for the emergence of the global village. Campbell does not speak so much of altruism as *love,* nor does he restrict his discussion to the Jewish or Christian faiths. He speaks rather of "counter-hedonic traditions" which allow persons to serve values other than those that provide immediate "skin-surface" satisfaction. His 1975 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association, to which I have already referred, created a storm of discussion because he

suggested that the counterhedonic recipes of the traditional religions were, on the whole, more reliable guides for human living than the prohedonic doctrines of psychotherapeutic practice. His position, therefore, not only asserts the epoch-making significance of altruistic behavior in human history, but it also insists on its contemporary importance. Further, he advances the notion, in league with several other scientists, that altruism beyond kin is transmitted culturally, not genetically, and that religious traditions are the chief carriers of this value. These religious traditions bear the "well-winnowed wisdom" of altruism that has met the challenges of selection and survived as a significant and essential adaptive option for human behavior (Campbell 1976). We might add that he considers altruism too important to be left to the exclusive custodianship of the religious communities. They too often fail to recognize this treasure within their all-too-earthen vessels.

Ralph Wendell Burhoe has also devoted the major portion of his research and writing to the issues raised by E.O. Wilson. He has coined the term *trans-kin altruism*. His hypotheses argue that this altruism is the distinguishing characteristic of humanity; it is what allowed the civilized human being to rise above the "beastly ape-man." He, too, considers religion and the wisdom of religious traditions to be the chief carriers of this altruism, and consequently he considers religion to be an essential dimension of human being.

Burhoe and Solomon Katz together have developed the thesis that global peace and global morality are likewise dependent upon the religions effectively representing this trans-kin altruism (Burhoe 1986; Katz 1989). Religion today is fully as responsible for conflict and war as it is an agency for peace. How can this paradox be accounted for? Burhoe and Katz point the finger at the religions of the world for not carrying their love command far enough.

The great advance in human history came when religion enabled altruism to be extended beyond family, tribe, and nation to all members of the religious community. In a global village, where the particular religious communities cross national and cultural borders and where they rub elbows daily, altruism practiced only toward the brothers and sisters of the faith is not only deficient, it is dangerous—as events in Northern Ireland, India, Lebanon, Palestine, and other places have demonstrated in our own times.

The Christian would add to the Burhoe/Katz critique of religion that Christians have yet to actualize what the historical Jesus of Nazareth urged and practiced in his own rather limited lifetime and geographic setting. He seemed to have made it a point to affirm his self-sacrificial solidarity across religious lines, across boundaries of

national identity, as well as those of economic and social class and gender.

VII. Taking Leave of the Theme

There may well be a convergence of the science and the myth upon which I have focussed. I have been discussing the mythic core of one particular religious tradition, but this does not mean that other mythic cores, from other religious traditions, do not also show marks of this convergence, a fact that must be given full attention.

Neither Christianity nor any other of the religions has been faithful enough to its mythic emphasis on the love command. We must return, as well, to Campbell's reminder that no matter how successfully the well-winnowed religious wisdom has stood the test of history and selection, it comes to every generation in concrete forms that can only claim to be the truth about past worlds and not necessarily about the present and the future. Furthermore, I know that there are those who would want to say that the concrete religious communities are the greatest obstacle to belief in the love command. They point to the millions of persons in our society and around the world who find the fundamental tenets of religious faith appealing, but who find their representation in official religious institutions to be offensive.

Both the scientific studies that I have surveyed and the religious myths that I have interpreted converge in their judgment that the love command is of special significance for human living. I do not consider the scientific judgment to be a perversion of the religious truth or a reductionism to functionalist processes that are the object of scientific study. Rather, on the one hand I see the scientific statements as prophetic, reminding the religious communities of the deeper significance of their heritage. On the other hand, I believe that the mythic stance in general and the Christian myth in particular would predict that the scientists would come to their conclusions. In general, the mythic view believes that it speaks of the way things really are, and if the love command is central to the myth, it will appear central to scientific study of finite phenomena.

Further, the Christian myth asserts that what we find in Jesus is the rationale of all reality, what the Greeks call *logos,* and which we often translate as *Word.* In Colossians, our scriptures assert that in Jesus "all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17–18). Following Kolakowski, if the myth refers the empirical realm to an unconditioned universe, then it would be rendered useless if scientific studies did not converge, at least to the extent that the myth could account

for them (see Kolakowski 1989). Paul Tillich makes the same point about religious myth and the unconditional, except that he puts a great emphasis on the unconditionai standing beyond conceptualization (Tillich 1957, 48–53 and passim). It would be difficult to conceive the convergence of scientific understandings with that which represents the reality that transcends conceptualization.

The myth and the scriptures do not say that the concrete organizational church or even the dynamics of religious practice hold all things together. More important, the mythic injunction does not prescribe any *particular form* of love as normative. In the Christian religion, even the cross of Jesus is interpreted figuratively as a norm for his followers; Christians are not urged to undergo literal crucifixions. Rather, the myth and its scriptures say that in this man, Jesus, we encounter the *logos* of all reality. If this be true, I would not be surprised to find the same message carried in the myths of other religions—indeed, I would be surprised if it did not occur in other religions, since they have stood the same test of history and selection that Christianity has. Some of them have stood the test much longer than Christianity.

It is always dangerous to assert the convergence of things scientific and religious. It is always dangerous to defend the integrity of myth and ritual among academics. But I believe just as firmly that it is most fruitful to put a thesis clearly out in the open, in full public view, so that we can gain maximum benefit from the clarifying and falsifying process that open discussion and critique always provide. Let me suggest a few questions for this discussion:

1. Is it proper to speak of scientific understanding and mythic information converging? What are the appropriate criteria for determining whether such a convergence has occurred?
2. What would be the significance of such a convergence if it did occur? Is it appropriate to speak of such a convergence as a predictive confirmation of the moral content of the mythic information?
3. If a mythic version of "the way things really are" converges with scientific understandings in questions of moral principle, would that suggest that at least some other mythic versions should present compatible moral injunctions?
4. Is it correct to relate the sociobiological discussions of altruism with the love command proposed by religious myth?

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