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Reconstructing a Hopeful Theology in the Context of Evolutionary Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to articulate a theological metaethic which accepts the nature of ethics as understood under the rubric of evolutionary theory. It will be argued that such a theological methaethic can be interpreted as hopeful and optimistic given the apparent evolution of the moral from the amoral. The biologist Theodosius Dobzhansky suggested that "nothing in biology makes sense except in light of evolution."[1] But how wide a net is cast with this remark? Biology is the science of *bios*, meaning 'life'. Our social, psychological, religious, and moral experiences are unquestionably elements of our life; are they hence within the remit of biology? Of course human experience requires higher levels of study though sociology, psychology, etc., but that does not discount the potential insights biology may bring to our self-understanding. Evolutionary theory is not only an analysis of the differential selection of genes, recombinant DNA, mutations, adaptations, and so on, but also has legitimate anthropological import, which, as Joseph Ratzinger notes, challenges faith to "understand itself more profoundly and thus help man to understand himself...."[2]

The principles of evolutionary theory can be employed beyond the confines of biology to develop a *Weltanschauung* which carries significant weight for our understanding of ourselves, and pertinently, our moral imperatives. Evolutionary theory has shown that we are just one strand in a complex web of millions of other evolutionary lineages; as the philosopher Mary Midgley's asserts in her oft-quoted remark, "We are not just rather like

[1] Theodosius Dobzhansky, 'Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in Light of Evolution', *American Biology Teacher*, 35.3 (1973) p. 125

[2] Joseph Ratzinger, quoted by Christoph Schonborn, *Creation and Evolution: A Conference with Pope Benedict XVI*, Stephan Otto Horn and Siegfried Wiedenhofer eds., trans. Michael J. Miller, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008) p. 16. Here I refer to 'Joseph Ratzinger' as this quotation was taken from a period before he became Pope Bededict XVI. I use his papal title when quoting his work subsequent to him becoming pope.

animals; we are animals."[3] If theology were to ignore these insights, it would be, as Benedict XVI suggests, "confined to a ghetto and thus lose its significance for the whole of reality and of human existence."[4] What is thus required from a theological perspective is perennial revision and hermeneutical appropriation of whatever is well-founded in other disciplines or contexts; a theology that can be characterised by the decree of the reformation *semper reformanda* (always to be reformed).[5]

The relationship between theology and evolutionary theory is presented here not as dichotomic but as dialectic – this is not to suggest that the two fields are mutually communicative, but rather that both can contribute to a cohesive, overarching worldview. In this respect, this thesis threads together the theological presupposition of a God of values with the naturalistic and material presuppositions of the modern scientific worldview (being cognizant of the fact that science may not necessarily be presented with these presuppositions). This dialectic occurs between two different but intertwined levels. One is the level of ethical systems; in this work, a particular understanding of Western Christian ethics. This level is framed by another, broader level of metaethics; in this thesis, an overarching understanding of the character of ethics will emerge from reflections on evolutionary theory and its naturalistic context. This will be a naturalistic view, though one which is understood to fit within a theological framework.

Amidst the abundance of literature on the interplay between theology and evolutionary theory, one encounters many issues such as theodicy, teleology, and our understanding of the significance of human life in light of our relationship with animals. Whilst aspects of these themes will require some attention, what is of specific interest within

[3] Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature*, (London: Routledge, 2002) p. xxvii [Originally published 1979]
[4] Benedict XVI, in *Creation and Evolution: A Conference with Pope Benedict XVI*, p. 161
[5] I have argued elsewhere that theology not only needs to dialogue with evolutionary science but more specifically, engage with representations of evolution that are presented as inherently inimical to theological worldviews, Gary Keogh, *Reading Richard Dawkins: A Theological Dialogue with New Atheism*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014)

the broad context of 'theology and evolution' is a reshaping of theological metaethics which is fully appreciative of the insights made available through evolutionary ethics and the wider picture of science in general. This is not to interpret evolution theistically, nor to seek credence for theological propositions, but rather to take evolutionary ethics *in toto* and incorporate it into a worldview which will re-evaluate the viability of particular theological themes and reconstruct an overarching theological metaethic. It will be argued that this theological metaethic can scaffold a particular understanding of Christian ethics as an ethical system, providing a more holistic and enriched vision which ultimately illustrates, to use Charles Darwin's phrase, the grandeur of this (evolutionary) view of life.[6]

In the task of reshaping a theological metaethic, it is important that the 'conventional' theological framework for understanding good and evil be acknowledged, as this work does not come *ex nihilo*. Indeed much of the history of at least Western Christian theology can be characterised by a predominant metaethical understanding which has an identifiable asymmetrical quality; a presupposed good and a conspicuous evil (in that evil demanded explanation in a world created good). This context will be the subject of Chapter One. The asymmetrical approach of a presupposed good and conspicuous evil is perhaps most evident in the Augustinian exegesis of Genesis which led to the influential doctrines of the fall and original sin; ideas which subsequently pervaded much of theology and philosophy. An expiatory (atoning) theodicy prevailed, where divinely instituted goodness was spoilt by human transgression, illustrating the corrupt nature of humanity (being mindful that interpretations on whether humanity is 'corrupt' have varied among Christian demoninations). In this view, evil existed as result of humanity's sin; this will be understood as the 'classical' or 'traditional' theological metaethic. It will also be demonstrated in this chapter how the principles of evolutionary theory intersect with certain key features of this

[6] Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, (London: Wordsworth Classics, 1998) p. 369 [Originally published 1859]

influential metaethic challenging significantly its asymmetrical character and consequently, the whole framework for understanding good and evil. This intersection between evolutionary theory and the traditional theological vision of good and evil provides the conceptual landscape within which this thesis rests; it highlights the need for a revised metaethic in light of evolutionary theory.

The second chapter will then turn to how the nature of ethics is envisaged from the perspective of evolutionary theory; how the principles of competition and struggle in natural selection can be reconciled with the apparent altruism and morality existent in humans and other species. It will also be considered how this understanding of ethics can be compatible with a particular understanding of Christian ethics. In this chapter, what is understood by 'Christian ethics' will be explicated; Christian ethics in this context is characterised by three key features; moral freedom, *agape* and neighbourly love, and natural law. Potential conflicts between Christian ethics and evolutionary ethics will then be addressed apropos these three themes. Although the classical expiatory framework for understanding good and evil will be shown to be inconsistent with evolutionary theory in Chapter One, it will be argued in Chapter two that perceived conflicts between Christian ethics and evolutionary ethics can be overcome upon a deeper analysis of evolutionary ethics. Consequently, this chapter will assert that Christian ethics is compatible with evolutionary ethics, and therefore, the task set in this thesis – to construct a theological/evolutionary metaethic which frames a Christian view of ethics – is possible.

In Chapter Three the task of redrafting a theological appreciation of good and evil will be attended to. After establishing that the traditional theological framework of a primordial good and conspicuous evil fails in light of evolutionary theory in Chapter One, and having further acknowledged evolutionary explanations of ethics in Chapter Two, this chapter will discuss a renewed approach with respect to a theological metaethic; a

paradisiacal past marred by human transgression is no longer tenable. Although such a renewed approach is evident within certain branches of theology, particular issues will be identified which require further reflection and refinement. Consequently, building upon and adding to others' work, a theological worldview will be proposed in this chapter which is appreciative of evolutionary ethics.

In outlining a shift in worldview, from the expiatory theodicy of Augustine to a more dynamic approach in line with evolutionary theory, the question of theodicy needs to be addressed; it was in a sense, the asymmetrical need to account for evil which framed the Augustinian explication of the fall. In moving away from the Augustinian framework, the question of evil is left unresolved. In Chapter Three, aspects of a response to the problem of evil will be suggested with respect to moral evil. Chapter Four will then give attention to the question of natural evil. In addition, given that evolutionary ethics, and the wider picture of modern science in general offers a seemingly self-sufficient, naturalistic ontological picture of the world, this naturalistic context must be considered. Chapter Four will thus argue that the world can be understood from the perspective of a naturalistic/material ontology. It will be outlined how a naturalistic ontology is consistent both with advances in modern science and theological considerations, significantly, the problem of natural evil. Furthermore, it will be explained how theological presuppositions can be consistent with a naturalistic ontology. Notwithstanding the weight attributed to a naturalistic ontology and its coherence with a theological view, it is acknowledged that a distinct caveat emerges when naturalism is interpreted theologically; namely, the connotations of inevitability which may be interpreted as nihilistic.

The fifth and final chapter of this thesis seeks to circumvent this caveat by illustrating how a naturalistic theological metaethic can provide a hopeful outlook. In order to do so, the issue of free will must be addressed; it will be argued throughout this thesis that

free will is a prerequisite of moral decisions, and thus without some form of free will morality becomes vacuous. Yet if mental events are material, as in the perspective of a naturalistic/material ontology, then the mental realm is governed by the same physical laws that govern the rest of non-conscious matter. In order to reconcile the concept of free will with a naturalistic/material ontology, this chapter will turn to a compatabilist conception of free will which recognises the reality of freedom but also the deterministic character of physicalism. It will then be proposed that the fact ethics evolved from what can be understood as a non-teleological, evitable and material world offers a glimmer of hope; the world need not be viewed nihilistically as meaningless collocations of atoms. The existence of goodness is seen here as indicative of profundity; a profundity interpreted theologically to be reflective of divine values. Moreover, it will be argued in this chapter that human morality is in a process of progression which can be understood from a Christian perspective as a progression towards an immanent *telos*; the concept of *agape*. This moral progression is considered as a further development in the natural evolution of altruistic behaviour as understood within the framework of evolutionary ethics. Consequently, a hopeful theological metaethic or axiology can be reconstructed to embrace the invaluable insights into the nature of morality which emerge from evolutionary ethics.