

Articles

IS ALTRUISM GOOD? EVOLUTION, ETHICS, AND THE HUNGER FOR THEOLOGY

by Nancey Murphy

Abstract. This essay pushes the discussion of biology and altruism in radical directions by highlighting the moral ambiguity of biology itself. The extent to which we draw positive moral implications from animal behavior, and even the extent to which we *see* positive traits in animals, is shaped by the preconceptions and the purposes one brings to the study. These preconceptions, when examined, involve worldview issues that are all related in one way or another to either a theological position or some nontheistic substitute for an account of ultimate reality. It is arguable that Darwin's own perceptions of nature were colored by the theological and social-ethical context in which he worked. William Paley's natural theology, together with Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population*, led many theologians of Darwin's day to conclude that struggle, inequality, suffering, and death are basic features of the natural world and are the result of divine providence. No wonder, then, that Darwin was able to see competition as the major key to natural selection. The moral ambiguity of biology can be pressed further by contrasting contemporary attempts to find altruism in animal behavior with the conclusions reached by Friedrich Nietzsche, partly in response to his reading of Darwin. Nietzsche concluded that the standard, more or less Christian, morality of his day is best labeled "slave morality." It is created by the weak in order to coerce the strong to provide for them. In this essay I contend that competing views of morality can be adjudicated only by turning to an account of ultimate reality. Whether Nietzsche is right in arguing against the morality of altruism depends on whether God is indeed dead.

Keywords: altruism; Charles Darwin; ethics; Alasdair MacIntyre; Friedrich Nietzsche; social Darwinism.

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I appreciate arguments for the intrinsically altruistic character of other animals. Given our close connections to animal kin, I do not believe that we could explain how morality ever got off the ground in humans without any precursors in animals. Despite my enjoyment of stories about cuddly animals doing charming things, my purpose in this essay is to push the discussion of the relation between animal altruism and human morality in more radical directions. I first highlight the moral ambiguity of biology. I argue that the extent to which we draw positive moral implications from animal behavior, and even the extent to which we *see* positive traits in animals, is very much shaped by the preconceptions and the purposes we bring to the study. These preconceptions, when examined, involve world-view issues that are all related in one way or another to either a theological position or some nontheistic substitute for an account of ultimate reality.

AMBIGUOUS BIOLOGY

I begin with some of the ambiguity surrounding Charles Darwin's work. The common perception is that Darwin developed his theory of how competition for survival produces evolutionary progress, and then, in response, the social ethic called social Darwinism was developed, including *laissez-faire* economics, survival of the economically fittest, and justification for failure to assist the poor—all of this on the assumption that competition for survival will drive economic progress.

The history is actually more complex. Proponents of nearly every other social program, including socialism and liberalism, were able to use Darwin's theories for support (Brooke 1991). So we see how purposes already embraced shape the way one chooses to make use of the science. Another complication is that Darwin never argued that evolution was driven *only* by fierce struggle. There are other factors such as sexual selection, the competition for mates. Sometimes this is conflictual, as between male elk, but sometimes it involves only differences in appearance, as with peacock tails (Dobzhansky et al. 1977).

Here is a particularly significant piece of the history: To the extent that Darwin *did* focus on competition for survival, there were important theological presuppositions that colored his thinking. There was the long-standing project of natural theology—the attempt to understand God's character and purposes by examining nature. William Paley (1802) was the most famous proponent, his text being read in every seminary in Darwin's day. His view of nature is summed up in the phrase "myriads of happy beings" [*sic*]. Published at approximately the same time was Thomas Malthus's *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), in which he expressed his famous theory that if unchecked, population would grow geometrically while food supplies could be increased arithmetically, at best. The result would be an intense struggle among rapidly growing popula-

tions for the slow-growing food supplies. This was the basis for Darwin's account of the pressure for change in the evolutionary process.

It is important to note that Malthus was an Anglican clergyman, working, as was Paley, in the tradition of eighteenth-century natural theology. So his writings were not simply a scientific treatise on population growth and food supply but were rather, in a sense, a theodicy—an attempt to reconcile the goodness of God with evil and suffering. In place of Paley's myriad happy beings, Malthus saw struggle, inequality, suffering, and death as the basic features of the natural world. And these he interpreted as the result of divine providence. Paley had set everyone up to say that, whatever the character of the natural order, this is the way God made it. Malthus's role was to say that the character of the natural world is starvation and dog-eat-dog. This, then, reflects on God's intentions, and it is also seen as providential. Malthus wrote that evil produces exertion, exertion produces mind, and mind produces progress. So in the end it is good that there is not enough food to go around.

After Malthus it was not uncommon for other theologians to take up the cause. Thomas Chalmers, professor of divinity at the University of Edinburgh, emphasized the necessity of moral restraint, especially sexual restraint, if the poor were to avoid the miseries to which the principle of population would lead. The necessary connection between moral weakness and misery was a reflection of the very character of God. Chalmers wrote:

It is not the lesson of conscience that God would, under the mere impulse of parental fondness for the creatures that he has made, let down the high state and sovereignty which belong to him, or that he would forebear the infliction of the penalty because of any soft or timid shrinking from the pain it would give the objects of his displeasure. When one looks to the disease and the agony of spirit and above all the hideous and unsparing death with its painful struggles and gloomy forebodings, which are spread universally over the face of the earth, we cannot but imagine of the God who presides over such an autonomy that he is not a being who will falter from the imposition of his severity, which might serve the objects of a high administration. (1833, 292–93)

Such a gloomy view of God and God's purposes! The question then is what role Darwinian theory *actually* played in the development of social Darwinism. Historian Robert Young (1985) says that all Darwin did was to provide a simple change in the source of the justification for social stratification. Now the basis of social stratification among rich and poor changes from a theological theodicy to a biological one in which the so-called physiological division of labor provides a scientific guarantee of the rightness of the property and work relations of industrial society.

The theological context in which Darwin's theory was developed was largely responsible for the conflictual imagery in Darwin's language. It is not surprising, therefore, that his theory could be used to support the very same social agenda as that which contributed to its development. This

then raises another question. If Darwin's perception of how nature works was influenced by thinkers such as Malthus and Chalmers, has this affected only his *theory* of natural selection, or has it affected his and subsequent scientists' perceptions of nature itself? I think that it has.

Contemporary ethologist Frans de Waal adds weight to my suggestion. His lovely book *Good Natured* (1996) recounts a vast number of observations of benevolent, cooperative, sympathetic behavior among animals. For example, a British ethologist was studying a mongoose colony. She

followed the final days of a low-ranking adult male dying of chronic kidney disease. The male lived in a captive group consisting of a pair and its offspring. Two adjustments took place. First, the sick male was allowed to eat much earlier in the rank order than previously. . . . Second, the rest of the group changed from sleeping on elevated objects, such as boxes, to sleeping on the floor once the sick male had lost the ability to climb onto the boxes. They stayed in contact with him, grooming him much more than usual. After the male's death, the group slept with the cadaver until its decay made removal necessary. (1996, 80)

Another example: Chimpanzees excel at so-called *consolation*. For example, after a fight, bystanders hug and touch the combatants, pat them on the back, and groom them. It is interesting that their attentions focus more on the losers than the winners. If such behavior does not occur quickly enough, loser chimpanzees resort to a repertoire of gestures—pouting, whimpering, begging with outstretched hands—so that the others will provide the needed calming contact.

De Waal also analyzes the linguistic practices of his fellow biologists. He says that current scientific literature routinely depicts animals as suckers, grudgers, and cheaters who act spitefully, greedily, and murderously. Yet, if animals show tolerance or altruism, these terms are placed in quotation marks lest their author be judged hopelessly romantic or naive. Alternatively, positive inclinations are given negative labels, such as when preferential treatment for kin is called not love for kin but nepotism.

De Waal attributes this attitude toward animals to the theological climate of Darwin's day in a section revealingly titled "Calvinist Sociobiology." Our tendency to project negative moral qualities on animals he sees as a result of the predominance of theological views of humans themselves as fallen and depraved.

It is important to note that de Waal is careful not to go to the other extreme of providing romantic characterizations of animals. He shows due caution in asking whether terms used to describe desirable human traits can legitimately be applied to similar traits in animals, asking, for example, if animals should be described as displaying sympathy or merely caring behavior.

So we may ask whether nature is better captured in Paley's phrase "myriads of happy beings" or in Alfred Lord Tennyson's "nature red in tooth and claw." Obviously both are natural, and the picture is complex: The same animals that comfort one another and share food also cooperate in hunt-

ing and killing prey. De Waal points out that animals that share food tend to do so when the foodstuff is highly valued, prone to decay, too much for individual consumption, procured by skill or strength, and most effectively procured through collaboration. In short, the food most likely to be shared is meat killed in a hunt. He speculates that this tendency, shaped among social animals by evolutionary necessity, creates a predisposition among humans for sharing. Although a natural tendency among animals to share food is not equivalent to human generosity, human morals cannot be entirely independent of our evolutionary past: "Of our own design are neither the tools of morality nor the basic needs and desires that form the substance with which it works. Natural tendencies may not amount to moral imperatives, but they do figure in our decision-making. Thus, while some [human] moral rules reinforce species-typical predispositions and others suppress them, none blithely ignore them" (1996, 39).

This point aptly illustrates what de Waal describes as a profound paradox: Genetic self-advancement at the expense of others has given rise to remarkable capacities for caring and sympathy. He concludes: "If carnivory was indeed the catalyst for the evolution of sharing, it is hard to escape the conclusion that human morality is steeped in animal blood. When we give money to begging strangers, ship food to starving people, or vote for measures that benefit the poor, we follow impulses shaped since the time our ancestors began to cluster around meat possessors" (1996, 146).¹

A DEEPER CHALLENGE

Now, let me push a bit further in my account of the moral ambiguity of biology. If the Calvinist clergy found justification in Darwin to refuse parish assistance to the poor, an atheist reading Darwin came to much more radical and shattering conclusions. We all assume that morality is a good thing. It is almost a tautology: Being good is a good thing. We disagree on many of the details, but we all agree that altruism is a fairly good way to sum up what all of the major traditions have in common: Love your neighbor, even at some cost to yourself. Yet Friedrich Nietzsche, a German philosopher writing in the late nineteenth century, called all of this radically into question. This other-regarding, benevolent, justice-seeking, self-sacrificial "morality" is "slave morality" ([1886] 2002, 153–56). Christians and others of their kind advocate it because they are usually weak and oppressed, so requiring justice from the rich and powerful is in their self-interest. People such as these invented the distinction between good and evil so that they, in their resentment, would have a pejorative term for those who rejected their slave morality. Having the label of *evil* for these others feeds the masses' sense of moral superiority. Nietzsche wrote: "From the beginning Christian faith has been sacrifice: sacrifice of all freedom, of all pride, of all self-confidence of the spirit; it is simultaneously enslavement and self-derision, self-mutilation." "For his part, the

herd man of today's Europe gives himself the appearance of being the only permissible type of man and glorifies those characteristics that make him tame, easy-going and useful to the herd as the true human virtues, namely: public spirit, goodwill, consideration, industry, moderation, modesty, clemency, and pity" ([1886] 2002, 44, 86–87).

Nietzsche was influenced by a number of factors, one of which was probably his rejection of the stultifying form of Lutheran piety with which he was raised. Another was the negative view of the possibility for a peaceful social order first coined by the early modern philosopher Thomas Hobbes, whose account of primordial human nature has been summarized as follows by James O'Toole:

In nature, man "finds no stop in doing what he has the will, desire or inclination to do." To Hobbes the "Natural Right" of every individual in this Edenic state is "the liberty each man has to use his own power for the preservation of his own nature, that is to save his own life . . . and consequently of doing anything which in his own judgment and reason he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto." Here, particularly in the concluding phrase, we see a statement of a modern notion of liberty. But in the next breath Hobbes gives it all away! Unhappily, he says, in this free and natural state the condition of life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" because there is a perpetual "war . . . of every man against every man." Hence, to procure security, and the progress of civilization, humans reluctantly surrender the liberty of nature, entering into a "social contract to live under the rule of law." (O'Toole 1993, 35–36)

It is revealing that O'Toole uses "Edenic state" to describe the state of nature, for what we have in social contract theory is a new myth of origins at variance with the account in Genesis. In fact, Hobbes's myth is the antithesis of the biblical story. At least as we receive it in the interpretation of fifth-century theologian Augustine, life for the original inhabitants in the biblical Eden is cooperative, not a state of war; bountiful, not poor; idyllic, not nasty; angelic, not brutish; and everlasting. It represents an aberration, a Fall, when the earth-creatures assert their will (against God, not one another) to take that for which they have a desire and inclination. These two myths of origin reveal antithetical theories of the nature of the person, two antithetical *theologies*. A variety of social theorists since Hobbes have followed him in claiming that coercion is necessary to maintain society and that violence is merely the ultimate form of coercion.

More particularly Nietzsche was influenced by the heroic tradition of ancient Greece and Rome, with its valuation of the qualities that made for good warriors, and he looked forward to the arrival on the scene of the superman, characterized by pride, boldness, and spontaneity. There is scholarly debate about the extent to which Nietzsche's ideas influenced the rise and acceptance of Nazism and the eugenics movement. But apart from any actual historical exemplification, we can certainly see how different a Nietzschean world would be from one based as nearly as possible on the teaching of Jesus or the Prophets.

RECONCEIVING THE NATURE OF MORALITY

Alasdair MacIntyre (1990) takes very seriously the challenge of Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality, but he finds little in modern thought with which to counter it. The development of theories in philosophical ethics from Hobbes at the beginning to the Bloomsbury group in the early twentieth century was a failed attempt to provide a theoretical rationale for traditional morality or for a critique of Nietzsche. This led him to conclude that modern moral discourse is in a grave state of disorder. He makes the pointed analogy that contemporary moral discourse is comparable to a *simulacrum* of science after a know-nothing regime has killed the scientists, burned the books, and trashed the laboratories. Later, fragments of scientific texts are read and memorized, but there is no longer any recognition of the point of science.

Similarly, MacIntyre says, our moral language is a holdover from the past, but we have forgotten the original point of morality. In particular we have forgotten the context that once gave it its meaning. What we moderns (and postmoderns) have lost is any notion of the ultimate purpose, or *telos*, of human life. Such accounts of the human *telos* used to be provided by traditions—usually religious traditions, but sometimes, as in Aristotle's case, by a metaphysical tradition. MacIntyre argues that the correct form of ethical claims is something like the conditional statement "If you are to achieve your *telos*, then you ought to do *x*." It is a peculiar feature of modern Enlightenment views of ethics that their proper form has been taken to be apodictic: simply, "You ought to do *x*." Modern philosophers have developed competing theories regarding the most basic moral claims: "You ought to act so as to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number" versus "You ought to act so that the maxim of your action can be willed universally." But because morality is taken to be autonomous—that is, unrelated to other knowledge—there is no way to arbitrate between these basic construals of the moral "ought." This impossibility results in the interminability of moral debates in our society. However, says MacIntyre, the interminability should not be taken as the intrinsic nature of moral discourse but ought rather to be seen as a sign that the entire Enlightenment project has taken a wrong turn—in attempting to free morality and ethical reasoning from religious tradition. Such traditions provide the starting point for settling moral disputes. They provide the resources for answering the question: What is the greatest good for humankind? Is it happiness? Is it living in accord with the dictates of reason? Is it a just heavenly reward? Or is it more complex than any of these?

Theology or metaphysics provides a concept of the purpose for human life. Ethics is the discipline that works out answers to the question: How ought we to live in order to achieve our highest ends? In addition, MacIntyre argues, such theories of human flourishing can be fully understood

only insofar as we know how they have been or could be socially embodied, so the social sciences are the descriptive side of a coin whose reverse, normative, side is ethics (MacIntyre [1981] 1984).

Thus, MacIntyre's contribution here is to argue that the modern view that insulates moral reasoning from knowledge of the nature of reality, *both theological and scientific*, is an aberration. Ethics needs theology (or some substitute for theology), and the sciences, particularly the social sciences, need ethics.

This brings me to the subtitle of this essay: Evolution, Ethics, and the Hunger for Theology. I use *theology* broadly to refer to any account of ultimate reality. Marxism has a *telos*, a secularized kingdom of God. Scientific materialism has an account of ultimate reality. In Carl Sagan's memorable terms, the universe is all that is and all that was and all that ever will be. The connections between a straightforwardly theological account of ultimate reality and prescriptions for the good life are usually clearly drawn. In my Catholic days we memorized the *Baltimore Catechism's* answer: The purpose of life is to know, love, and serve God in this life and to be happy with him in the next. The connections between an account of the material universe as ultimate reality and prescriptions for living are more tenuous, but one version is that the best we can achieve is the courage to face the fact that the human race is a cosmic accident, and we must therefore *create* as much meaning during our short individual and species' lifespan as possible (Dawkins 1998).

My proposal is that ethics is a discipline nested within a hierarchy of other disciplines, each of which focuses on its own proper subject matter, but each is necessarily restricted by the disciplines below. I put biology, psychology, and the social sciences in order below ethics. Recall my quotation from de Waal earlier: "Of our own design are neither the tools of morality nor the basic needs and desires that form the substance with which it works. Natural tendencies may not amount to moral imperatives, but they do figure in our decision-making. Thus, while some [human] moral rules reinforce species-typical predispositions and others suppress them, none blithely ignore them" (1996, 39).

But each discipline raises "boundary questions"—questions that can be framed at one level of the hierarchy but cannot be answered without moving to a higher level of discourse. Some obvious ones arise out of scientific cosmology: Why is there a universe at all? Why does our universe appear to be so strangely fine-tuned for the appearance of life? Traditional theology does not provide the only possible answers, but the answers (probably) need to come from some reflections outside the bounds of science itself.

The moral question I have been focusing on here is the one to which the obvious answer would seem to be a resounding Yes: Is altruism good? All the more so do psychology and the social sciences raise ethical questions. Should the goal of psychotherapy be to promote autonomy and self en-

hancement? Is justice the highest good at which a society can aim? Is violence justified because it is the only way to maintain social order? And ethics, as I have argued, necessarily raises theological boundary questions. Is God dead, as Nietzsche proclaimed, or alive and well and secretly or overtly working to bring about a kingdom of peace and joy in this world? I am not at all sympathetic with any of the antievolution movements, but I am sympathetic with theists who object to the promotion, in the name of science, of materialistic worldviews. We do have a clash of worldviews in our society, and this is the level—the level of accounts of ultimate reality—where the conflicts need to be recognized and the relative merits of the arguments assessed.

CONCLUSION

My late husband, James McClendon, had a good way of summing up the points I have made in this essay. He argued that Christian ethics needs to be understood as a three-stranded cord—the social strand, the body strand, and the Resurrection strand. He criticizes contemporary Christian theologians and ethicists for failing to pay attention to the moral capacities and limitations of our bodies in their relation to the rest of the inhabitants of the crust of the earth. But no account of what we should do with our bodies in society can be justified, ultimately, without attending to the question of God and God's purposes for the world and for the human race (McClendon [1986] 2002).

NOTES

A version of this essay was presented at a symposium (with Jeffrey Schloss) on ethics and biology at The University of California, Santa Barbara, 20 October 2005. I thank Michael Osborne for organizing the event.

1. The foregoing is an abbreviated account of history that I discuss at greater length in an earlier essay published in this journal (Murphy 1999).

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