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BOOK PROFILE: EVOLUTION AND ETHICS

A book profile of *Evolution and Ethics: Human Morality in Biological and Religious Perspective*, edited by Philip Clayton and Jeffrey Schloss. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004. x + 339 pp. \$32.00. ISBN: 0-8028-2695-4

I. The Evolution of Ethics: Scientific Perspectives

1. *“Evolutionary Ethics Past and Present”* by Michael Ruse.

RUSE BELIEVES THAT EVOLUTIONARY ETHICS has been making a comeback from the nearly comatose state it was in some forty years ago. He traces the often failed history of many of the well-known, “morally repellent” conclusions of Social Darwinism (such as genocide, war, sexism, etc.) and shows that Darwinians were on all sides of these issues (not just the “repellent” side). Ruse believes that one of the major reasons for the comeback is a much more sophisticated approach within evolutionary biology of handling social behavior. This includes an emphasis on Dawkins’s selfish-gene approach in which *all adaptations* must be related back to self-interest.

2. *“Darwinian Evolutionary Ethics: Between Patriotism and Sympathy”* by Peter J. Richardson and Robert Boyd. Richardson and Boyd give an overview of Darwin’s four-part argument regarding human morality. They believe that Darwin’s explanation for differences between races has to do with custom and not biology. They identify two main weaknesses of Darwin’s theory regarding the origin of human morality: (1) the genetic system generally lacks the inheritance of *acquired* variation and (2) relies too heavily on group selection, which is generally considered to be a side-effect of individual fitness maximization. In light of these weaknesses, Richardson and Boyd offer a modernization of Darwin’s original arguments in their own updated four-part theory of the development of human morality.

3. *“Explaining the Prosocial Side of Moral Communities”* by Christopher Boehm. In this

essay, Boehm proposes that a “common sense” revisiting of the derided area of group-selection theory could help explain some kinds of human behavior which a strict sociobiological perspective has difficulty explaining. He believes that sociobiologists are often so committed to certain models that they overlook “what humans actually do” especially, when it comes to altruism. Boehm specifies two areas of evidence that make group selection theory a good candidate for explanation: (1) prosocial norms and responsiveness to such norms and (2) conflict intervention.

4. *“Hominid Failings: An Evolutionary Basis for Sin in Individuals and Corporations”* by Michael J. Chapman. Chapman argues that humans have predispositions to certain misbehaviors because of our evolutionary history. He shows that these behaviors can be classified using the Christian terminology of the Seven Deadly Sins: gluttony, greed, lust, vanity, envy, rage and sloth. While many of these behaviors were essential to our success in the earliest stages of *homo sapiens*, “in today’s resource rich environment, however, unhealthy consequences of evolved behaviors (obesity, bankruptcy, and divorce for individuals; robber-baron CEOs and bad public relations for corporations) outweigh their former selective benefits.” If hope is to be found, Chapman wants to move away from more “radical interpretations of human evolutionary theory” and toward more holistic models that will take multilevel and multidisciplinary consciousness-raising seriously.

5. *“The Leverage of Language on Altruism and Morality”* by Joseph Poulshock. Due to the incompleteness of selfish gene theory in explaining certain altruistic behaviors, Poulshock explores a combination of structural and functional approaches to the problem and examines how the *function of language* facilitates both group and individual identity and plays a crucial role in the regulation of group behavior. He introduces the concept of virtual relatedness, which expresses how an individual treats another regardless of biological relatedness. If an increase in virtual relatedness behavior made one group more altruistic than another group, the altruistic group will out-compete the more selfish group.

6. *“You Have Heard ... but I Tell You ...’: A Test of the Adaptive Significance of Moral Evolution”* by David C. Lahti. Lahti proposes that “certain changes in a society can lead to shifts in what kinds of behaviors, and therefore, attitudes, tend to be adaptive.” As a test case for this proposal he examines the moral message of Jesus, as found in the Sermon on the Mount, and contrasts this with the traditional Judaic teachings in light of the changed social setting in which Jesus lived. Lahti believes that “Jesus’ moral reform accords with the expectations from evolutionary theory in a multi-ethnic society where shared values do not necessarily follow lines of shared ancestry, and where social costs and benefits

require cooperation with nonkin.”

II. Religious and Evolutionary Ethics – Are They Compatible?”

7. *“Evolution and Divine Revelation: Synergy, Not Conflict, in Understanding Morality”* by Loren Haarsma. Haarsma suggests that sociobiological and evolutionary psychological theories about morality are fully compatible with essential Christian beliefs about morality as long as certain philosophical presuppositions are uncoupled from the science of these fields and as long as the scientific descriptions are augmented by divine personal revelation at some points in human history. He points to certain scientists who drift into philosophical arenas by moving from explanations for “How Morality Evolved” to explanations for “Why Morality Exists.”. Haarsma then takes his proposal through various issues such as “selfish” language, moral responsibility, mechanistic explanations and functional arguments, showing the compatibility of scientific and theological explanations in each case.

8. *“Darwinian and Teleological Explanations: Are They Compatible?”* by René van Woudenberg. Woudenberg begins his investigation by defining “teleological explanations” as explanations involving one or more of the following related concepts: goal, intention, actor and reason. Darwinian explanations, by contrast, are those that give a non-intentional explanation of what has happened. He uses various examples to show that these two categories sometimes exclude one another, but that they do not always. Woudenberg proceeds to show that in the case of morality, the linkage between the two categories of explanation can be shown to exist and thus that the categories are not necessarily incompatible.

9. *“Is There an Evolutionary Foundation for Human Morality?”* by John Hare. Hare begins his essay with two questions: “if we assume that the theory of evolution as it applies to human beings is correct, does this help us answer the questions of whether we *can* be morally good and why we *should* be morally good?” Hare believes that evolutionary theory, whether true or false, does not answer these questions. He proposes that there is a “problem of gaps” involving two aspects: (1) an “affection gap” between non-human animals and humans (non-humans only having an affection for advantage while humans also have an affection for justice) and (2) a “performance gap” within each human between the demand to be moral and the actual performance.

10. *“The Darwinian Moral Sense and Biblical Religion”* by Larry Arnhart. Arnhart

proposes that Darwin's biological view of moral sense is compatible with biblical religion. He believes that Darwin's ideas are rooted in a tradition of moral naturalism that includes the ideas of Aquinas and Aristotle through to the biblical doctrine of creation. It is only as one follows a Hobbesian-Kantian tradition that connects to Gnosticism that one runs into conflict between natural moral sense and the biblical tradition.

11. *"Thomistic Natural Law and the Limits of Evolutionary Psychology"* by Craig Boyd. Boyd suggests that, while natural law morality could use the findings in sociobiology as an important basis for much of human morality, sociobiology, by itself, will be insufficient in explaining all of human behavior. He presents Aquinas's theory of natural morality law, linking it with Aquinas's complex view of the characteristics of human nature. He proceeds to link many of the findings in sociobiology and evolutionary psychology with Aquinas's natural law morality. Boyd concludes "that the merely biological approach to ethics that sociobiology represents fails to account for the development of virtue and the practice of behaviors that do not enhance fitness."

12. *"The Good Samaritan and His Genes"* by Holmes Rolston III. Rolston asks how Good Samaritans – those helping non-genetically related others – can continue to be reproduced generation after generation in light of current evolutionary theory? He says, "Unless biologists can set this too in a Darwinian framework, perhaps this sort of altruism will be revealing counterevidence to current biological theory." He offers a litany of complications of attempts to "biologicize" the Good Samaritan's genes.

III. The Ethics of Evolution: Theological Evaluation and Critique

13. *"A Cross-Section of Sin: The Mimetic Character of Human Nature in Biological and Theological Perspective"* by S. Mark Heim. Heim points to cognitive research that suggests that imitation may be one of the key elements that moved human nature from genetic evolution into the cultural evolution revolution. He is moved by René Girard's work on the mimetic transition in human development and on religion's role in that transition. Heim redefines sin in this context as "that activity that deforms the medium of mimetic communion, that turns this powerful emergent human dynamic to destructive and conflictive results rather than those that build up human community."

14. *"Falling Up: Evolution and Original Sin"* by Gregory R. Peterson. In light of

recent scientific advances, Peterson suggests that the traditional view of the historic fall of humans should be reinterpreted. He believes that the origins of sinfulness should be seen as centered in our evolutionary heritage as each increase in complexity in biology allows for more freedom. In humans this leads to greater potential for both good and evil. It is this plasticity that leads Peterson to suggest “falling up” as opposed to “the fall” as a better description of the full complexity of human nature.

15. *“Morals, Love, and Relations in Evolutionary Theory”* by Thomas Jay Oord. Oord believes that many Christians’ apprehension to evolutionary theories comes from the claim that there is a continuity between humans and non-human animals and that any differences are not of kind but only of degree. Thus, evolutionary models claiming that all animals are inherently selfish could undermine the communal nature of religion and the Christian emphasis on self-sacrifice in particular. Oord uses process philosophy to attempt to alleviate these concerns. By recognizing the relatedness and relational nature of all existence, he argues that “in a cosmos in which all existing things are interrelated, each one’s own fulfillment connects with the fulfillment of others.” Within this concept of love, altruism and egoism become blurred.

16. *“Darwin’s Problems, Neo-Darwinian Solutions, and Jesus’ Love Commands”* by Philip A. Rolnick. Does the neo-Darwinian synthesis successfully account for all human relationships, including relations of love? Rolnick believes that while becoming aware of our evolutionary roots is a great moment in human history, the genetic origins of humans do not tell the whole story. He believes that “unfounded and unnecessary reduction of everything to genetics” must be resisted. He points to what he believes are more pluralistic and accurate, alternative studies that include both egoistic motivations *and* empathy-altruistic motivations.

This collection of essays provides a good view at the wide spectrum of ideas in the various disciplines surrounding biology and religion. It shows that while there are considerable disagreements among many of the authors, there are substantial areas in which *all* of the authors are able to find common ground. The editors of this volume (Jeffrey Schloss and Philip Clayton) provide a thorough introduction and conclusion, which provide the background and motivation behind this project as well as acute analyses of the various themes found within.

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Shelton, Anthony. "Book Profile: Evolution and Ethics." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 6 no. 3 (Fall 2005): 136-141. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/06.3/shelton.pdf>