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EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS: DOGMA OR HERESY?

Next to the revelations of Christ himself, it was alleged in the introduction to a life sciences textbook, there is no better means than the study of nature to awaken religious feeling.¹ This agenda of natural theology was inherited by Darwinism and led to our religion of nature.

The agenda of natural theology in England and Germany in the 19th century was to strive to accelerate God's efforts by discovering, in the workings of nature, the intent of God. Professor [Louis Agassiz](#) of Harvard, for instance, discovered that God had assigned different capabilities to the different races so that it was natural and right, indeed it was God's Will, that black people, who are naturally slaves, and white people, who are naturally masters, should enter into a symbiotic slave/slavemaster relationship one with the other, and help one another – by service, on the one side, and mastery, on the other. Now the agenda of sociobiology in America in the 20th century is to see the intent of nature in the workings of society, so humans can strive to accelerate progress toward nature's future. The big difference seems to be that it is no longer the convention to capitalize the name of the entity one worships (also, human slavery is no longer among the popular causes). This substitution of "nature" for "God" may seem to make a lot of difference, but it is to be noticed that in each case we have an elite telling us what to do to make the world safe. 20th-century sociobiology may appear to be a repudiation of 19th-century natural theology, but it is a continuation. There is a straightforward historical development via evolutionism. Until a spiritual crisis in 1981, I (Austin Meredith) was determined that the meaning of life was to be discovered by understanding how the natural led to the ethical. From my earliest introduction to "the theory of evolution" in High School, I became committed to the idea that I ought to struggle, with as much spirit and determination as I could muster, for the

1. K.A. Schönke, *NATURGESCHICHTE*, 2d Edition, Berlin 1866, pages 4-5.

perpetuation of my family's biological heritage. I considered that evolutionary theory demonstrated that to fail to struggle with maximal intensity for such perpetuation amounted to becoming confused or being deceived, and amounted to losing in the ruthless contest for life more abundant. "Seize the future," I told myself, "before someone else takes everything of value from you." How did I arrive at such an attitude?

What happened to me was that, one day in 1953, our sciences teacher, Mr. Oliver, told us that we were being given class time to read the next chapter in the biology textbook but that we were not required to read that chapter. We could study any other textbook until the class bell rang. There would be no questions "from this chapter" on the final exam. We were warned that the teacher would not respond to "any question on this topic." Such a live-and-let-live attitude, on the part of a public school teacher, was entirely unprecedented in my educational experience, so this difficult chapter received my undivided attention. It was as if the chapter had been subtitled "How to Make Your Very Own Atom Bomb."

I took these new facts to my pastor, Reverend Nangle, at the South Side Evangelical United Brethren Church, and learned God was testing my faith. If I could look at fossils in the rocks, and know that God put the fossils there when He created the universe, and grasp that He put them there so I would see them and doubt, then I had been preordained as one of the elect and would go to Heaven when I died. On the other hand, I might harden my heart to the truth of God's word, in which case, like the heathen Pharaoh of Egypt, God had preordained my soul to damnation.

The attitude taken by my family was that I had made myself into an atheist. (These were the days in which people were saying "There are no atheists in foxholes," and considering that such comments destroyed the credibility of any doubter.) Years later, therefore, when I needed financial assistance to finish my senior year at the University of Texas, my family wrote that there could be no help for someone who might someday become a teacher of the young, and pervert them.

It has been argued that Charles Darwin did not himself sympathize with the recommended ethical attitude, that to do what comes naturally is to be a good person. Such opinions were in the air prior to Darwin, and prior to the 19th century. Thomas Hobbes provided us, in *LEVIATHAN*, with a similar ethic:

"I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of Power after Power, that ceaseth only in Death."²

But if one presumes to derive this sentiment from the science of biology, or sociobiology, rather than from human political culture, one can pretend that one has discovered a fact of nature rather than a mere fact about human society. And one can say that one must obey, and pretend that one has no real choice.

2. Thomas Hobbes, *WORKS* (ed. W. Mosesworth) Bohn, London 1839, Volume 3, Chapter 11.

Nature will out. One's agenda becomes inevitable. Therefore, as I grew into adulthood, I presumed to derive this sentiment from the science of biology, and succeeded prettily in convincing myself that I had no real choice but to succeed in life, or fail. While I was engaged by this attitudinal framework, perhaps the attitudinal framework of a youngster who had been suckered once too often by his playmates, I imposed four babies on my wife in rapid succession. Then, during labor with the fourth baby, my wife “betrayed me” by asking the obstetrician to tie her tubes. As a young man committed to reassuring myself about my personal worth, I was an unselfconscious elitist. Had one of my babies been born “defective,” or had I suspected its paternity, I might conceivably have tried to free myself of the burden: I was not inclined to allow some cowbird egg to inherit the ultimate future of the planet, and I was not inclined to waste family assets on a less-than-ideal infant that might promptly be replaced by an ideal one. As one would expect, the idea of adoption amused or horrified me. It amused me that some men could be induced to sponsor other men's babies, and it horrified me that infidelity, or even a delivery-room mix-up, might result in my nurturing some other man's future. The important thing was what theoretical population ecologists refer to as “the grandparent test”: having many reproductively-competent offspring surviving at the time of one's own death.

As my children grew, I gave them their marching orders. They were to provide me with as many grandchildren as they could. I felt scant respect for their own desires in the matter. When one of my little boys was molested, I became frantic, and only part of my reaction was due to concern for my son. Part of my reaction, I am sorry to say, had to do with my fears that this experience might make him turn homosexual - thus robbing me of grandchildren.

When I belatedly became aware of our collective ecological peril, I leapt eagerly to the conclusion that the most ruthless action was mandatory, and began to spend full time on the manuscript that would legitimate that agenda. We needed to restrain ourselves so we would not induce an ecospasm. I speculated on various ways in which the necessary worldwide totalitarian rule could be created, a rule by ecologists who would ensure that the human species behaved itself. If this ruler could be me, so much the better for the planet and for me, but if it could not be me (as apparently it could not) there must nevertheless be self-regulation.

I shudder as I reveal these things about my previous self, and as I recollect how singleminded I was within this framework of attitudes - whenever I was able to maintain these attitudes. Many times I weakened, and wished for a gentler world, but to tell the story of my self-doubts would complicate this recounting beyond all intelligibility; yet, as I say, whenever I was able to maintain my ruthlessness, I was in the mainstream of the “naturalistic ethics” tradition in the politics of biological science. When I needed to reinforce my viciousness, I could read another in the long shelflist of ecology books that were being published. At that time I was so far gone that I could

have watched Carl Sagan's *Cosmos* on the tube without being disturbed, and his organ music would have seemed to me to be quite appropriate.

I had this ruthlessness on the very best authority, and it extended even to redefining what could, and what could not, count as "rationality." My Harvard logic professor, Willard Van Orman Quine, commented that "Creatures inveterately wrong in their induction have a pathetic but praiseworthy tendency to die before reproducing their kind,"³ and by "creatures" he meant, primarily, *humans*, and by "creatures inveterately wrong in their induction" he meant, primarily, *inferior humans*. Of course Professor Emeritus Quine was not vicious, he was merely an elitist, it was not that he was without mercy, it was merely that he understood that we have a greater need for excellence than for mercy. Is this not what Harvard is all about? What he delivered there was the standard Malthusian sermon, that we must steel ourselves not to respond with pity when humans get themselves into dreadful straits through misjudgment, because giving aid to individuals can only harm the future of our species when considered as a whole and in the long term. I could ordinarily, except in periods of personal weakness and doubt, understand that I needed to pay primary attention to this longer-term perspective. I tried to bear constantly in mind that toughmindedness was truly more pitiful than pity.

Since my life-crisis I have been sorting out a new set of attitudes. I have been drawn again and again with great fascination to the records of the life of Jesus, and to Lev Tolstoy's interpretation of the sermon on the mount. I have attempted to speak with various life scientists, such as Hardin, Ehrlich, Heller, Wilson, Lumsden, Simpson, Lorenz, Fox, Tiger, Maynard Smith, Salk, Gould, Medawar, Tinbergen, Wynne-Edwards, Mayr, etc. in regard to this agenda to which I was for so long committed. They were (and remain) reluctant to hear about my personal conversion from devoted practitioner into baffled onlooker.

It has been difficult for them to pay attention to my suspicion that my lay fascination with their scientific ethics had largely been due to the impurity of my personal motivations. — So difficult, in fact, that George Gaylord Simpson suggested that my *reformed* thoughts might be those a druggie whose mind had burned out, or a pervert whose thinking had become contaminated by perverse sexuality.

It was not until I was firmly positioned in my new attitude that I recognized what I had been doing with that "passing the grandparent test" goal. How embarrassing to discover that I had been seduced by an only slightly more sophisticated version of "He who has lots of toys when he dies — wins!"

It is strange that, with a religious upbringing, I had never studied the sermon on the mount. My folks were fundamentalists and concentrated on the bloodthirstiest parts of the Old

3. Willard Van Orman Quine, "Natural kinds" in *ONTOLOGICAL RELATIVITY AND OTHER ESSAYS*, Columbia UP, NY 1969, page 126.

Testament, on the avenging Christ of the book of Revelation, on the misogynist letters of Paul, on the gnostic gospel of John. Their attitude, and my attitude, was that when Jesus said "resist not evil" he must have been joking, for we were obligated to resist evil with every breath in our bodies. We were not only fundamentalist (Anti-Catholic, Anti-Semitic, etc.) but also conservative (Indiana Republican). We knew the truth of what William F. Buckley, Jr. termed "the lifestyle we are prepared to defend with a nuclear arsenal":

There is nothing in the teaching of the Bible that enjoins the Christian to desist from defending himself and his family and his hearth from the tyrant. A failure to grasp this point is at least incidentally disqualifying to the discharge of episcopal [that is, having to do with church office] duties.⁴

We Indiana farm folk knew, and joked about, the fact that the only piece of earth inherited by the meek is the three foot by six foot plot in which we are buried. Therefore it had not seemed too strange to me, when the Hobbesian environmentalist philosopher Michael Ruse sneered that the sermon on the mount means "you are supposed to be indifferently nice to everybody, no matter what the cost." Ruse commented, and I agreed, that a person making a good wage, who kept his/her family "virtually at the point of poverty" in order to help starving strangers in Africa, must be a "moral monster, intent on buying his/her way into the Kingdom of Heaven, at the expense of others." Before my personal life-crisis I had been doing my best to be the kind of moral monster who supports his own over all, whenever I could, as much as I could, and I did my best not to be the kind of moral monster who allows himself to be influenced by short-sighted, selfish, irrational feelings of concern for others.

I can't now determine whether my crisis was more "logical" or more "psychological," but I can report that my crisis came as I recognized that my survival-orientation was essentially self-defeating, that it is less true that **nothing succeeds like success** and more true that **nothing fails like success**. When it belatedly penetrated my skull that (as mentioned by Socrates of Athens) it is simply a **mistake** to think that people ought to spend their time "weighing up the prospects of life and death." Now I am even able to admit that, since any action that will improve the chances of bare survival can be justified in any situation in which there is the slightest opportunity of nonsurvival, there must be something even **procedurally** incorrect with my attempt to use the primacy of survival as my ethical guide. I am to the point at which I am wasting my time and substance in silent meeting with Quakers, seeking to acquire what they may know and I not know, and would consider adopting a disadvantaged child were I able to do so and still meet my existing responsibilities to my own four.

So much change there has been, my head is in a spin. How is it

4. William F. Buckley, Jr., "Analyzing Operation Hunthausen," syndicated newspaper column of November 15, 1986.

possible for there to be such different attitudes, in one person in one lifetime?

My "Devolution" paper was written just after my crisis. Professor Emeritus Garrett Hardin helped get it past the peer-review censors and into a leading scientific journal, and then Professor Paul Ehrlich helped it find a popular audience by fronting me to a former student of his who edited a "new wave" magazine,⁵ before these two scientists became noncommunicative. My topic was the inherently self-defeating nature of our struggle for survival. Professor Ernst Mayr commented that he failed to see what was so successful about success-extinction. I tried to tease out the theoretical implications of taking seriously the fact that extinction is as much a part of the evolutionary process as is continued survival. Professor Heller commented that he did not know what this was, but he knew what it was not - it was not biology.

I find that, since 1981, my thinking has not been able to change much in spite of constant condemnation and advice. I seem to be stuck on elaborating this same idea, that (as Robinson Jeffers put it) "powers increase and power perishes." In ethics I seem to be fixated on the idea that, as each day has excitement enough of its own, we need not preoccupy ourselves with our future but instead should be striving to love even our enemies and should be refraining from doing evil even with the agenda of resisting evil.

While my spouse was a graduate fellow at the Pembroke Center at Brown, Donna Haraway, a biologist from the University of California at Santa Cruz, came and spoke on the possibility of using a "cyborg" metaphor in feminist thinking. What sticks in my mind is not the substance of her topic, but a side remark she made about public education. Her idea was, unapologetically and quite literally, that "teaching modern Christian creationism should be fought as a form of child abuse."⁶ It occurred to me that I, of all people, should be the person who would agree with her about the evil of creationist teaching, after the way my family molested my mind while I was a schoolchild, and that nevertheless I was shocked at her words and at her attitude. It was not merely that, because one of my own children had been sexually molested, I needed to take her comment about child abuse as an unnecessary cheapening of the concept of child abuse. No. Rather, it has to do with why I have titled this piece "Evolutionary Ethics: Dogma or Heresy?" If I were given a soap box and could offer one maxim to educators, it would be:

"Confuse 'em as much as you can, to get 'em started thinking for themselves at the earliest point."

Here we have the creationists saying they don't want evolutionism taught to their kids, as my folks said in regard

5. *J. theoret. Biol.* 96 (1982):49-65; *CoEvolution Quarterly* 37(Spring 1983):36-44.

6. Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," *Socialist Review* #80 (Volume 15, Number 2), March/April 1985: 65-107.

to me, because it is not True and one should tell children only Truth. And you've got the evolutionists saying they know the scientific truth about not only human history but also human nature, so it is "child abuse" to teach a child about any ethic other than one or another (unspecified conservative or liberal) version of an evolutionary ethic. Biology as a continuation of religion by other means. Life worship. This biologist proclaimed her dogma, and declared her opponent to be a heretic, in precisely the manner in which the "official religious" proclaim their dogmas, declaring scientists like her to be guilty of heresy. An evolutionary ethic is constructed as a scientific dogma because, unless it is perceived as a scientific dogma, it can be seen as merely another Christian heresy, the latest in a long chain of Christian heresies. I am tempted into the assertion that if we really did want to keep religion out of the public school system, we'd have to forbid the teaching of the life sciences - at least until the present situation straightens itself out.

And here I am, in the midst of this, and after seventy-one years of life I find myself unable to admit even such a theoretical point as that the salvation of our entire species would be worth a single unkind act among the thousands of unkind acts we commit every day. I amaze myself. These new attitudes do not spring out of any suspicion that by altruism and kindness we can save ourselves, although I suppose this might slow down (somewhat, temporarily) our blazing progress toward collective self-extermination. In fact I propose no salvation and believe that the sociobiologists are correct about our societal programming: individuals may be capable of deselected themselves by opting out of the struggle to inherit the future, as I seem now out of weariness to be attempting to do, but this can never succeed in dominating human society *en masse* and long term. I am not embracing my present attitudes in order to win, and I suspect Bertolt Brecht was right when he asserted:

"The great plans will come to nothing because of the small plan of the small man to survive."⁷

No, I do not suspect that I have found the way to salvation. Rather, I have simply become frustrated at my own viciousness, and reluctant to be a party to our collective agenda. Instead I find my mind running to David Ferris's

"Seekest thou great things for thyself? seek them not."⁸

Now I find I'd rather lose, than participate in winning this sort of game.

As I listen to the cited theoretical population ecologists attempting to whip people into enthusiastic dedication, I wonder what can be said in opposition to their influence. What, for instance, can be said to expose Garrett Hardin's "Promethean"

7. Bertolt Brecht, *GESAMMELTE WERKE*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt 1967, Volume XIX, page 460.

8. David Ferris, *MEMOIRS*, Philadelphia 1855, pages 49-50.

ethic of elitism and to expose Paul Ehrlich's "ZPG" agenda of colonialism and to expose Edward O. Wilson's "biophilia"-ethic of survivalism? We cannot object that these are merely conservative political attitudes posing as science, for it has been pointed out that it is a mistake to suspect that sociobiology is compatible only with conservative politics. Any new ideology must be offered as an alternative to some established ideology, and the ideology of evolutionism is no exception to this rule. Where the established ideology is self-defined as "conservative," evolutionary ideology is condemned as "liberal," as well as vice versa. Any new ideology must be a disestablishmentarianism, for the established of society always already possess their established ideology. They are not seeking to overthrow themselves and therefore they are not in the market for a replacement ideology. For those on top the name of the game is reaction: they are anything before they are initiatory and they react to other people's initiatives by attempting to stifle these innovations. Adherents of a new ideology must choose whether to protest that they are more establishmentarian than the established groups, as Ernst Haeckel attempted to do, or to wear the mantle of radicalism which is flung over their shoulders. This is true whether the established ideology is a "conservative" ideology, as in Wilhelmine Germany where the state was in league with the state church (so evolutionism in its guise as erotic monism was condemned as liberal and the spectre of the Paris Commune was raised in order to keep Darwinism out of the public school system), or a "liberal" ideology as at present in American scientific circles.

I fail to see an important difference between racism and the human-racist agenda of humanism (that is to say, speciesism), an allegedly liberal undertaking, except that the latter is the former writ large enough for the species. Both agendas are agendas of desperation, and the desperation is fostered in order, in both cases, to legitimate desperate acts. I fail entirely to see how moral errors could be righted by writing them larger: not only do I fail to see how my moral error of favoring my family over all could have been righted by rewriting it as favoring my race over all, but also I fail to see how the moral error of favoring one's race over other races can be righted by rewriting it as favoring one's species over other species. There is, however, reason to believe that a sociobiologist might be able to concur with each of the things I have said in this paragraph. However, I am sorry to report that I still discover the primary linkages of sociobiology to be with the way the Nazis, admittedly a conservative political group, attempted to whip the populace into enthusiastic dedication to collective survival.

Neither natural theologians, nor Nazis, nor sociobiologists have been content with the *imitatio dei* obligation of humans, the obligation to emulate God's magnanimity, forbearance, empathy, and concern for the needy. Rather than *imitate*, they must **correct**. The natural theologians, dissatisfied with God's ways as too dilatory, accelerate God's ways by man's ways. The sociobiologists, dissatisfied with nature's ways as too

dilatory, accelerate genetic evolution by conscious cultural development. God and nature, being too slow, are too cruel. The cardinal principle of both natural theology and sociobiology is that humans know better and must step in to accelerate the process of betterment. Both agendas present the same paradox, a paradox which is not but which might as well be a direct quote from a Nazi poster: being ruthless now results in less cruelty overall. (Here is a question for you, gentle reader, are you capable of recognizing viciousness when the talk is of making an omelet, or are you only capable of recognizing viciousness when the talk is of breaking eggs?) Both agendas, natural theology and sociobiology, amount to legitimations for viciousness, for the imperative of survival is that we must be willing to do **anything**.

We have an unfortunate tendency to allow scientists to puff themselves up into moral philosophers. Time and time again, one or another prominent scientist such as Professor [Louis Agassiz](#) of Harvard or Professor Edward O. Wilson of Harvard will step forward and announce to us "Seriously, I am the Pope of Rome," – and when we hear this, we all bow out heads and tug at our forelocks.

However, Harvard University is not the "Yes-We-Can Vatican." It is merely another high-rent place where people attempt to privilege themselves over others. (This of course would be not only a general accusation but also a personal confession.) Academics have a known tendency to aggrandize their own disciplinary or ideological perspective at the expense of other perspectives and at the expense of other insights. This is natural. It goes with the territory. It is not a problem. However, when we fall sucker to this tendency, that becomes a problem. We should not let these people thus influence us. Edward O. Wilson now, and [Louis Agassiz](#) back in the days of Henry Thoreau, have been guilty of attempting to make of science a natural religion. Like the early Darwinians, Wilson dreams of using the science of biology as the key to open the door to all wisdom. He glides as easily from empirical fact to ethical injunction as Stephen King glides from minor mood to major monster.

The philosophers have long ago given us a mantra to protect us against this: "You cannot derive ought from is!" Only if one were to embrace the maxim of compassionate conservatism "I've got mine and therefore things ought to remain the way they are" can one **logically** transit from "This is the way things are" to "This is the way things ought to be." Nevertheless, endlessly, generation after generation, biologists step forward and make their announcement, "I am going to describe nature to you, and then I am going to explain what is natural to you (what is your human nature), and then I am going to tell you how to survive and what you ought to do in order to fulfil yourself – and since I am going to do this as a scientist, factually, if you know what's good for you you'd better listen and you'd better do as you are told!"

Edward O. Wilson tries to reduce religious faith to biology. He speaks as the high priest of a cult of science and we can

understand why he'd try to do that – it puts him in charge, and who doesn't want to be in charge? What we can't understand is why anyone would listen to him as he tries to pull this one off. Perhaps therefore we can term all these biologist/ethicists "survivalists" because they all believe, like the people up in the hills with assault rifles and chickens, that survival is the overriding concern. Perhaps we can term them "pagans" because their god is always the god of life and of life-success. Perhaps we can term them "extremists" because their counsel is always a counsel of desperation, and because they always work around to legitimating *whatever's* necessary for human survival. (The general definition I would use for the word "extremist" would be similar to what R.M. Hare used for the word "fanatic," on page 105 of his 1963 book FREEDOM AND REASON: someone who has wholeheartedly espoused a moral ideal and supposes that, so long as this is something at which we ought to aim, it is acceptable – if necessary – for our interests or the interests of others to be harmed in the pursuit of it. Note that extremists are not angry, not vicious, they may merely be moralists who are determined to be effective and determined to be consistent. By my understanding of the phenomenon, it is simple and easy to fall into the trap of extremism.)

But perhaps we can be polite and simply term them enthusiasts, because it seems that what we need is not greater enthusiasm but more real kindness and tolerance, and because it seems that any sort of whipped-up enthusiastic dedication (even to "kindness and tolerance," I suppose) is opposed to this real kindness and tolerance. The Nazis believed, and Professor Quine believed at least in 1969, and I believed until 1981, and the sociobiologists now believe, that it would be the greatest foolishness for us to allow ourselves to be persuaded by our rationality to ally in any way with the weak. The weak only lose, and to ally with them is to become weak and lose any possibility of being of benefit to them. Our covert agenda is that mere reason is not going to con us into anything quite so foolish as all that. Only the rich can help the poor, trumpets the loudspeaker of Crystal Cathedral near Disneyland. Looking back, I don't know what anyone could have said to me that would have convinced me, before I was ready, myself, to let go of some personal trash I was clutching. Perhaps, however, a path can be found through this biosophy minefield. Perhaps you don't have to live your way through what I lived my way through. Perhaps, even now, looking forward, you personally may benefit from what for yours truly is merely 20/20 hindsight.