

ENTRUSTING THE LIFE THAT HAS EVOLVED: A RESPONSE TO MICHAEL RUSE'S RUSE

by *Philip Hefner*

Abstract. This piece challenges Michael Ruse on three points: (1) The charge that Christian myth and doctrine are incredible fails to take into account the scholarship that has clarified the genre to which myth belongs and its function. (2) Naturalistic explanations, like Ruse's, have fully as much difficulty dealing with questions of purpose and evil as religion does. (3) The concept of "deception" has a number of inherent problems that Ruse fails to consider, of which the chief is that it requires a certainty about truth and falsity that Ruse cannot and does not claim to possess.

Keywords: altruism; deception; meaning; myth; religion; Michael Ruse; trust.

Most of what appears in *Zygon* is either in the nature of proposals that serve the yoking enterprise to which we are devoted, or useful and necessary critique of such proposals. In this issue, it becomes clear that thinkers from across the disciplines—in this case, biology, philosophy, and theology—also argue, passionately and intelligently, about religion, its relationships to the sciences, and the possibilities of yoking the two. In these pages, readers have the privilege of listening in on a debate whose freshness and earnestness are quite out of the ordinary for scholarly journals. And the central issue is whether it makes sense for scientifically literate persons to hold to religious faith, specifically, Christian faith.

The debate, however, grows out of the thinking of Michael Ruse and his reflection upon the difference that this thinking makes for morality, for his personal outlook on life, and for the possibilities of religious faith in our time. His reflections evoke a range of responses: (1) the unambiguous critique of religion set forth by biologist George C. Williams, summarized in the straightforward and terse statement,

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“It seems to me that not just some but all of the basic tenets of Christianity are patently absurd”; (2) the more detached, possibly ambiguous, skepticism of philosopher Michael Bradie, who doubts religious faith can be elaborated in a way that is credible in the face of contemporary evolutionary biology; and (3) the positive, though intellectually agnostic, stance toward religion of theologian Richard Busse, who argues that evolutionary biology has yet to take the full measure of religious faith and its actual power to change people’s lives.

What is it about Ruse’s stance that has elicited such responses? The clue to his provocation is expressed in the title of his second piece in this issue, “From Belief to Unbelief—and Halfway Back.” Each of the three stages of the personal journey described in that title awakens controversy, and the controversy is quickened by the courage and skill with which Ruse combines intellectual rigor and personal authenticity in the description of his journey. In this, he intersects cleanly with the programmatic of this journal, which has always considered the religion/science discussion as one that presses the intellectual challenge to the utmost, while it finally reaches to questions of how we are to conceive of our lives, their meaning, and our conduct in the scientifically interpreted world that confronts us today.

What makes Christian faith problematic, if we understand Ruse and his interlocutors correctly, are (1) the crass incredibility of some Christian myths and doctrines when measured by empirical scientific criteria (for example, the existence of a primeval blissful paradise); (2) that both faith and morality (in the Christian case, the Love Command) can be accounted for on purely naturalistic grounds (that is, in terms of evolutionary biology, more specifically, of sociobiology), and (3) that the evolutionary explanations eliminate the relevance of an overarching foundation for faith and morality (Bradie: “the call for meaning is meaningless and should be abandoned”). As the only person (except for Michael Ruse) who has read all of the pieces that figure in this Profile conversation, I will exercise an editor’s prerogative to attempt an overview commentary on these issues—a commentary that is also available to Ruse for response.

THE INCREDIBILITY OF CHRISTIAN MYTH AND DOCTRINE

No issue is more at the heart of interdisciplinary intellectual and academic discussion of religion than this one. It is equally as certain that vast segments of the intellectual and academic community—even the theological portion of that community—subscribe to the assertion that much of myth and doctrine is unbelievable when

judged by scientific criteria of adequacy. However, this issue also presents a tangled thicket of problems that are seldom sorted out carefully.

When taken as literal assertions, the element of patent absurdity is obvious: a primordial peaceful paradisiacal epoch, talking serpents, divided Red Sea waters, one man "saving" the entire world and all of history, and the like. On the one hand, too many religious thinkers dismiss this absurdity factor on the grounds that it is the product of perverse misunderstanding, that only academics take it seriously, and that, after all, science cannot prove or disprove the existence of the God to which these myths and doctrines point. Contrariwise, on the other hand, too many scientists and philosophers dismiss the body of reflection and research (now under way for at least two centuries) in the various disciplines of the humanities that insists that there is a question of *genre* at issue here. These disciplines assert that both the academic critics and the believing population at large misunderstand how myth and doctrine are to be construed and hence also miss the resources of insight that they provide. It is genuinely beside the point for the critics to dismiss the story of Adam and Eve and the serpent on the grounds that snakes do not talk and that condemnation for eating forbidden fruit is too trivial a proposal to be entertained by serious persons. These judgments do not even touch the heart of what the myth is telling us. At the same time, it is just as misguided for the cognoscenti among those who believe in myth to scorn the challenge to interpret the richness of mythic representation in terms that are at least accessible to persons whose thinking is conditioned by scientific modes of inquiry. The tangle is rendered even more intractable when the critics of religion equate the quite reasonable acknowledgment of the genre factor with watering down religion and the uncritical religious believers equate the same phenomenon with a loss of faith. Both sets of equators have missed the point.

Myth and doctrine serve as illuminating symbols, detectors, not explainers, of reality, as Paul Ricoeur has suggested. *Homo sapiens*, by its very neurobiological constitution requires packets of information for its functioning that are, by scientific standards, underdetermined by the data. Myth and doctrine constitute a segment of this kind of information. Much of modern theology has attempted to set forth what kind of illumination the myths of Christianity can provide. There is no question but that some traditional interpretations of the classic mythic material must be revised or rejected altogether. Nevertheless, as the last two centuries of theology have demonstrated, there is much relevant insight in the classic myth. When this question of genre is respected, the question becomes not: Could serpents talk?

or Are all humans today infected by the sin of Adam and Eve? The question, rather, is, What is the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent trying to tell us that can illuminate our lives today? The answer to this question must, of course, be elaborated in terms that are credible today, whether that entails attention to the sciences or to some other facet of the human condition (as an example, see my interpretation of the Christian doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin [Hefner 1993a, 1993b]).

NATURALISTIC EXPLANATIONS AND THE OBSOLESCENCE OF THE QUEST FOR MEANING

A prevailing dogma running through the conversation with Ruse, and one that he himself foments, is that if morality or religion can be accounted for on naturalistic (biological) grounds, then conversation can stop. E.O. Wilson made this a fundamental tenet of sociobiology. In principle, religions, like those of the West, that hold that the world owes its existence solely to the action of God (this is the import of the much-misunderstood doctrine of "creation out of nothing") find nothing quite so congenial as the suggestion that the study of nature itself grounds faith and morality. The long tradition of natural law thinking is devoted precisely to substantiating the natural grounding of religious faith. The point at dispute between Wilson and the theologians is not whether a biological grounding exists, but rather how nature is to be interpreted. Furthermore, it is only the academically religious who wince at the suggestion that religious faith is a major component in our repertoire of coping or adapting mechanisms.

Having said this, both the secular and the Christian naturalists face an enormous task of making sense of things. Ruse sometimes makes it sound as if only Christians suffer from an inability to understand evil. Even so modest a claim for the meaningfulness of human life as his is rendered vulnerable by the existence of evil. He is devoted to family. Why is family considered so highly when we think that our species will live on planet earth for only a moment of geological time? Or when we consider how inexplicably one generation defies the values and precepts of its predecessors? Or in light of the fact that so many persons today are genuinely incapable of wholesome parenting? Similarly, even Ruse must lament that his most cherished values are frequently significant causative factors in "most of life's major conflicts." After all, racism is the perversion of pride in one's family and tribe. Ethnic cleansing is certainly a biological and evolutionary phenomenon before it is a religious

event, well-explained by Richard Alexander's insight concerning "within-group amity serving between-group enmity."

In terms of the issues of this conversation, Christian belief in God amounts to trusting the conviction that evil is subordinate to goodness as the unifying cause of the cosmos, a kind of Grand Unifying Theory for guiding human life. And the strong version of the Love Command is the chief corollary to the GUT. It amounts to saying that the only way in which human life can be conducted in accord with the GUT is by self-giving love for others. To say that Jesus saved the world on the cross is to say that in Jesus' life and death the fundamental character of the cosmos was manifest in a way that grasped the attention of Western culture and, beyond that, that of other cultures as well. (This statement says nothing about the value or disvalue of other religions.)

Reflecting on the strong version of the Love Command opens up further issues. Ruse's line of argument contains within it a curious suggestion that later stages of the emergent evolutionary process should be governed by the principles that govern earlier forms. If nepotism is the prevailing form of reciprocity at the level of the selfish gene, that surely is significant for us humans, since we carry that gene in ourselves, but it cannot be the last word for us, since we are also complex creatures of culture. Myth and doctrine, at their heart, are messages about the *future* of the evolutionary process. Ruse argues that since our biology allows only for kinship altruism and reciprocal altruism beyond the kin group, the strong version of the Love Command is rendered unacceptable. If so, forget about Americans and Europeans contributing to the welfare of the Somalians or to people living in the former Yugoslavia. Jesus' preachments constitute a hypothesis that the wager that we ought to show as strong a love to the children of Somalia as to the children around our dinner table will not be a losing one—that it is, in fact, one more consonant with the GUT that illumines the nature of our world. As Richard Busse holds, Christians hold, at bottom, that human lives can be changed, that they can be changed for the better, and that this change, promoted by certain "oughts," is most fully consonant with what fundamentally "is." In a sense, I am arguing that Ruse does not give full attention to culture, its nature, its functions, and what it accomplishes in tandem with genes. Rather than setting up a potential "nature versus nurture" controversy, however, I would put it in the terms I have already suggested: Ruse's outlook seems to be one that is backward-looking, insisting that we are what our biology has been, whereas I am urging that the quintessential human stance is forward-looking, asking

what this genes-culture symbiosis can become and what it ought to become.

In this framework, the work of the sociobiologists on altruism should be construed, not as a refutation of the Christian Love Command, but rather as an archeological expedition for the purpose of illumining what biological (including genetic) building blocks make up the infrastructure of this biocultural *Homo sapiens* who hears the *natural* (not supernatural) message from within its own history to move in the direction of transkin altruism. As Ralph Wendell Burhoe saw, years ago, this call to a strong version of the Love Command, if it is to be properly understood and tested, must be interpreted naturalistically. It has emerged within the evolutionary process, through the forms of religion which are themselves emergents in the evolutionary process, and it is a packet of information concerning what constitutes the most adequate adaptive strategy for the human species. As an essential component of his overarching theory, Burhoe set forth an explanation of religion as just such an emergent in the evolutionary process, rooted in the genetic processes, but becoming explicit only with the emergence of culture. He asserted the centrality of religion for the appearance of the genuinely human precisely because it is the carrier of the information and motivation for transkin altruism (Burhoe 1981, esp. chaps. 1, 2).

To say that nature might simply be deceiving us to believe that the world is rooted in goodness or that transkin altruism is essential to human being is simply to say that nature is testifying to what it truly is—it is no deception! Deception, however, is becoming a popular way of explaining (and therefore justifying) morality and the basic tendency to live “as if” nature were meaningful. The concept of deception thus enables skeptics to have their cake and eat it, too. As if to say, “I’m living as if life held meaning because I must do so in order to survive. Nature has programmed me to live thusly, but I’m sophisticated enough not to believe that it’s really so.” Rejection of the strong version of the Love Command complements the ideology of deception, because it is a laid-back philosophy that recognizes moral earnestness but does not let itself be carried away with obsessive altruism. The image of Jesus, in substituting realism for epigenetic deception, insists that one cannot eat the cake and still have it. If reality is grounded in goodness, then the strong version of the Love Command is essential; if the weak version is acceptable, then agnosticism, even skepticism, is ruled out: a cosmos whose GUT calls for either moral relativism or weak altruism is a cosmos in which nothing much matters. Note well that the issue is not naturalism versus supernaturalism; it is a question of how one interprets nature.

When the discussion is moved onto this field, as alternative interpretations of nature, the Russian ruse faces the challenge to deal much more rigorously, in this context at least, with the concepts of truth and deception. If morality in general and altruism in particular enables better adaptation and even survival, then in what sense is it to be termed "deception" rather than truth? In what sense is it an "as-if" strategy rather than "real"? Is Ruse (and those who follow in his camp, of which there are many) settling for too easy a concept of truth, one that is equivalent to what can be determined by the obvious data? There is a fundamental contradiction to the argument that a long-term adaptively desirable attitude and behavior is deception and untruth simply because it is underdetermined by what can be empirically demonstrated by the data. To be able to designate something as deception requires some sense of what is true—which Ruse neither claims nor in fact possesses. If underdetermination by the data makes the judgment of what is true impossible, it does the same to judgments of what is deception. This strange curiosity in Ruse's argument is linked to his defective understanding of the genre of myth. (I admit that I am also aiming this argument at Messrs. Williams and Bradie, even though they have not had the chance to reply.)

Michael Ruse has clearly seen the issues, the chief of which is, as he himself obliquely suggests, trust or discipleship, or the wagering of oneself. Robert Scharlemann has recently written a book entitled *The Reason of Following* (1991) that makes exactly this point: It is only in entrusting our lives to a concrete option or direction that we understand ourselves and our world; if we come to understand that we have entrusted ourselves inadequately or misguidedly, we cannot undo the life that we have so entrusted, but we recognize that only through entrusting or following have we come to knowledge. Michael Ruse challenges us to ask whether the philosophy of deception is not finally a ruse, in that it clouds our vision of this important insight. For that we are finally grateful, because in the examination of the basic tenets of his thinking, the commitments of this journal are also opened up for fundamental scrutiny.

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