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Sociobiology, Anabaptism, and the "Problem" of Altruism

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When Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published in 1859, two issues immediately entered the public debate. First, the mechanism of natural selection seemed too materialistic and lacking in direction to be the work of a purposeful creator. The second was its implications regarding the nature of human beings. Darwin had been guarded in reference to human evolution, stating only, "Much light will be thrown on the origin of man and his history" (Darwin 1958, 449). The British politician Benjamin Disraeli voiced what troubled many: "The question is this—Is man an ape or an angel? My Lord, I am on the side of the angels" (Desmond and Moore 1992, 527). The popular public response justified Darwin's concern: cartoons and editorials highlighted the "monkey" angle of evolution. Darwin later responded with *The Descent of Man* (1871), a two-volume work devoted to his views on human evolution.

The field of sociobiology challenges us to meditate upon the substance of our charitable motivations, and to consider once again Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

Though Darwin's work rekindled debate concerning human nature, it has always been a central concern to Christians. To what extent are we inherently good or evil? How completely has sin corrupted the image of God in humanity? To what extent are we capable of truly loving others sacrificially? Various Christian traditions differ significantly in their approach to these questions.

My interest in this essay is not to debate the validity of evolution.

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While there is often merit and sometimes necessity in emphasizing the conflict of ideas, such an approach has begotten a multitude of books. In his influential book *Religion and Science* (1997, 77-105), Ian Barbour offers four typologies of how science and religion may interact: (1) they may be viewed in conflict, (2) they may operate independently, (3) they may be integrated, or (4) they may be in dialogue. I will address the "goodness" of human nature using Barbour's approach of dialogue.

The ethical call of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount has historically been of central concern to Anabaptist theology. In what ways are current discussions in evolutionary biology either consonant or discordant with the ethical call Jesus places upon his disciples, a call which commands sacrificial love of God and of others? The focus of this dialogue is the field of human sociobiology and its consideration of altruism. Has an Anabaptist perspective anything to say to this topic?

THE PROBLEM OF ALTRUISM AND THE RISE OF SOCIOBIOLOGY

A Darwinian view of behavior from its inception faced one glaring anomaly: the existence of altruism—the sacrificial behavior of one individual for another. If behavior is a result of natural selection, how can sacrificial behaviors, which reduce an individual's fitness, be reconciled with a process that should only favor behaviors which increase an individual's fitness? For instance, many species of gregarious animals have individuals that will issue a warning cry when the group is approached by a predator. Such altruistic behavior benefits the group as a whole, but draws attention to the individual who issued the warning cry, making it more likely to be preyed upon.

Early attempts to find a means of explaining unselfish behavior focused upon alternative means by which natural selection could work. The traditional view was that selection would work upon the individual organism. But if natural selection could work at the level of groups of organisms, then unselfish behavior toward others within the group could develop, for cooperating groups of organisms might survive better than groups where cooperation was lacking.

Such "group selection" arguments were rejected by mainstream biologists because within any group with a mixture of altruistic and nonaltruistic individuals, the percentage of altruists should diminish over time. This is because nonaltruists benefit from the altruists without paying the cost of reduced fitness of altruism. The group might prosper, but each generation would have fewer altruists until they disappeared completely from the group.

The issue of altruism was thought to have been answered decisively in the 1960s with W. D. Hamilton's concept of "kin selection." If an individual sacrifices itself so that genetically related kin survive, the genes that determined the altruistic behavior will be carried on to future generations by the surviving relatives. This genetic perspective was presaged in the 1930s by J. B. S. Haldane's quote: "I will die for two brothers or eight cousins" (Depew and Weber 1995, 369). The logic behind Haldane's statement rests in the rules of inheritance, which result in siblings carrying roughly half of their genes in common, while among first cousins, approximately one eighth of their genes are identical.

Rather than view behavior from the perspective of individual or group, if viewed from the perspective of the genes that determine behavior, the dilemma of reconciling sacrificial behavior and natural selection disappears. Individuals may appear altruistic, but the genes that determine behavior are favored by such actions. This perspective was later encapsulated in Richard Dawkins' term, the "selfish gene" (1976). Apparently altruistic behavior might exist, but only among genetically related individuals. What appears self-sacrificial is merely a disguised form of selfishness at the genetic level.

The movement to view behavior from the perspective of genetic selection led to the rise of "sociobiology," a term coined in the seventies by prominent biologist Edward O. Wilson. In books such as *Sociobiology* (1975) and *On Human Nature* (1978), Wilson began by seeking to explain the instinctual behavior of insects, but extrapolated to higher animals and finally to human behavior. In that old debate of nature versus nurture, sociobiologists may give some consideration to culture, but, according to Wilson (1978, 167), "genes hold culture on a leash." In this view, the range of cultural practices is limited by genetic factors shaped by natural selection. Only behaviors which promote genetic survival and reproductive success should flourish. By the 1980s, the field of sociobiology was well established, though even evolutionary biologists disputed how strongly human behavior is constrained by natural selection.

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOBIOLOGY

While the field of sociobiology deals with much more than issues of altruism, the problem of apparently unselfish behavior continues to be a central issue. How then can one account for unselfish behavior of individuals toward those who are not kin? The answer has usually been to emphasize a "tit-for-tat" type of behavior: if you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. Natural selection could favor generosity toward others if it was performed only toward those who reciprocated. While people may

exhibit apparent generosity and sacrificial behavior toward others, the basic nature of humans (and life in general) is selfish. Altruism is merely a disguised form of selfishness. The denial of the reality of truly generous behavior was exemplified in the quote, "Scratch an altruist and watch a hypocrite bleed."

Nevertheless, the blood type of altruists is difficult to determine with precision. Where is the hidden selective benefit in the life of Jesus, early Anabaptist martyrs, or of contemporary altruists like Mother Teresa? Various attempts have been made to make sense of such altruistic behavior from the vantage of sociobiology.

One challenge to the traditional orthodoxy has come in the form of a recent revival of the concept of group selection. David Sloan Wilson argues that earlier arguments against group selection were flawed, and that group selection is important in shaping altruistic behavior (Sober and Wilson 1998, 23-54). Another approach suggests that altruism toward others raises the reputation of the practitioner among the group, demonstrates reliability, and induces support from group members.

The current state of much sociobiological thought presents a somewhat changed perspective on human nature. It suggests we are naturally selfish, yet there are also within us natural inclinations toward charitable, altruistic actions. How appropriate is the paradigm of abject selfishness when it is natural to show care and concern toward relatives and friends? Cooperative behavior can be argued to be just as much a part of human nature as is confrontation. We have natural tendencies to display generous behavior. But the predominant theme is that there are limits to our goodness. The leash of genetic self-preservation must ultimately constrain the bounds of human altruism.

PARALLELS IN RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES

Christians who emphasize the depraved nature of the human condition echo sociobiologists who insist the selfish gene trumps all. From a less negative perspective, the doctrine of original sin reinvents itself as genes which naturally predispose us to act in ways that preserve our genotypes. While sociobiologists view their field as the vanguard of understanding human nature, Jesus' words seem to foreshadow recent sociobiological perspectives on altruism. Reciprocating the actions of good or evil is natural; the challenge is to return good for evil (Matt. 5:38-42). Praying and almsgiving in public carry their reward as well, but these acts in secret can secure a benefit only from God (Matt. 6:1-19). Loving the neighbor who loves you carries its own reward; "perfection" requires loving the enemy who does not (Matt. 5:43-48).

If many sociobiologists have been skeptical of the possibility of truly altruistic and sacrificial behavior, this certainly is not a uniquely recent claim. The ethical call of the Sermon on the Mount is demanding. It seems intensely unnatural and perhaps unattainable. The rigor of the call has led Christians to many different interpretations of how we are to respond. It has been variously interpreted as hyperbole, as an attitude to be adopted rather than acts to be implemented, or limited in application to certain private spheres of life.

Another response has been to view it as a means of showing the impossibility of God's standard. We realize our inability to follow its commands and thus recognize our need for grace. Since we are saved by grace we need not be troubled by our lack of perfection. Similarly, if the bonds of human selfishness are so strong as to prevent the Sermon's fulfillment, perhaps it is an ethic for a transformed eschatological future. In a view common to many dispensationalists, the Sermon applies not to this current age, but to the Kingdom to come.

EXPANDING THE ETHICAL CIRCLE

Anabaptist theology has historically stressed the centrality of following the altruistic ethics of Jesus found in the Sermon on the Mount, an ethic that reaches beyond the confines of kin and neighbor and tribe. The challenge is to "expand the circle of ethical concern" (Singer, 1981). The belief that approaching such an ethic is possible in the present has distinguished Anabaptism from many other views. Arrayed in opposition, arguments for the impossibility of such an ethic have come from both Christians and sociobiologists. The question that comes center stage is whether or not it is possible for people to practice an ethic of extreme altruism.

One would assume that the logic of sociobiology would contradict a truly altruistic altruism. But a careful reading often reveals surprises. For George C. Williams, "An unremitting effort is required to expand the circle of sympathy for others. This effort is in opposition to much of human nature" (Rolston 1999, 264). And Dawkins writes, "Let us *teach* generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish" (1976, 3).

Holmes Rolston (1999, 264-272) notes the discrepant logic of these statements, for sociobiologists commonly argue that ethical beliefs are simply an "illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate" (Ruse and Wilson 1993, 310). If these statements are to make any sense, they must assume we have the freedom as humans to break the straitjacket of genetic determinacy. It requires an element of human free will, but at the same time recognizes the powerful ways in which selfish human

nature works against these purposes. It also requires a belief that what *exists* in human nature is transcended by what *ought* to be.

A curious shift has occurred recently in the argument of that quintessential sociobiologist, Edward O. Wilson. While previously he had asserted that it is a mistake to confuse what *is* with what *ought* to be (known commonly as the naturalistic fallacy), in his recent book *Consilience* (1998), he claims otherwise. After arguing forcefully for the reality of genetic constraints that shape our nature, there appears his oft-repeated call for a redirection in our behavior. But he now asserts that in ethics, the choice of what *ought* to be done does not exist outside of what *is* (249-51).

What exists is our common need for global genetic survival. Wilson (277) asks, "To what end, or ends,... should human genius direct itself?" His answer is an ethic of preserving the entire diversity of life on earth. Without such a transformation, ecological disaster will overtake humanity. It is only by such an extension of the circle of ethical concern that we can ensure our own survival (292-98). Evidently the genetic leash is long enough to encompass a culture that can altruistically sacrifice not only our immediate genetic, personal, and tribal self-interests, but those of our own species as well.

Wilson seems to share one common perspective with a number of contemporary theologians seeking to develop a more cosmic ethical perspective. That similarity is the need to ground ethics within nature, as opposed to working against what is natural (human or otherwise). John F. Haught (2000) seems to speak for many in the science-religion dialogue when he voices reservations about grounding an inclusive ethic by opposing what is natural. For Murphy and Ellis (1996, 208-15), the structure of creation itself points to a "kenotic," sacrificial God who exemplifies the type of all-embracing love we are called to. Rolston (1999, 247-49; 280-91) locates the human capacity for such generous behavior according to things we value, and argues that our values can naturally extend beyond the genetic and somatic self to encompass ever broader concerns.

I suspect that most Anabaptists, though agreeing that it is possible to expand the ethical circle, would be suspicious of attempts to find the power to make such a transition strictly by extrapolating from nature. The power to live the truly altruistic life requires a transformation of nature and—something that might resonate with some sociobiological emphases—the support of a community (read here "group"). Such a transformation may be a mysterious mix of what can and cannot be explained sociobiologically.

CONCLUSION

Though sociobiological and biblical explanations for the root of human selfishness differ, there are definite points of agreement. Unlike enlightenment philosophy which considered humanity in nature good, but corrupted by outside forces, sociobiology argues a theme similar to many biblical interpretations of human nature. Contrary to Disraeli's assertion, human nature imitates neither ape nor angel. We are powerfully shaped by natural inclinations toward selfishness, but we are more complex creatures than this alone.

It is also in our nature to care for kin and those closest to us and to respond in kind to those who give to us. The debatable point is whether it is right—or natural or possible—to extend the reach of altruism beyond these limits. Here the divide is not between religious and scientific perspectives; both fields speak with diverse voices. For those of Anabaptist orientation, taking the words and life of Jesus seriously means an affirmation that it is both right and possible, regardless of whether it is natural. With such an extension of ethical concern, a number of sociobiologists seem to agree.

I believe there is value in dialogue. For Christians, sociobiological critiques of human altruism are worth reflecting upon. They are a reminder that there is little distinctive in loving kin and neighbor and friend or practicing charity before the eyes of others. Such acts are not necessarily selfish, but neither are they good enough. It is a sobering discipline to meditate upon my deepest charitable motivations. Sociobiology encourages me to consider once again the Sermon on the Mount.

But dialogue implies that those of faith also have something to speak to the field of sociobiology. And what have we to say? Here I doubt that contemporary Christian apologetics will sway skeptics of sociobiological persuasion, not even the best crafted arguments of the current Intelligent Design school. There is in the end perhaps a singular witness we have to offer to sociobiology, and indeed to the world at large. This witness is not a new line of argument. It simply recalls the work and words of Jesus, that it is in the unbounded loving of others that the world can see the Father. This has always been the Anabaptist vision. Were we all to live lives faithful to the gospel call, there would be altruism enough to perplex and confuse the most skeptical sociobiologist. ❁

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