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Reconstructing a Hopeful Theology in the Context of Evolutionary Ethics

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CONCLUSION

In this thesis, a proposal was set forth for a hopeful theological perspective on the nature of ethics as understood within the scheme of evolutionary theory. It was contended that evolutionary theory should be treated as a substantive resource concerning the nature of ethics. This theological framework for envisioning good and evil was presented in line with particular presuppositions of Christian ethics; namely, that the epitome of morality lies with the unqualified extension of beneficence to all others, inclusive of one's enemies and in particular the most vulnerable. Retrospectively, we can portray the evolution of morality as developmental, from amorality to its epitome. However, it is only since the emergence of human consciousness and free will that morality can truly be considered teleological and be meaningfully differentiated from evolutionarily functional behaviour. An overarching vision was put forth which views altruistic behaviour as emerging from its origins as selectively beneficial to the point where human consciousness eventually advocates an unqualified expansion of moral relevance, explicated in this context in the Christian ideal of *agape* and neighbourly love.

Evolutionary theory offers us the best principles available to us to understand life, human life being one strand amongst hundreds of millions to have ever existed. The significance of human life is arguable; is it a trivial detail that through human life, the mindless matter of the universe has become mindful, or is it truly indicative of a wider purpose? In either case, what is clear is that we cannot be excised from the narrative of life. We are an element of it. The universality of our religious and moral experience are important facets of human life, and whilst these require higher-level analysis, it would be

negligent to ignore the perspectives offered by evolutionary theory; the best framework available to us for understanding life.

The pre-scientific reflections on our moral nature which constructed the traditional theological narratives have great insight – for example original sin, which parallels the natural competitiveness which lingers as a result of our evolutionary heritage. Yet these reflections need to adapt and take note of new reflections, particularly those which come with the strength of scientific verifiability. Although moral behaviour is highly sensitive to psychological motives and circumstances, to undervalue the influence of our biological history would significantly diminish the comprehensiveness of any analysis of human nature, be it philosophical, sociological or indeed in this case, theological. Anselm defined theology as ‘faith seeking understanding’ and it is felt that based on its predictive successes and experimental strength, the natural sciences offer us the clearest way to understand the natural world, including ourselves.

The scientific picture of the world presents the universe as a vast expanse of collocating atoms which *a priori* has no discernable goal or purpose in and of itself. Within this context too, the prevailing view of evolutionary theory can be summated in Monod’s expression of ‘chance and necessity’. Humanity has undoubtedly ascribed significant meaning to itself, though our place on the cosmic stage in relation to the vastness of the spatial and temporal scales made known through the natural sciences can seem disconcerting, and can lead to the interpretation of nihilism. However, the alternative may be even more disconcerting; a world that has a distinctive plan may lead one to believe that instances of evil are then the consequence and thus responsibility of a divine planner. It was argued against these interpretations that although the world is indeed an impenetrable causal web, it is not desolate or forsaken; goodness has emerged, through whatever improbability, and this it is argued, is indicative of depth, profundity and reflective of the divine. From the

material amoral universe of collocating atoms came the phenomena of the good. The incredibility of this facet of the universe offers us a glimmer of hope. In viewing the Christian vision of *agape* as the pinnacle of a moral development that has its origins in evolutionarily beneficial altruism, one can envisage a hopeful overarching view of ethics whilst being true to the picture of the world presented by the natural sciences.

Developing a theological worldview in conjunction with what we learn from naturalistic perspectives on ethics also provides a sense of immanence absent from the traditional U-profiled theological narratives of a paradisiacal past to be restored in an eschatological future. The viability of such narratives is deeply problematic in light of evolutionary theory in any case, but even still, the proposed naturalistic framework places emphasis on the achievability of the moral epoch in the present. It was optimistically inferred from an admittedly general overview of human moral history that we can be evidenced to be progressing morally; on the whole, equality and moral relevance is more prevalent now than in previous ages. Of course such a progression could not be systematic; indeed evolutionary theory itself differs from macro-physics in this regard – it operates largely through tendencies rather than inalienable laws. Notwithstanding, an expansion of the circle of morally relevant others, allegorically illustrated in the Christian tradition through the parable of the Good Samaritan, can be roughly traced.

In the first chapter of this work the departure point for the argument was explicated; the acknowledgement that theological understandings of the nature of ethics have been traditionally or classically framed in a certain way; namely that goodness was directly attributed to God and instilled in creation. The problem of the existence of evil thus required a theodicy. Addressing this quandary led to a framework for understanding good and evil depicted in the theological narrative as a paradise gone awry as a result of human fault, followed by a long period of suffering-as-punishment to be eventually redeemed.

However, the viability of such frameworks is precarious in light of the dynamic nature of evolution. Evolutionary theory challenges central facets of the classical vision, perhaps most saliently in terms of its postulation of a preordained good. Holding a vision of the nature of ethics that is at variance with our increasing comprehension of the natural world was argued to be untenable. Therefore, the need for a re-imagined metaethic was signalled in Chapter One.

Having acknowledged that evolutionary theory necessitates a reframing of theological metaethics, the question of the compatibility of evolutionary ethics and Christian ethics was considered in the second chapter. A particular understanding of what evolutionary ethics and Christian ethics were understood to entail was presented, followed by an analysis of potential conflicts between the two systems with regard to three central facets of Christian ethics; moral freedom, *agape* and neighbourly love, and natural law. It was argued that on my understanding of these two systems, conflict does not arise. Evolutionary ethics provides a scheme for understanding morality based on the principles of competition in natural selection which does not supersede Christian ethics but as illustrated later in this work, frames and enriches it. A normative Christian ethical system can coexist with an evolutionary understanding of the nature of ethics itself.

In order to provide a theological outlook that shifts from a pre-established good as in the traditional framework for good and evil, it was suggested in Chapter Three that aspects of contemporary theological approaches be reflected upon and refined. The developmental aspect of certain approaches to theology were incorporated given that it reflects the evolutionary nature of the world, however, it was argued that the explicitly teleological aspects of eschatological theologies are problematic in light of evolutionary theory. In addition, a developmental approach to theological metaethics as evident in Hick's representation of Irenaeus was noted as a partial response to the theodicy question which

was left unaddressed after the classical expiatory theodicy was discredited. Whilst Hick presented an overarching approach to theodicy, I argued that such an approach was only sufficient with regard to moral evil. Moreover, rather than postulating a future perfection to come (in an eschaton or afterlife), it was argued that evolutionary ethics provides a more immanent and present understanding of our moral responsibilities.

The need to address the problem of natural evil was the starting point for the fourth chapter, though it also sought to establish an ontology implied by the natural sciences and consider how this ontology might fit within a wider theological view. It was argued that the image of the world presented by the natural sciences is material and naturalistic; naturalism in this context was presented as an ontology that precluded any mode of divine interaction with the world, acknowledging that certain models of divine interaction could themselves be considered naturalistic. Arguments for such a view were premised on the predictive successes and coherence of science. Furthermore, the implications of teleological perspectives and divine interactions for the problem of evil were also considered and taken as further theological reasons to envisage an ontology preclusive of divine interaction. Whilst this perspective could be interpreted as inimical to religious outlooks, it was argued that a naturalistic ontology can be theologically appropriated apropos the themes of divine kenosis, autonomy and atemporality. Envisioning the world in this way, however, presents a distinct problem for the theological presuppositions of a God of values – namely, the interpretation of nihilism.

The culmination of this thesis was reached in Chapter Five, where it was suggested that a turn to a compatibilist model of free will can reconcile the materialism of a naturalistic ontology with the necessary prerequisite of morality; freedom. It was then argued that the distinctly evitable emergence of the moral from the amoral offers a glimmer of hope in a world that would otherwise be a valueless manifestation of interacting atoms. In addition, it

was argued that a vision of morality which noted the human conscious expression of morality as an additional development within the broader process of evolutionary ethics provides an overarching perspective on the nature of ethics. It is in this perspective that we can see hope, meaning and a reflection of the divine. It was also tentatively but evidentially argued that in general, there is a discernable progression within human morality; there is a more prevalent cohesion among humanity pertaining to moral relevance than in previous ages. This provides further hope from the evolutionary understanding of moral development. Finally, the Christian notion of indiscriminate neighbourly love was suggested as the *telos* for this moral development, providing a hopeful outlook that stresses the achievability of the Christian moral vision as well as our responsibilities in realising this vision.

Although this thesis has presented a new approach to envisioning theological metaethics, it is not suggested that this is the last word. I have advocated an overarching theological view with respect to ethics, though there is further discussion needed on the intricacies of this picture. I suspect that research will be needed to investigate or propose what actually constitutes the realisation of the Christian moral vision, given the difficulties societies have in establishing moral precepts amenable to all people. Moreover, whilst I have argued that the Christian notion of *agape* is the *telos* of moral development, this idea is clearly open to hermeneutical reflection; how broad is the Christian commandment of neighbourly love? Are primates, or even other mammals to be included? Framing ethics as a development from its naturalistic context rather than within the narrative of a fall may also have implications for the sources of moral authority; if ethics emerges as a reasoned reflection upon our nature, then what conclusions can be drawn with regard to scripture, tradition, fact/value distinctions, and other premises. Undoubtedly too, future scientific advances will present unforeseen moral dilemmas; for example, by envisioning mental

events as material, then what ethical rights would be afforded to potential artificial intelligences? These are fascinating potential issues that will require further reflection.

The theological framework advanced in this thesis allows one to envisage Christian ethics in a way that maintains the centrality of Christian ethics, understood here as *agape*, yet acknowledges the conceptual setting understood through the natural sciences as naturalistic and material. In acknowledging the naturalistic context/nature of ethics, it forces us to reflect on our responsibilities towards its development; ethics were not instilled from on high through a divine covenant but ultimately the result of the interplay between our reason and nature. The view espoused does not locate the *summum bonum* of goodness in an eschatological future or lost past, but rather as something to be strived for in the present. It is not a view resigned to nihilism or futility but advocates the establishment of an earthly kingdom which reflects divine values. It allows an ultimately hopeful vision which recognises the theological presuppositions of a God of values whilst being dialectically mindful of insights of the natural sciences. In humanity, we see a transition from altruism as evolutionary functional behaviour to a genuine morality. Therefore, we can provide a hopeful and enriched envisioning of the Christian moral challenge as a conscious extension of the unconscious natural development of goodness.