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The handle http://hdl.handle.net/1887/25894 holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

Author: Keogh, Gary
Title: Reconstructing a hopeful theology in the context of evolutionary ethics
Issue Date: 2014-06-11

CHAPTER FIVE:

A HOPEFUL THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS

5.0 Introduction

This chapter will set forth the culmination and cardinal argument of this thesis; that an evolutionary understanding of ethics can provide hope in what may otherwise be understood as a nihilistic world – understanding hope as in opposition to nihilism. The previous chapters outlined a worldview which drew from evolutionary science and appropriated such science theologically. However, in doing so, this theological approach may be left vulnerable to the criticism of nihilism or forsakenness. In this chapter, I hope to address this potential criticism by offering an alternative interpretation; the fact goodness evolved from a material and non-teleological world can offer a glimmer of hope. Moreover, it is because goodness was not inevitable that gives morality greater significance than had it been inevitable. This glimmer of hope is furthermore, interpreted in the context of a theological metaethic; an overarching theological framework for understanding good and evil which has emerged from developments in modern science and particularly the field of evolutionary ethics, though one which also acknowledges a particular reading of Christian ethics.

A further element of this argument is to suggest that my understanding of Christian ethics offers a *telos* or goal for moral progress – the concept of *agape*. I argue that humanity is in the process of moral progress and that *in general*, this can be evidenced by various moral revolutions and the fact that moral atrocities are less frequent and incite more moral outrage than in previous centuries. In more forthright terms, this is to state that humankind is becoming 'more moral'. Whilst this element of the argument is threading together two levels of discourse, (a Christian ethical system and an evolutionary meta-ethical framework) it is

not necessarily drawing support from one to the other, but rather stating how the two can be envisaged in one overarching scheme. The realisation of this goal – the culmination of moral progression – may be termed in Christian/theological parlance, the 'Kingdom of God', though this is not to take a stance on whether or not such a goal will actually be realised. Furthermore, what this may actually be or be like will not be discussed in this chapter, as this would require more extensive study than space permits. As such, particular ethical issues will not be addressed in any great detail; less controversial moral questions, for example war and race/gender equality, will be peripherally considered to make evident humanity's moral consensus on certain issues, though this is not to take a stance on other moral questions such as abortion or euthanasia, or whether animals be considered morally relevant. Rather, I will merely put forth a metaethic that suggests a developmental vision of morality from its origins in altruistic behaviour as discussed by sociobiology, through to its current manifestations, which, since the advent of humanity, can be deemed to be developing. This metaethic, I argue, can be understood from a Christian theological perspective if the Christian notion of *agape* is presented as the *telos* of such moral development.

In order to demonstrate how a glimmer of hope can be seen in the evolution of goodness, the potential material fatalism that may be implied by a naturalistic ontology must be addressed. The material depiction of the world such as that espoused in the previous chapter may seem to be inimical to the notion of free will necessary for actions to have moral worth. In section 5.1, it will be suggested that incorporating a naturalistic version of free will can overcome this material inevitability. The naturalistic version of freedom suggested is akin to what has been termed 'compatibilism' in other contexts – that physical determinism and free will are compatible.[627] The particular representation of compatibilism

[627] See Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, p. 98

adopted here rests on the degree of alternative decisions that are possible in any given mental system. Having established how free will and a material ontology can be reconciled, section 5.2 will then argue for a hopeful interpretation of this picture of evolution; the evolution of freedom and moral values from the material offers an argument against nihilism. Section 5.3 will then interpret this point theologically, by reasserting that such values as evident in humanity are indicative of depth and reflective of the divine.

Viewing values as evolving from the valueless is the first of two discernable examples of hope in the theological framework outlined in this thesis. The second is the suggestion that morality is progressing. This will be argued in section 5.4, where the analogy of an expanding circle of moral relevance will be used to illustrate how humanity's collective moral conscience is in general, developing. Section 5.5 will then suggest that in terms of constructing a Christian metaethic which is incorporative of an evolutionary view of ethics, the Christian love commandment could be seen as the goal of the aforementioned moral progress. The Christian vision of indiscriminate *agape* could be taken as the epitome of an expanding moral circle. Consequently, a Christian ethical framework can emerge enriched by appreciating evolutionary understandings of ethics and scientific understandings of reality.

5.1 Overcoming Material Fatalism: The Question of Free Will

If, as argued in the previous chapter, a naturalistic/material ontology is adopted, then this may imply fatalism. I use the term fatalism here, similar to Chapter Two, to suggest a nihilistic view of the world; that all events are inevitable and that we do not maintain control over our actions; our free will is illusory and our actions are governed by forces beyond our control.[628] In Chapter Two, it was considered whether or not our behaviour is fully governed

[628] Refer to discussion on moral freedom in section 2.3 for a more detailed explication of my use of the term 'fatalism'.

by our genetic predispositions (genetic fatalism) – it was argued that our consciousness plays significant enough a role in order for this not to be the case. Presently, however, an alternative mode of fatalism will be considered; material fatalism.

If a material ontology encompasses the human mind, then a provisional reading may seem to suggest that all events are inevitable, including human choices. This argument can be advanced by positing two premises; i) that the human mind is comprised of physical matter and nothing more as in a material ontology, and ii) that physical matter obeys the inalienable laws of physics. If these two premises hold, then one reaches the conclusion that human choices are as governed by the physical laws of causality as any other physical event such as snowfall or planetary orbits. Bertrand Russell outlined this implication of a material ontology as he wrote that if everything we understand as matter (which in this case, includes human thought) is subject to stringent physical laws, then "all its manifestations in human and animal behaviour will be such as an ideally skilful physicist could calculate from purely physical data."[629] On this reading, Russell suggests, a human would be equivalent to an automaton, as even their thoughts can be inferred from physics.[630]

In Chapter Two, it was suggested that a genetic fatalist interpretation fails as a model for understanding human behaviour, including morality, given that it is not sufficiently appreciative of the role of consciousness. However, if consciousness is indeed material, as contended here, then this may merely be a relocation of the locus of fatalism to lower-level entities, i.e., our actions are not fatalistically determined by genes, but by the physical collocations of atoms in our brains. Again on a provisional reading, this prospect would seem to cohere with the reductionism of a naturalistic ontology. If this is the case, then we may be led to a genuinely nihilistic, fatalistic conclusion; that the universe is merely unfolding atomic interactions running their course and even our thoughts and choices are

[629] Bertrand Russell, 'Materialism Past and Present', p. 213
[630] Ibid., p. 214

essentially determined by the laws of physics. This perspective carries significant theological and ethical implications; if our decisions are merely the manifestation of interactions of atoms bound by physical laws, then can we be held responsible for our actions? This is a central issue raised by Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, as they ask:

> If humans are *physical* systems, and if it is their brains (not minds) that allow them to think, how can it *not* be the case that all of their thoughts and behaviour are simply the product of the laws of neurobiology? How can it *not* be the case, as the epiphenomenalists argue, that the mental life of reasoning, evaluating, deciding is a mere accompaniment of the brain processes that are really doing all the work?[631]

Murphy and Brown proceed to ask the subsequent question, "If these questions cannot be answered, what happens to our traditional notions of moral responsibility, even of our sense of ourselves as *rational* animals?"[632] If the mind is material, and the material is governed by fixed unalienable laws, then what of our moral freedom? Would this material picture of the world seriously mitigate, if not completely eradicate our understanding of freedom, and hence, moral responsibility? A similar question is also posed by Philip Clayton, "It is also questionable whether one can make sense of ethical obligation or moral striving given a purely naturalistic ontology... If all that exists are the objective states of affairs described by the sciences, then all sense of obligation is ultimately an illusion."[633] If moral obligations were indeed illusory, then despite whatever meaning we perceive or attribute to our own lives, we would be left ultimately with an ontological nihilism – a world in which actions most poignant and profound are merely the results of different manifestations of collocations of atoms in individuals' brains.

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[631] Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It? Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Free Will*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) p. 3
[632] Ibid., p. 3
[633] Philip Clayton, *Mind and Emergence*, p. 173

I argue in this chapter that this nihilistic conclusion does not follow from a material worldview – evolutionary ethics provides a glimmer of hope. However, before that can be argued, the issue of freedom must be addressed (this has been peripherally mentioned throughout this thesis, though will now need a more detailed analysis). In order for actions to have moral worth, they must be considered free – this was signalled as a key feature of my understanding of Christian ethics in Chapter Two, also evident in the thought of Augustine. The question arises then, of how free will can be reconciled, if at all, with the causal nexus of the material ontology espoused in the previous chapter. Although it will be outlined in section 5.1.2 how I suggest this issue be approached, another potential solution which is worthy of consideration has been discussed in contemporary theology, though it will ultimately be rejected here; an appeal to caveats of a naturalistic ontology.

5.1.1 Free Will Contra a Material Mind

Criticisms of a material view of the mind with respect to considering free will have appeared in contemporary theology, such as the alternative to the material model of free will espoused by Nancey Murphy. She has addressed this issue in two important works as a co-author, though henceforth, I speak of her view in the singular, being mindful that it has been explicated with others. Her argument is nuanced, relying on at least three features; nonreduction, quantum indeterminacy, and environmental causation. She does not pose that an immaterial mental realm exists, akin to a Cartesian dualism, but rather, suggests that "there must exist an adequate physical basis for free actions in the hierarchical structuring of the human brain."[634] Whilst she sees merit in an ultimately reductive account of the human mind, such as the one I adopt, she argues that the explanation of the mind in terms of neurophysiology can only be partial; mental properties have a greater complexity than other

[634] Nancey Murphy and George Ellis, *On The Moral Nature of the Universe*, p. 32

physical properties and are intricately related to environmental variables. Therefore, they cannot be considered identical to brain states.[635] This view, she explains, can be termed 'nonreductive physicalism'.[636]

Nonreduction

Objections to nonreduction, such as those explicated in the previous chapter (section 4.1) could be recalled at this point. This objection to Murphy's view pertains to a difference of opinion on what constitutes 'non-reductionism'. I suggested following from others (see section 4.1) that certain entities cannot be directly explained by their material constituents. Therefore, I agree with Murphy on the issue that mental properties cannot be *directly* explained by reduction to their physical constituents, though I differ in that I contend that mental properties are *ultimately* reducible. For Murphy, our experience of an 'I' stems from the existence of a higher-order complex state, which offers us the opportunity to choose between various lines of reasoning with no overriding reason to choose one rather than the other – our mental experience is of a "global, transcendent state."[637] As she explains, on her reading a reductionist view of the mind is not refuted or replaced, but rather supplemented by additional considerations.[638] In contrast to this position, I have argued that no such additional considerations are necessary (given that, as noted in section 2.3, reduction is not diametrically oppossed to emergence). Reduction does not diminish the significance of the mind, and there is not nor should there be any reason to postulate anything 'more' than ultimately reductive elements. The 'additional considerations' posited add nothing to the view that cannot be understood through material reduction.

[635] Ibid., p. 35
[636] Ibid., p. 33
[637] Ibid., p. 35
[638] Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It? Philosophical and Neurobiological Perspectives on Moral Responsibility and Free Will*, p. 55

Mental Indeterminacy

In addition to her view on the irreducibility of the mind, Murphy also incorporates quantum indeterminacy, which she feels may be a necessary condition for true freedom and spontaneity.[639] Her understanding of an irreducible mental process acts downward on a genuinely ontologically indeterminate level (the quantum level).[640] Our thoughts are not governed by their constituent elements on this view, but rather the 'whole' of the mind can choose between ontologically indeterminate options. It is also worth noting that elsewhere, her co-author George Ellis postulated that quantum uncertainty in brain activity may provide a point of divine interaction; God could act in causing different outcomes within quantum events in the brain which would be macroscopically amplified and subsequently influence our decisions.[641] In opposition to such a view, I find sufficient reason to discount Murphy's appeal to quantum physics to provide a facet of ontologically genuine indeterminacy given the similar discussion on divine action at indeterminate levels in section 4.2.1. Such a view, I argued is an appeal to a 'God of the gaps' mentality – an appeal to as of yet incomplete knowledge. In any case, I also contest that ontological indeterminacy is not necessary in providing a sufficient account of free will, or at least, it is worth conceptually exploring an alternative.

Environmental Causality

One further aspect of Murphy's criticism of reductionist views of the mind is her understanding of environmental causality. Murphy interprets reductionism to always assume bottom-up causation; that entities' behaviour is ultimately governed by 'lower-level' physics

[639] Nancey Murphy and George Ellis, *On The Moral Nature of the Universe*, p. 35.
[640] Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?*, p. 49
[641] George Ellis, 'The Theology of the Anthropic Principle', Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy and Christopher J. Isham eds., *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, (Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 1993) p. 396; for criticism, see Willem B. Drees, *Religion, Science and Naturalism*, pp. 179-180

thus, all causation occurs from the bottom-up. However, even with this interpretation of reductionism, it can be argued that higher-level properties are not illusory nor can they be immediately reduced to their fundamental constituents – see section 4.1. Murphy rightly notes that the environment, social or otherwise, can have a causal effect on the mental system. Therefore, she concludes that mind/brain states cannot be fully governed by their constituents, because they can be causally influenced by external environmental contexts, not just the physical laws that govern their constituents:

> It is obvious, is it not, that the environment (or the broader system of which the entity or system in question is a part) often has a causal effect on that entity or system? Is it not, therefore, also obvious that the behaviour of an entity is often *not* determined solely by the behaviour (or laws governing the behaviour) of its parts? And is it not obvious that a sophisticated entity such as an organism has control of (some of) its own parts—the horse runs across the pasture, and all of its parts go with it? If all of this is so obvious, why is causal reductionism still so widely assumed?[642]

This is where I find Murphy's critique of causual reduction too strong. Whilst Murphy is, strictly speaking, grammatically correct in stating that external causal influences can causally affect the mental system, her point is problematic, as such causal influences are not precluded by reduction. Such causal influences are the result of interacting systems, each of which are governed by their own constituents. The core of reductionism does not preclude reductive causal systems (namely, the environment) interacting, but merely acknowledges that ultimately, each of these systems' behaviour is reducible. Consider for example, two billiard balls. The behaviour of each of the billiard balls on a reductionist view is governed physically by their constituent atoms. If the two balls were to collide, they would cause a change in the state of each other, therefore, each of the balls' behaviour will be influenced by an external or environmental force, namely the other ball. However, both would still be

[642] Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It,* pp. 54-55

governed by their physical constituents. The same too, for a mind and its environment; suggesting that the mind is governed by the physical laws of its constituent physical properties is not to deny that it can be influenced by an external cause; our thoughts/brain states have external causal influences. For example, we feel certain emotions when listening to certain types of music, or we feel cold if the temperature falls. Such external/environmental influences are easily understood as 'inputs' in a material model of the mind such Dennett's multiple drafts model discussed in section 4.1.

Consequently, I find sufficient reason to move away from Murphy and others who critique a causally reductive view of the mind, either by viewing it as irreducible, or by postulating quantum indeterminacy as the factor which offers us 'genuine' freedom. The task is then to either explain how an ontologically material view of the human mind can account for the freedom necessary for actions to have moral worth, or else succumb to the nihilistic view that we are not truly accountable for any actions. I choose the former, and to do so, I turn to Dennett's depiction of free will.

5.1.2 Free Will in a Naturalistic Ontology

As discussed in section 4.1, I subscribed to Dennett's understanding of the mind as a product of physical processes. The mind is not exempt from the long chain of causal interactions in a naturalistic ontology. Free will, as an aspect of the mind is also no exception on this view; as Dennett observes, free will is not "a God-like power to exempt oneself from the causal fabric of the physical world."[643] Notwithstanding, despite the fact that the mind is bound by the "causal fabric of the physical world", Dennett challenges the direct linkage between physical determinism and inevitability which he feels underpins the polarisation of the

[643] Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, p. 13

debate between hard-determinism (the view that free will is illusory) and agent causation (there is a nonmaterial free will).[644]

It is contested here that evitability – meaning avoidability – emerges not from a genuinely ontological indeterminism but rather from the complexities of deterministic causal systems. To proffer an analogy; the throw of a die is considered random, and is thus often used to introduce 'chance' into various games. However, in principle, the throw of a die is entirely non-random – it is governed and fully determined by the laws of physics. If a skilled physicist had complete access to all the relevant information about a die-throw, i.e. the weight of the die, the velocity, the wind-drag, the angle from which it is released, and so on, then that physicist would be able to calculate using Newton's laws of motion, where the die would land. In practice, such variables would be so numerous and complex that it would be impossible to actually calculate where the die would come to rest; consequently, for all intents and purposes, the throw of the die is random. It may be strictly speaking determinable by a hypothetical intelligence with a God's-eye perspective, such as that postulated by the eighteenth/nineteenth century philosopher Pierre Simon Laplace.[645] However, from the perspective of our experience, the causal system of a die-throw is so complex that we cannot calculate it. The human mind can be considered as an analogous causal system, though one exponentially more complex than that of a die-throw – indeed, the human mind it seems is the most complex causal system in the known universe. Whilst our minds are governed by cause and effect, this causal system is so complex that it is far beyond our comprehension. The ontologically indeterminate view of free will thus faces significant challenges, which leads me to the consideration of a more pragmatic understanding of indeterminacy.

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[644] Ibid., pp. 100-101
[645] Pierre Simon Laplace, *A Philosophical Essay on Probabilities*, trans. Fredrick Wilson Truscott and Fredrick Lincon Emory, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1902) p. 4 [Originally published 1812]

In the example of a die-throw, the result is deterministic but as we have lost sight of the laws and variables, given that they are too complex to follow, we envisage the throw as random. Laplace offered a similar understanding with respect to the mind and free choices. Laplace suggests that we have lost sight of the reasons for choices, and therefore we believe that our choices are not determined.[646] Dennett elaborates on this principle by postulating the interdependence of every causal system in the universe leading to the conclusion that whilst the universe is governed by physical laws, the degree of alternative possibilities are so incomprehensibly vast that events cannot be considered inevitable – he quotes Whitehead in this regard, "The vast causal independence of contemporary occasions is the preservative of the elbow-room within the Universe."[647] Therefore, the universe is governed by causal deterministic laws, but such laws offer enough 'elbow-room' for events to be considered evitable and thus, free.

Pertaining more specifically to conscious thought, if freedom is considered to be equated to the level of complexity in a causal system, rather than an ontologically distinct factor, then Dennett considers that even 'lower' organisms have a degree of freedom.[648] A redwood tree, for example, can 'decide' to blossom in spring, though of course, this is not yet a 'conscious' decision. This decision is based on a simple environmental 'switch', "A system has a degree of freedom when there is an ensemble of possibilities of one kind or another, and which of these possibilities is actual at any time depends on whatever function or switch controls this degree of freedom."[649] Dennett expands on this concept by suggesting that over evolutionary time, such 'switches' become more prevalent in systems, and can become linked in parallel or in series, eventually forming larger switching networks, rather

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[646] Ibid., p. 4
[647] Alfred North Whitehead quoted by Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, p. 83
[648] This is view not wholly dissimilar to Whitehead's understanding that all matter has a degree of experience, though Whitehead's view is more metaphysical – Whitehead rejects materialism outright, whereas Dennett seeks to reconcile materialism with consciousness. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, David Ray Griffin and Donald Sherburne eds., (New York: Free Press, 1978) pp. 78-79 [Originally published 1929]
[649] Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, p. 162

than a 'simple' on/off switch in systems such as a tree – though perhaps a dendrologist (an individual involved in the study of trees) may argue that the process of tree blooming is in fact quite complex itself. Given the powers of exponential multiplication, the introduction of further 'switches' into a system allow the degrees of freedom to "multiply dizzyingly, and the issues of control grow complex and non-linear."[650]

This is the crux of Dennett's understanding of free will which I argue fits neatly into the naturalistic ontology promoted in the previous chapter. The human brain is the manifestation of such a system of 'switches'; it modulates the enormity of information that we perceive through the senses and accesses our past experiences in order to make choices. The incomprehensibly vast amounts of information we acquire and innumerable amount of choices we can make at any given time gives us free will in the same sense that a die throw is random; our free choices are governed ultimately by physics, but the level of complexity involved in such choices is so great that our choices are unpredictable or free. Of course, critics argue that such a view on free will is not sufficient. The philosopher Jerry Fodor for example, feels that Dennett's compatiblist explication of freedom only accounts for a pseudo-freedom; it falls short of a metaphysical freedom, a "freedom tout court."[651] Murphy offers a similar critique, suggesting that Dennett only explains how "complex machines could *appear* to have language, beliefs, morality, and free will" and fails to give a full account.[652] However, it is contested here that the view of free will put forth by Dennett is again more coherent with a naturalistic ontology; there is no reason why we should expect consciousness to be exempt from the causal processes of the world. This understanding of freedom, it is argued, is sufficient to account for human free will, particularly as it concerns the moral worth of actions. Free will can be understood as congruent with a seamless causal system – in sum, a naturalistic, material ontology, even one which understands the mind as a

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[650] Ibid., p. 162
[651] Jerry Fodor, 'Why Would Mother Nature Bother?' *The London Review of Books*, 25.5 (2003) p. 17
[652] Nancey Murphy and Warren S. Brown, *Did My Neurons Make Me Do It?*, p. 298

physical entity, does not preclude free will; the fatalism that may be presumed to stem from a material ontology can be overcome.

5.2 Freedom and Hope

It is argued then, that freedom can be compatible with a naturalistic/material ontology, if freedom is viewed as an incomprehensibly vast array of alternative brain states. If we accept this reading of free will (a genuine but physical free will), then we can subsequently state that our actions have moral worth. It does not diminish the significance of moral freedom if freedom is equated to the degree of alternative possibilities open to our brains, responsiveness to our environments and our ability for self-reflection. Dennett acknowledges this point, "... a naturalistic account of decision making still leaves room for moral responsibility."[653] The fact that moral decisions are not 'cause-free' or ontologically indeterminate does not preclude them. Kant outlined a similar argument, though in a somewhat different context, as he argued that moral decisions must have reasons as their causes – they are not undetermined.[654] I advance this argument further here, and suggest that not only does a naturalistic account leave room for moral responsibility, but the evolution of free will and a moral sense can actually be interpreted as more significant on a naturalistic and non-teleological view, rather than as something ontologically distinct, such as a pre-established morality or dualist position.

If morality was inevitable, its significance might then be considered to be mitigated; as noted in previous chapters, I attribute some significance to novelty. The fact that certain events transpire is given greater significance when such events were not inevitable – this is not to say that inevitable events have no significance, but that inevitable events would have less significance than evitable events. This argument was stated in

[653] Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, p. 226
[654] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, pp. 63-66

section 3.3 though in a wider context; I argued that foreseen evolutionary developments may have less significance than developments in an open, non-teleological system. Of course, one could disagree and state the contrary; that an absence of teleology is not a prerequisite for significance. However, as it was argued in previous chapters, I contest that foreknowledge does in fact diminish the significance of events, as in the example of viewing a sporting event already knowing the outcome. Although significance may be gained in certain respects from foreseen events, it is contested that significance is at least to some extent dependent on novelty. The fact that freedom can be the result of combinations of mindless particles of matter is the remarkable point, indeed I argue more remarkable than had it been specially created or ontologically distinct. Had moral freedom been inevitable or planned, then it would not carry the same significance that one can attribute to it from the perspective of a material worldview.

Arthur Peacocke makes a similar point, though as discussed in the previous chapter I differ from him with regard to his belief in divine interaction. He posits the question which I address here, "... how are we properly to interpret the cosmological development (or the development of the cosmoses) if, after aeons of time, the fundamental particles have become human beings, have evidenced that quality of life we call 'personal'?"[655] I suggest that this premise, the evolution of morality and freedom from mindless matter, be interpreted as offering a glimmer of hope in what would otherwise be nihilistic world.

Although 'hope' is used here as a term which stands in opposition to nihilism, this is not to posit 'hope' as the direct opposite to nihilism; of course, one can maintain an ontological nihilism yet find a subjective notion of hope. Indeed, as I will argue, hope can be found through the evolution of goodness/morality, which may be subjective. Whilst the idea of hope I argue for will be considered in this context to be somewhat theological, I do not

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[655] Arthur Peacocke, *Creation and the World of Science: The Re-Shaping of Belief*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p. 73 [Originally published 1979]

conversely equate atheistic/secular visions of the world with nihilism (though atheistic perspectives on the universe would seem to imply an ontological nihilism). Therefore, whilst I propose 'hope' as a term used here in opposition to nihilism, these terms are not diametrically opposed in every context. Moreover, although my understanding of hope is theological, it is not eschatological in the sense that other theologies of hope have been, such as those discussed in Chapter Three. Hope is understood here as pertaining to meaning or purpose; something more than arbitrary interactions of atoms and matter. Whether this hope is considered purely subjective (as in an atheistic outlook) or indicative of theological 'depth' (discussed further in Chapter Three) is not the primary concern in this project, though I am in favour of the latter view.

Counterfactuals

A difficulty with the argument that the evolution of morality may provide a crevice in an otherwise nihilistic world is the absence of a frame of reference or counterfactual world. Notwithstanding, it is possible to conceive of alternatives, and suggest whether such alternatives would be considered nihilistic, or whether the evitable evolution of morality as it has transpired could be deemed more significant. For the purposes of illustrating why the evitable evolution of ethics offers us hope in opposition to nihilism, three categories of worlds will be briefly considered; a universe with no life, a world with no evolved morality, and a world not with evolutionary morality but a preordained, inevitable morality. Firstly, one could envisage a universe with no life, or indeed a wider conception of the non-existence of the universe itself. Such worlds would appear nihilistic; being absent of purpose or value, particularly if as argued in Chapter Three, the antitheses of nihilism (notions such as value and teleology) only fully emerge with human life.[656] Nihilism is not understood

[656] However, this is not to say that non-human life has no purpose or value, given that in an evolutionary worldview, such issues exist as matters of degree.

here as an existent force in itself but rather as the absence of value/purpose, and thus could exist in a world absent of life – it can exist in our conceptions of such a world.

A second category of counterfactual worlds also illustrates the due significance attributed to the evitability of morality and how it provides hope in opposition to nihilism; a world with evolution, but without the evolution of moral sentiments. As discussed in the previous two chapters, the portrayal of evolution adopted here is one which operates within the framework described by Monod as chance and necessity. As Gould noted in his analogy of winding the tape of evolution back, it is highly unlikely that anything like human beings would emerge in an evolutionary process. Consequently, if morality is only considered as such – that is differentiated from functional behaviour construed as altruistic – when it emerges in humans or other hypothetical self-reflective life, then morality too can be considered highly unlikely. Moreover, a premise set forth in previous chapters was that teleology or value only exists at the level of human consciousness. Without these values, as in non-human life or a conceivable alternative evolutionary world where moral sentiments did not evolve, the world could be considered nihilistic; it would be devoid of values or purpose. Of course, this raises the important distinction between 'values' and 'value'; arguing that non-human life does not have values is not to suggest that it does not have value – this is a different, ethical issue.[657]

A third category of worlds, a world with a pre-ordained, inevitable morality is easier to conceive, given that the pre-evolutionary orthodox approach would fall into this category; that is the approach discussed in Chapter One drawing on the traditional theological narrative of a pre-established (and thus, inevitable) good. On this perspective, values existed and moral actions were given significance. However, the important clarification which needs to be made, as discussed in Chapter One, is that moral actions

[657] For an example of such discussion, see Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) pp. 55-82 [Originally published 1993]

were given significance in part as a result of free will, in the view of Aquinas, for instance.[658] It is again, this central notion of freedom which gives moral actions their significance. The absence of moral freedom would severely diminish the meaning of morality, as expressed in the seventeenth century Unitarian objection to predestination; the *The Racovian Catechism* for example, makes an objection to predestination in terms of God's punishment, "And when God punishes the wicked, and those who disobey him, what does he but punish those who do not that which they have not ability to execute."[659] Therefore, in a non-evolutionary view, an inevitable, preordained morality can still be significant if the concept of moral freedom with regard to moral actions is acknowledged.

Notwithstanding, it can be suggested that such a pre-ordained morality is less significant than a non-inevitable morality, given that a non-inevitable morality also introduces freedom at the level of the metaethic. In short, moral actions are considered to have worth when they are not inevitable but free. I argue similarly, that the existence of morality has greater worth as it was not inevitable. These two views are not completely dichotomic, given that moral significance can still exist in a world with a pre-existent, inevitable morality; in this case, perhaps this world would not be nihilistic. Yet I argue that a non-inevitable morality can be more significant.

John Hick outlines a similar premise, though in the context of his soul-making theodicy. Hick argues that a world with a pre-ordained hedonistic paradise would not lead to as valued a moral sense as the exploration of the potentialities of human personality.[660] I argue a similar sentiment though with respect to metaethics; a perfectly planned and instilled framework for morality might not be devoid of significance, if free will exists at the level of moral actions, though it might be less significant than a world in which metaethics was not

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[658] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: I*, 83.1
[659] Thomas Rees trans. and ed., *The Racovian Catechism of 1605: A Sketch of the History of Unitarianism in Poland and the Adjacent Countries*, trans., (London: Longman, 1818) p. 333 [Originally published 1605]
[660] John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, p. 258

inevitable. In this respect, I am attributing freedom not just to the level of the moral action, but also to the level of the metaethic. John Haught expresses a similar outlook, though in a wider context than morality. Although Haught's approach to teleology was discussed and ultimately rejected in Chapter Three, he does acknowledge the theological importance of evitability, "Contingency, for instance, may be troubling to those fixated on the need for design in nature, but an openness to accidents seems essential for creation's autonomy and eventual aliveness."[661] The evitability of the world, and in the context here, morality, gives it greater 'aliveness' or significance.

In comparison with conceivable alternative categories then, it can be evidenced that a world which exhibits the evitable evolution of morality offers hope in a world which could otherwise be considered nihilistic. In the three categories of other counterfactual worlds considered, the first two, a world without life and a world without moral sentiments, are argued to be considered nihilistic. The third category, which encompasses the orthodox conception of the world in pre-evolutionary thought, may not be considered nihilistic given that it exhibits morality and stresses the importance of free will with regard to moral actions. Nevertheless, it was argued that an evitable morality in the evolutionary view could be seen as more significant than an inevitable morality, as with a pre-established good. It might not be that the preordained vision of morality is completely insignificant or completely nihilistic, and thus not diametrically opposed to the current understanding of morality conceived. In any case, based on our current scientific understanding as explored from the context of a naturalistic ontology, it would seem that only the first two categories of worlds (and of course our own) are actually possible.

Russell's words in the previous section, that a material worldview would imply a world with no freedom, can be overcome by incorporating Dennett's notion of evitability

[661] John Haught, *Christianity and Science*, p. 94

and the incomprehensibly vast degree of alternative decisions we have available to us. Therefore, our freedom offers us the ability to avoid the 'inevitable' – it allows us to avoid the conclusion of nihilistic fatalism. Our freedom allows us to contradict the apparent inevitability of a material world bound by the physical laws. Similarly, the fact that ethics evolved from a non-teleological, material world can be interpreted as offering a glimmer of hope. The world is not merely meaningless collocations of atoms, but goodness has emerged – thus we find a 'get-out clause' in a world which could otherwise be considered a nihilistic amalgamation of particles of matter. Goodness, I argued in Chapter Three, is a feature of depth, some profound 'something more'. The view that this evolution of goodness was not *a priori* inevitable, I suggest, makes it more significant.

5.3 Theological Interpretations of Naturalistic Freedom

In further addressing the question posed by Peacocke above, I also put forth the suggestion here that the evolution of our moral freedom from material matter can be interpreted theologically; that evolved morality is reflective of the divine. It was stated in Chapter Three, that although morality is contested here to have arisen from the processes of evolution as understood through the field of sociobiology, human morality can in some senses be considered unique. I incorporated Sarah Coakley's term 'supernormal' morality to serve this purpose. Similarly, human freedom can be considered unique; though there is no ontological difference between the freedom we possess and the freedom of a redwood tree, for instance, there are significant distinctions. Ontologically, human freedom differs from the freedom of a tree only in terms of degree. However, our level of self-consciousness has, as Teilhard suggested, pierced a significant boundary in biological evolution.[662] Dennett echoes this sentiment, "Whales roam the ocean, birds soar blithely overheard... but none of

[662] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, 'Turmoil or Genesis?' p. 222

these creatures is free in the way human beings can be free. Human freedom is an objective phenomenon, distinct from all other biological conditions and found only in one species, us."[663]

This degree of moral freedom, I suggest, is reflective of the divine; as stated in section 3.4, morality can be equated to what Tillich terms 'depth'. Evolved ethics offers us a glimmer of something beyond the surface – beyond the purely physical events towards our ineffable experience (though to reiterate, this is not to state there is anything 'more' than the physical – see section 3.4). Viewing the remarkableness of evolutionary ethics and evolved freedom in this way does not discount the fully naturalistic explanations that have been explored and defended in this thesis, though it appreciates the 'miracle' of their evolution from a mindless world. Coakley suggests that the level of morality apparent in human life is not quite evidence of God, "but... manifestations which demand from us some sort of response both rational and affective."[664] On this point I agree, though to a lesser extent – evolved morality, in my view, is reflective of the divine, perhaps not quite a manifestation; I do not suggest that such morality has a direct, supernatural element. I argue, as stated in section 3.4, that such profound goodness as evident in human morality is indicative of depth.

Of course, this theological assumption may be challenged; why suggest that this supernormal morality is reflective of the divine? Coakley also acknowledges this caveat:

> What we do still need to worry about, however, is the classic Humean point: that there is no reason why the agnostic or sceptic could not simply stop at the phenomenon of evolutionary order kindly supplied by game theory and merely now attribute it to the evolutionary processes themselves.[665]

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[663] Daniel C. Dennett, *Freedom Evolves*, p. 226
[664] Sarah Coakley, 'Teleology Reviewed', p. 13
[665] Ibid., p. 18

Coakley offers a response to this caveat by suggesting that it seems impossible to account for supernormal morality in any way other than to consider its cause God.[666] Alternatively, I do not suggest that God is the cause of morality – recall my espousal of a naturalistic ontology in the previous chapter which suggested that all causes were natural. I argue that morality which has evolved from mindless matter is reflective of the divine. In this sense, perhaps, my argument is more philosophical. Whilst I do interpret the evolution of morality as theological, it could also be stated in more general terms. The fact that goodness evolved offers us a glimmer of hope; with the advent of human moral conscience, we are not bound to a nihilistic inevitability, we can see hope in the evolution of the moral from the amoral, in the evolution of values from the valueless. Consequently, this gives motives for the establishment of an optimistic, hopeful worldview. In furtherance of this theme, I also turn my attention towards morality as it exists among humans and propose that morality is progressing.

5.4 The Expanding Moral Circle

A further aspect of an evolutionary view of morality that can contribute to a hopeful theology is the proposition that we are evolving or progressing morally; in a sense, we are becoming 'more moral'. Before this is explored in more detail, it should be clarified that there is an important distinction to be made between this notion of moral evolution or moral development/progression, and teleology. Evolution, it has been argued here for scientific and theological reasons, should be viewed as decidedly non-teleological; it does not have a goal. A full and coherent picture of the world can be taken from a non-teleological naturalistic ontology which includes evolutionary ethics, to give us a picture of the world from the big bang to moral behaviour (noting that this picture is not yet quite complete).

[666] Ibid., pp. 18-20

However, non-teleology does not discount the notions of development or progression in the realm of moral behaviour.

The nineteenth century Irish philosopher William Lecky hypothesised a circle of moral relevance which demarcates who might be the beneficiaries of our benevolent actions – the centre of the circle being those most relevant in a moral sense, with the degree of relevance decreasing as the circle expands. This circle, he suggested, at one time merely encompasses the family, but then extends to include "... a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity, and finally, its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the animal world."[667] Lecky felt that our moral conscience was progressing given that we were in the process of extending our beneficence to more classifications of people, and indeed eventually animals. Whilst I will return to this point, I raise it presently to draw parallels with sociobiology. If we recall the theories of sociobiology discussed in Chapter Two, we can trace a similar expanding circle of moral relevance though in this case from a genetic perspective; altruistic actions emerge from natural selection as a result of the benefit they bring to copies of genes in their kin (kin selection). Such altruistic actions however, can then extend to include the group; an altruistic group's genes may fare better in the fight for survival (group selection). In cases where organisms develop more efficacious memory, foresight and the ability to recognise others, individuals of a more distant relation can benefit from behaving altruistically towards each other given the prospect that such acts can later be reciprocated (reciprocal altruism). So as Lecky put forth the idea of our expanding moral circle from family to class to nation, sociobiology can also trace an expanding moral circle from kin to groups to unrelated individuals outside one's group. Morality can thus be

[667] W.E.H. Lecky, *History of European Morals: From Augustus to Charlemagne*: *I*, (London: Longman, Green, and Co., 1890) p. 107 [Originally published 1869]

considered developmental – or as philosopher Philip Kitcher terms it, an unfinished project.[668]

There is however, an important distinction between the moral development as explicated by Lecky and that of sociobiology; namely that of teleology. In the case of Lecky's expanding moral circle, such an expansion could be considered conscious, intentional, or indeed teleological. In the case of sociobiology, the developmental expansion of the moral circle is guided only by the laws of natural selection; it is not conscious, indeed, one could even question whether such behaviour should be classified as 'moral'. Peter Singer, who takes the title of his work *The Expanding Circle* from Lecky's quote above, notes this point as he states that when speaking in terms of genetic motivations, we are speaking in terms of consequentialism, and not in any normative ethical sense.[669] Despite this clear point of difference, the evolutionary worldview espoused here sees no ontological discontinuity between the 'moral' behaviour evident in the natural world which is governed in general by genetic 'motives' and the moral behaviour of humans; consciousness and morality are evident in other animals – ours differs only by matter of degree. It can still be maintained though, that human consciousness is uniquely complex, and thus, it can be proper to speak in terms of intentionality with respect to human moral behaviour in a way which is not possible when speaking of altruism in ants, birds, etc.

As discussed in section 3.3.1, human consciousness represents a significant landmark in evolutionary history; as Teilhard and others suggested, it allows for an unreflective process to become reflective. It allows for a supernormal morality, or indeed, a supernormal freedom. Even on a material evolutionary worldview, it is still intelligible to speak of human nature and human morality in a normative sense – it was detailed in section 2.3.1 how evolutionary understandings of human morality do not limit its legitimacy.

[668] Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011) p. 2
[669] Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, p. 129

Moreover, as outlined above, human freedom understood in terms of the incomprehensible versatility of material brain states, need not deny freedom – even if it is not ontologically indeterminate. From this perspective, there is a development from our behaviour being governed more prominently by our genes, to being governed more prominently by our conscious thought. Our motives for moral behaviour are no longer purely associated with our genetic predispositions, but are now also predicated on our reasoned 'good will' to use Kant's terminology.[670] From this point, the development of conscious intentions now allows for teleology – we can consciously govern our moral behaviour for a purpose. In respect of teleology in moral development, the question arises of the *telos* or goal. I will address this question in the next section from a theological context

It is important to note that this understanding is not to convey a situation where our moral behaviour developed from one sphere (genetic intentions) to another (conscious or cultural intentions). The evolution of human freedom/morality is not a break in the causal chain – rather, it represents another, admittedly significant chapter in the long narrative of evolution. Conscious morality works in addition to evolved morality. Human conscious morality can be considered teleological in a way that pre-human morality cannot – though this teleology is an additional step in the development of morality and not an ontologically 'new' step as in the case of divine command ethics or divinely instituted goodness. In this regard, Singer suggests that viewing morality as evolved through nature "upset" the prevailing wisdom among psychologists – who generally focused on the cultural and educational development of our morals – as it suggests an innate morality.[671] However, evolutionary perspectives of moral development need not stand in opposition to developmental theories of morality; the two can easily coexist. Evolutionary ethics provides a substantial foundation for our understanding of where morals came from, but it does not

[670] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 9
[671] Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, p. 188

preclude our cultural influences. Again, even stalwart evolutionists will acknowledge the role of human conscious thought, and hence culture, education, and other factors in our morality.

This vision of morality as a long sequential development – conscious morality being another phase in the process – leads me to the argument that morality is continuing to develop. Altruistic behaviour became more prevalent in the evolutionary tree as the circle of relevance expanded from genes to kin to group, etc. even though at that point it might not necessarily be considered 'moral'. After the advent of human consciousness however, speaking of such behaviour as moral becomes intelligible, though this does not mean that the chain of moral development is broken. Rather, it is continuous. Congruently, it is suggested here that humanity is continuing to develop morally – in short, we are becoming 'more moral' (note here the interesting parallels with John Hick's understanding of Irenaeus in section 3.5.1). This sentiment was also put forth by Darwin – though he had not drawn the direct links between such moral development and evolutionary theory that I seek to here; he seems to be speaking solely in terms of human morality. Darwin suggests, "And it is admitted by moralists of the derivative school and by some intuitionists, that the standard of morality has risen since an early period in the history of man."[672] More contemporary theorists have agreed, for example the linguist and political commentator Noam Chomsky, as he suggests that, "... my general feeling is that over time, there's measurable progress – it's not huge, but it's significant."[673] Can this apparent moral progress be evidenced? I argue that it can, though somewhat tentatively.

The Berkeley philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah offers a useful description of a moral revolution as a "rapid transformation in moral *behaviour*, not just in moral

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[672] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, p. 80

[673] Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power: The Indispensible Chomsky*, Peter Michel and John Schoeffel eds., (London: Vintage Books, 2003) p. 356

sentiments."[674] On this definition, it could be argued that *in general*, rapid transformations in moral behaviour have been more numerous, prevalent and significant in recent centuries than over previous centuries or indeed millennia in human history. It is important that it is understood that I speak intentionally and consciously in general terms, and indeed tentatively on this point. There are obvious objections to the assertion that we are more ethically mature in recent history as there are salient instances of repugnant moral behaviour evident in the world today; violent conflicts in certain regions, for instance. Moreover, we are faced in modern times with immense ethical dilemmas of our own making; environmental issues, threats of nuclear war, or more ambivalent issues such as preventing aging, perhaps resulting in unsustainable population expansion.

Philip Kitcher also signifies moral subjectivity as a distinct objection which could be raised against the assertion of moral progression.[675] Kitcher distinguishes between "mere change" – that moral codes change – and moral progression. It might be clear that moral codes have changed, though this cannot be taken as grounds for asserting progression. A presupposition of moral progress is that our current ethical code, or one we envisage following the future, is 'better' than a previous code or alternative code; in order to consider the concept of progress, one must adopt a form of moral objectivism and demand moral truths, otherwise, how could one moral vision be considered 'better'? This issue can be overcome, Kitcher feels, by emphasising progress rather than truth; that progress brings truth, "ethical progress is prior to ethical truth, and truth is what you get by making progressive steps (truth is attained in the limit of progressive transitions; truth 'happens to an idea')."[676] Moreover, Kitcher also points out that even when certain consensuses are reached with regard to moral issues, human behaviour is so multifaceted that certain moral

[674] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honour Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co.. 2010) p. xi
[675] Philip Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, p. 209
[676] Ibid., p. 210

progressions may not be "uncontroversially positive in all respects."[677] He notes that there may be disadvantages to certain moral developments, slight in comparison to the large positive gains, but existent nonetheless. He gives the example of increased freedom for women – a positive gain – which may bring about anxieties of newfound freedom, for instance.[678] A more stark example could be the potential elimination of hunger – a positive moral gain – which may exacerbate the issue of unsustainable population expansion. Essentially, it is evident that moral progression is a complicated issue.

Those caveats being acknowledged, there have been substantial and expedient moral revolutions in the last few centuries, even in the last one hundred years, which have achieved a degree of moral consensus, even if we acknowledge the difficulties in asserting moral claims. For example, although violent conflicts still occur on a large scale, they are less frequent and incite more moral outrage than in previous times. Following the brutality of the Second World War, the United Nations was established in part, to "to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind."[679] Although critics such as American Historian Howard Zinn have argued that the United Nations is heavily influenced by Western imperialism, the establishment of such an organisation can be interpreted to represent a conscious progression in humanity's attempts to better ourselves morally.[680] It signified a global consensus that war was morally wrong and steps should be taken to avoid it. Similar developments such as the Geneva conventions (1864, 1906, 1929 and 1949) and the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons (1970) can be taken as further evidence that humanity's moral conscience is developing. Undoubtedly, there are political issues, ambiguities, and nuances that exist pertaining to such treaties, but these are far beyond the scope of this thesis. I merely seek to

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[677] Ibid., p. 212
[678] Ibid., p. 212
[679] Preamble to the Charter of the United Nations, http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/ accessed 18th Dec. 2013
[680] Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2003) p. 415 [Originally published 1980]

use these examples as legitimate evidence of moral progression, despite their imperfections or multifaceted motivations.

Further evidence can be taken from the decline in prejudicial treatment of people based on "race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status", to use the terminology of the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights.[681] Although of course, such declarations are not always honoured, the establishment of such a charter can be taken as further evidence of moral progress; a collective consensus on moral issues. In the last century, we have seen the enactment of civil rights in the United States in 1964 and the end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 which were steps towards curtailing discrimination based on race. In my own country, Ireland, we have seen legal rights extended to curtail discrimination against women. For example, women were not permitted to maintain an employed position in the Irish public service after they were married until 1973, nor had they any legal rights to a family home once married until 1976, even if they were the sole income provider. Similar developments are evident with respect to discrimination based on sexual orientation; to again use Ireland as an example, homosexuality was decriminalised in 1993. Again, whilst these developments may be vulnerable to criticism from a variety of standpoints, I argue that they signal significant "rapid transformations in moral behaviour" to re-use Appiah's definition of a moral revolution. They represent collective statements against various forms of discrimination. As Chomsky suggests, certain moral issues such as slavery and feminism have essentially been solved – not in the sense that there is no slavery or subjugation of women in the modern world, but in the sense that a moral consensus has been reached with regard to these issues.[682]

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[681] Article II, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights http://www.un.org/en/documents/udhr/index.shtml#a2 accessed 18th Dec. 2013

[682] Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power*, p. 356

To further the argument that morality is progressing, the role that recent technological developments may have on moral progression must also be acknowledged. If we accept that moral progression stems from a widening of our circle of moral relevance, then the exponential growth in technological developments such as the internet and mass media could be playing a powerful role. The advances in global communications have led to a metaphorical shrinking of our global village – geographical boundaries no longer prevent communication between diverse cultures. As a result of globalisation, we are becoming more familiar with other cultures, and thus, more inclined to see each other as morally relevant. Moreover, the fact that moral atrocities can be communicated instantly and globally brings about a further moral awakening. A prominent example is the role of social networks in inciting the Egyptian revolution in 2010.[683] Technological developments may be interpreted in this way as promulgating the expansion of our moral circle. Advances, particularly in communications, may be a serious contributory factor in the increasing number of moral revolutions in the last number of decades since the development of mass media; the extent of this would require a more full investigation of this point, which would be beyond the scope of this thesis, though may be a fruitful question for future research.

Appiah, who takes as examples the ceasing of practices such as duelling, foot-binding, slavery and honour killings to indicate moral progression, feels that such progression is driven by what he terms ‘honour’.[684] Appiah’s use of the term ‘honour’ may be problematic, given that honour may also be associated with pride, and in some senses consequently, with practices he has already deemed immoral (his examples of duelling and honour killings are based on a certain understanding of honour). Appiah however, equates his understanding of honour with Hegel’s notion of *Anerkennung*, or in English, ‘recognition’. Hegel postulated that an unequal relationship, such as that between a lord and

[683] Jose Antonio Vargas, ‘Spring Awakening: How an Egyptian Revolution Began on Facebook’, *The New York Times,* 17th Feb. 2012

[684] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honour Code*, p. xii

bondsman, prevents self-recognition in both parties. Self-recognition for Hegel is only possible in relation to an 'other' – it is the recognition of an 'other' as a self-conscious being. If this recognition is achieved, then the inequality of the master-slave relationship will be overcome.[685] This concept of recognising others or acknowledging their 'honour' drives moral progress. As Appiah explains, a distinctive feature of the last few centuries has been a "growing appreciation of the obligations each of us has to other people."[686] Chomsky also agrees upon historical reflection, "Over history, there's been a real widening of the moral realm. I think – a recognition of broader and broader domains of individuals who are regarded as moral agents, meaning having rights."[687]

Darwin put forth similar sentiments, though again, his links between moral development and evolutionary theory were more implicit than those argued for in this thesis. He echoes Lecky in his description of the widening of who becomes encompassed as morally relevant:

> As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races. If, indeed, such men are separated from him by great differences in appearance or habits, experience unfortunately shews us how long it is, before we look at them as our fellow-creatures.[688]

Although Darwin acknowledges this moral expansion, he also alludes to the fact that our moral sentiments are far stronger for our closer relatives, which would be consistent with the theories of sociobiology.[689] Therefore, I suggest that although human conscious morality has

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[685] G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) pp. 111-119 [Originally published 1807]
[686] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honour Code*, p. xiv
[687] Noam Chomsky, *Understanding Power*, p. 356
[688] Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, pp. 78-79
[689] Ibid., pp. 68-69

significantly developed from its biological roots, ultimately, the expansion of our circle of morally relevant others is a continuation of the expansion of 'moral' relevance in sociobiological theory.

This expansion of moral relevance, I argue, can be understood as a continuation of the expansion of beneficiaries of altruistic behaviour from genes to kin and so on through sociobiology – though of course, continually bearing in mind that such altruistic behaviour is consequential and not normative. The issue of whether this expansion of moral relevance is teleological then becomes apparent. This complex issue was discussed in wider terms in Chapters Three and Four, where I argued that there does not seem to be an *a priori* teleology in the evolutionary process. With respect to moral evolution, the same is argued to be true, given that the process itself is decidedly non-teleological. Philosophers such as Michael Ruse have argued that even though teleological language is beneficial for our understanding of biology, it is important that we acknowledge that such teleology is retrospectively attributed.[690] Similarly, teleological descriptions of evolutionary ethics can only be validly discussed retrospectively. The absence of a discernable teleology in evolution does not, however, preclude notions such as development and progress. Consequently, it is maintained that the development or progress in evolutionary ethics, which was *a priori* non-teleological, continues today, and has become more expedient in recent centuries with the perennial expansion of moral relevance.

In addition, evolutionary theory may also exacerbate this moral expansion given that our knowledge of evolutionary theory indicates our close genetic relationship with other animals, which may be taken as support for extending our moral circle to include other animals. Singer addresses this question by suggesting that our genetic relationship to other animals as made known through evolutionary theory makes it "as arbitrary to restrict the

[690] Michael Ruse, *Darwin and Design: Does Evolution Have a Purpose?* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003) p. 269

principle of equal consideration to interests of our own species as it would be to restrict it to our own race."[691] The potential for drawing ethical conclusions from evolutionary theory is not the central issue here; I merely seek to argue that the expansion of our moral circle is a development from the original, non-conscious, non-teleological expansion of 'moral' relevance evident through sociobiology theory – though evolutionary theory may also offer us reason to promulgate this moral expansion. This gives us reason to infer an optimistic worldview. The proposition that morality is continually progressing then, gives further support to a hopeful theology. At this point, a more specifically theological appropriation of moral progress will be discussed.

5.5 A Christian Interpretation of Moral Evolution

Throughout this thesis, a framework for understanding ethics has been sketched; I argue, a framework that, having acknowledged scientific advances and evolutionary theory, is more enriched and more coherent than the traditionally dominant frameworks of classical theology such Augustine's version of the fall/original sin – though this is of course not to understate the significant contribution to our understanding made by the Augustinian vision, as discussed in Chapter One. In a way that is consistent with theology and science, a representation of ethics has been presented from the origins of ethics to current moral progression. As this pertains to the central argument of this thesis, how evolutionary ethics can contribute to a hopeful theology, two distinct facets of hope can be discerned. Firstly, the fact that goodness and freedom emerged out of a purely material world offers a glimmer of hope in what might otherwise be considered a nihilistic, amoral universe of inevitability. Secondly, it is suggested that morality is in a process of development, from its origins as discussed in sociobiological theory to the current widening of our circle of moral relevance

[691] Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle*, p. 120

which, I have argued, is in general, progressing significantly in recent human history. This view will now be incorporated into a Christian perspective and culminate with three theological conclusions; firstly, from a Christian perspective this evolutionary view on ethics gives us a teleological axiology. Secondly, it is an axiology that places emphasis on our present moral obligations, and thirdly, it suggests that we are making progress towards the moral *telos*.

The developmental vision of ethics under discussion fits neatly with theological representations appreciative of the evolutionary nature of the world such as the theological vision espoused in Chapter Three. However, comparative resemblance will not suffice for a full theological reading of evolutionary ethics. To further demonstrate how Christian ethics could be synthesised with this evolutionary approach, it is argued that Christian ethics may offer a *telos*; an end, purpose or goal. This goal, I suggest, is the Christian notion of *agape*, which I have already signified in Chapter Two as a key feature of my understanding of Christian ethics. The concept of *agape* or indiscriminate neighbourly love may be considered as the ultimate expansion of our morally relevant circle (however, and only for the sake of focus, I will not specifically address the question of whether animals should be considered morally relevant – I leave this question for future ethical research).

An expansion of the circle of moral relevance to include even one's enemies is, as discussed in Chapter Two, a distinguishing factor of Christian ethics. The expansion of who we consider morally relevant can be identified as a key feature of the ethical thought of Jesus. As Hans Küng observes, the inclusion of enemies in our circle of moral relevance sets Jesus' ethical thinking apart from previous ethical systems, "It is typical of Jesus not to recognise the ingrained frontier and estrangement between those of one's own group and those outside it."[692] Among the numerous biblical instances where this theme in Christian

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[692] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, pp. 258-259

thought is conveyed, two distinct passages can be taken as examples; the Sermon on the Mount and the parable of the Good Samaritan – though biblical scholar John Piper in his study of Jesus' love commandment indicates several alternative pertinent texts.[693] At the Sermon on the mount, Jesus explicates his vision for an indiscriminate love, and an inclusion of enemies into our moral conscience, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:43-44).

Similarly, the inclusion of 'others' in our moral circle who would have previously been excluded is evident in the act of the Samaritan; an act of kindness towards a socio-religious 'other' (Luke 10:30-37). In this parable, not only is the inclusion of others as morally relevant apparent, but it is the traditional enemy that provides the example to be followed, As Küng again explains, "... it sets up as an example, not – as Jesus' hearers might have expected – the Jewish layman, but the hated Samaritan, the national enemy, the half-breed and heritic. Jews and Samaritans cursed each other publically in religious services and would not accept assistance from one another."[694] The call of *agape* transcends social and religious differences and recognises the other not only as morally relevant, but as an exemplar of righteousness. This is a Christian notion that, as theologian Ronald Green argues, envisages acts of compassion beyond the bounds of one's community – broadening the circle of moral relevance.[695] These two passages (the Sermon on the Mount and the Good Samaritan) can therefore be taken as exemplars of Christian *agape*; an unconditional love of distant others, even one's enemies.

It is suggested then, that Jesus' attempts to widen the moral circle to be inclusive of enemies and more distant others could be taken as a precursor to the visions presented by

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[693] John Piper, *Love Your Enemies: Jesus' Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Paraenesis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) pp. 4-5

[694] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, p. 260

[695] Ronald Green, 'Christian Ethics: A Jewish Perspective', Robin Gill ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) p. 142

Lecky, Darwin and others noted in the previous section. Furthermore, on the Christian view, such an expansion is not merely developmental, but explicitly teleological. With respect to this issue, Küng makes an interesting observation about Jesus' motives for expanding the circle; his motives are a perfect imitation of God.[696] If this theological point is acknowledged, and as I argued in section 3.4 that values reflect the divine/offer a glimmer of depth, then a decidedly theological and teleological addendum can be incorporated into the evolutionary view of ethics. Altruistic behaviour emerged from a non-teleological process, but if conscious human values are taken to carry theological connotations, i.e. reflect divine values, then human moral evolution can be considered teleological; it is widening to a point of ultimacy which seeks to, as Küng states, imitate God. Jesus' ethical vision of the inclusion of morally relevant others can be taken as an indicator of this teleology.

Notwithstanding this argument, I do not suggest that the now teleological expansion of moral relevance is exclusively Christian; other traditions may exhibit similar or identical goals. Here is where I depart from a number of other contemporary scholars' treatments of theological readings of evolutionary ethics such as Neil Messer and Sarah Coakley; I take the Christian idea of indiscriminate love of enemies as the epitome of expanding the circle of moral relevance, rather than the explicitly theological aspects of Christology such as salvation.[697] The developmental understanding of ethics, which stems from an appreciation of evolutionary understandings of ethics is also reminiscent of other Christian ethical frameworks in important respects; the teleological widening of the circle of

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[696] Hans Küng, *On Being a Christian*, p. 260
[697] Neil Messer, *Selfish Genes and Christian Ethics*, pp. 211-215; see also, Sarah Coakley, 'Teleology Reviewed', pp. 19-20. Note that on this point, my position would be closer to Coakley's than Messer's, given that she stresses it is the Christian example of moral living that is supernormal – though again, she draws more direct theological conclusions by stating that such morality is inexplicable without reference to the divine, whereas I suggest that such supernormal morality is reflective of the divine. I consider the evolution of altruism as depicted in sociobiology coupled with human consciousness sufficient for explaining all moral behaviour; the ultimate origin of moral sentiments can be accounted for by sociobiological theory, whilst individual moral actions can be accounted for by human free thought.

moral relevance could be seen to echo Aquinas' notion of the divine law as an end.[698] Yet Aquinas believed that this was an end for all things, where I argue that an "imitation of the divine" through moral conduct can only truly be considered as an end in relation to human consciousness; our understanding of the evolutionary process and a naturalistic ontology suggests a non-teleological world. As I have stressed, it is the fact that goodness and teleological moral conduct emerged from the amoral, material world which gives it its due significance; it offers a glimmer of hope.

The Christian conscious expansion of the circle of moral relevance is thus interpreted as a further expansion of altruistic behaviour which sociobiological theory posits as the origin of morality. The fact that the Christian ethical programme as I understand it is conscious, with *agape* as its epitome, is a significant distinction between it and sociobiology. However, with the naturalistic ontology, there is no ontological difference between the two expansions. Thus, envisioning Christian ethics in this way is appreciative of evolutionary ethics, and ultimately I argue, emerges enriched; Christian ethics can envisage on overarching metaethic inclusive of the natural origins of morality. A full appreciation of evolutionary ethics and its naturalistic ontological context not only allows for a normative Christian ethics to be developed on the basis of neighbourly love, but actually contributes to it. Acknowledging the natural origins of the expanding moral circle, from genes to groups to individuals etc., though of course originally only by proxy of natural selection, may provide substantial motives to continue such an expansion consciously – again, this reiterates the similarities with the dialectical vision of natural law; a conscious reflection upon natural tendencies. We can evidence a historical, evolutionary tendency of an expanding moral circle, offering us a hopeful theology from a material worldview.

[698] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: I-II,* 91.2

In addition, as it was argued in section 3.6, whilst the developmental aspects of eschatological theologies (those of Teilhard, Haught and others) are appropriate interpretations in light of evolutionary theory, they may relegate our present responsibilities giving way to a promissory vision, which whilst hopeful, is too distant. Eschatological theology places the *telos* of God at the Omega. Yet our understandings of cosmological time indicate that this would seriously dilute our present responsibilities, given that the cosmological time-span is exponentially greater than that of our lives, or even of human history. However, the synthesis of Christian ethics and evolutionary ethics I have argued for above posits a very present *telos*. It is a *telos* that, in theory, is within the grasp of our lifetime – indeed, it was/is within the grasp of any human generation – though this is not to suggest that it will actually be realised; time will tell. It is a *telos* that is a part of a metaphysical framework for ethics, but a metaphysical framework that is not intangible; a realisable *telos*. The fact such a *telos* is actually within reach gives us further reason for a hopeful theology, perhaps more hopeful than the theologies of eschatology and futurity evident in Haught, Pannenberg, Rahner and others discussed in section 3.4.

Having reflected upon evolutionary ethics, a theological axiology can be developed; one that incorporates both Christian ethics and evolutionary theory. Three discernable features of this axiology emerge: Firstly, it is an axiology that provides us with a goal. This goal, moreover, is not cosmological in time scale or metaphysically eschatological, but inherently temporal. It is an immanent *telos*, in line with a hermeneutical emphasis on the earthliness of the Christian prayer, "*On Earth* as it is in Heaven" (Matt. 6:10) – though this hermeneutical emphasis on earthliness may be selective. An emphasis on earthliness does not contradict the emphasis on the transcendent, atemporal God espoused in the previous chapter, but rather focuses on the imitation or reflection of God – which could be understood as the Kingdom of God. The understanding of Christian ethics with a goal of

promulgating the expanding moral circle is presented in one sense, as a part of a metaphysical naturalistic framework. However, it is also presented dialectically from a theological perspective as an immanent coming of the Kingdom of God. God is understood as ontologically transcendent though immanently reflected in human values.

The second feature of this axiology is that it places serious emphasis on our present responsibilities. It is not complacent in awaiting a metaphysical, eschatological Kingdom of God at the Omega, but seeks to establish a Kingdom of God in the present. It seeks to continue the expansion of morally relevant others that I have argued is perennially increasing with general consensuses being reached with regard to war and to eliminating discrimination based on race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and so on; in other words, encompassing more peoples as morally relevant. The pinnacle of this expansion, I have suggested, is the Christian understanding of *agape*, though the question remains over whether we will reach this pinnacle. Nevertheless, it is an earthly pinnacle and a pinnacle that we are responsible for attaining. A third feature is, as argued above, that we are progressing towards this *telos*. Although there is undoubted misery in the world and morally repugnant acts are prevalent, when speaking in general terms, we do seem to be making identifiable positive progress. We have reason to infer an optimistic reading of this axiology given that we are coming closer to achieving the *telos* of Christian *agape*.

5.6 Conclusion

The scientific picture of the world, incomplete as it may be, offers then an ontological perspective which, I argue, can be understood to give hope. In a material and contingent universe, the moral evolved from the amoral; mindless matter became self-reflective, and the goalless process of natural selection produced altruism and eventually, the notion of *agape*. This evolution of values from the valueless offers, I argue, hope; it allows one to

proffer an overarching hopeful metaphysic, rather than viewing the world as nihilistic. In order to illustrate how it can be maintained that our actions are significantly free as to have moral worth, yet also that the world is purely physical, it was suggested in section 5.1 that freedom emerges from the complexities of the physical brain. This model of free will, it was argued, is sufficient for actions to have moral worth. Section 5.2 then suggested how this evolution of moral freedom may be understood to give hope. A theological interpretation of this hopeful understanding of the evolution of morality and freedom was then discussed in section 5.3, reiterating how values are understood in this context to be indicative of depth.

It was then outlined in section 5.4, how a developmental vision of morality can be taken from our understanding of sociobiology, which sees the further development of morality in humankind as a continuation of the development of altruistic behaviour in other forms of life. It was argued that, in general, moral progress can be evidenced among humankind in more recent times, from various international treaties to moral consensuses being reached with regard to various modes of discrimination. This moral progress can be used to further contribute to a hopeful worldview. This hopeful understanding of moral progress was then appropriated from a Christian theological perspective in section 5.5, arguing that the Christian concept of *agape* can be considered as the *telos* of our moral development. It was argued that humanity is progressing towards this moral pinnacle that is potentially achievable in the present. Ultimately, then, a framework for understanding ethics can be proffered which demonstrates how evolutionary understandings of ethics can enrich Christian visions of ethics and provide a distinctively present hope.