

Perspective Digest

Volume 6 | Number 3

Article 5

7-1-2001

Darwanism

Earl Aagaard
Pacific Union College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd>

Recommended Citation

Aagaard, Earl (2001) "Darwanism," *Perspective Digest*. Vol. 6 : No. 3 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol6/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Adventist Theological Society at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Perspective Digest by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

DARWINISM

What are the moral implications of this myth of origins?

Human life seems to have lost its dignity and value. Ask a Muslim in Serbia, a Ba'hai in Iran, or a Christian in the Sudan. Observe Jack Kevorian assisting suicide and then being embraced as a valuable contributor to our moral conversation. The question looms: What's important about being human?

Time was when we could blame barbarity on the pagan, the uncivilized, or the fanatics. Names spring to mind: Hitler, Ghengis Khan, Pol Pot. But now we're not talking about the past. We're over the edge of the 21st century. And yet there remains the question—simple, yet most profound: What's so special about being human?

For many philosophers, including some who call themselves Christians, the answer is increasingly, "nothing much." With today's scientific knowledge and technical

achievements, and with the historical record in full view, human beings are still tempted to violate basic human rights.

After World War II, the Nuremberg Trials bared the evil that lurks in the human heart and showed how even the most cultured and civilized society can crawl into moral sewers, virtually erasing the spiritual meaning of "humanity." The lessons of that war drove the United Nations to pass, in 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document affirmed the dignity and equality of every human being, requiring civilized societies to protect the weak from the strong. The declaration still stands. Why, then,

* *Dr. Earl Aagaard is Professor of Biology at Pacific Union College, Angwin, California. "Darwinism" is digested from an article in Dialogue, February 1999. Used with permission.*

are we still talking about human rights and dignity?

The Myth of Origins

The answer's in what is embraced as the scientific explanation of the origin of life and its diversity, a story that leaves out the biblical God. This perspective is clearly expounded in James Rachels' 1990 book, *Created From Animals: The Moral Implications of Darwinism* (New York: Oxford University Press). The author reasons from a foundation of naturalistic evolution. His conclusion, robustly supported, is that Darwinism completely undermines the doctrine of human dignity. Human beings occupy no special place in the moral order; we are simply another form of animal.

This view and concern about it aren't new. In 1859, Bishop Samuel Wilberforce warned that Darwinism was "absolutely incompatible" with Christianity's "whole representation of the moral and spiritual condition of man." The Southern Baptist Convention of the United States echoed Wilberforce in 1987. But there is no unanimity among Christians. A century ago renowned preacher Henry Ward Beecher suggested that the evolutionary perspective *added* to the glory of God's creation. Pope John Paul II is willing to accept the evolutionary process as God's means of creating the human body (although not the "spirit," which he

insists is God's immediate creation).

Even scientists are divided on this issue. Some, such as Steven Jay Gould, say that Darwinism and religion are compatible, that one can be both a theist and a Darwinist; while William Provine and others assert that Darwinism makes all supernatural religion not just superfluous but untenable.

In "Must a Darwinian Be Skeptical?" Rachels argues that teleology [direction and purpose] in nature is irrevocably destroyed by Darwinism. Without teleology, religion must "retreat to something like deism, . . . no longer. . . support[ing] the doctrine of human dignity" (pp. 127, 128). This powerful argument must be refuted if a religious Darwinist is to salvage the biblical teaching that humans are created in God's image and have a special place in the divine order. As Rachels reminds us, "The 'image of God' thesis does not go along with just any theistic view. It requires a theism that sees God as actively designing man and the world as a home for man."

In "How Different Are Humans From Animals?" Rachels concludes that Darwinism destroys any foundation for a morally significant difference between humans and animals. If humans descended from primitive ape-like creatures by natural selection, they may physically differ from other non-human animals, but not essentially so. Cer-

**In “Morality Without Humans Being Special,”
Rachels flatly rejects human equality! Humans are entitled
“to be treated as equals” only if there are no “relevant
differences” between them.**

tainly not different in any way that gives *every* human more rights than *any* animal. In Rachels' words, “one cannot reasonably make distinctions in morals where none exist in fact.” He calls his doctrine “moral individualism,” which, he says, rejects “the traditional doctrine of human dignity” along with the idea that human life has any inherent worth that non-human life lacks.

Moral Individualism

In “Morality Without Humans Being Special,” Rachels flatly rejects human equality! Humans are entitled “to be treated as equals” only if there are no “relevant differences” between them. Rachels, lacking belief in sin and its power (and ignoring history), expects that “relevant differences” will be used in distinguishing individuals *only*, and not genders, races, religions, etc. Accepting Darwinian concepts extends the analysis to non-human animals as well, yielding no automatic superiority of human claims over those of rabbits, pigs, or whales. Under “moral individualism,” when faced with using a human or a chim-

panzee for a lethal medical experiment, we can no longer decide the question by noting that the chimp is not human. “We would have to ask what justifies using this particular chimp, and not that particular human, and the answer would have to be in terms of their individual characteristics, not simply their group memberships” (p. 174).

Given the crucial role of “relevant differences” in this ethic, one looks for some formal definition of the term. Rachels provides none. Instead we get “something of how the concept works” in an example about testing cosmetics on the eyes of rabbits, and in a vague hypothetical: “If it is thought permissible to treat A, but not B, in a certain way, we first ask why B may not be treated in that way. . . . If A and B differ only in ways that do not figure in the explanation of why it is wrong to treat B in the specified manner, than the differences are irrelevant” (p. 181). This ABC “logic” is no bulwark against the XYZ selfishness and evil we see in ourselves and in our fellow human beings.

Experience demonstrates that

Continued on page 55

any relativistic ethic will be twisted into whatever shape allows us to do whatever we want to our fellow humans. Examples abound: chattel slavery; racial and religious persecution; one million annual U.S. abortions; the epidemic of abandoned, abused, and murdered babies; laws permitting assisted suicide and euthanasia; ethnic cleansing; etc. We must have a "bright line" standard of our obligations to every member of the human family if we are to distinguish between morality and amorality. No middle ground exists.

Darwinism and Amorality

The connection between Darwinism and amorality is now explicit. In the *New York Times Magazine* of November 3, 1997, Stephen Pinker tells us that "moral philosophers have concluded that . . . our immature neonates don't possess [the right to life] any more than mice do." Further, he alleges that "neonaticide may be a product of maternal wiring" since it has "been practiced throughout history." He thus ties infanticide directly to our evolutionary ancestry and the Darwinian struggle for survival, which sometimes demands that mothers kill their young in order to further their own reproductive future! Here the formerly unthinkable is presented as reasonable and acceptable. We're being softened up for a change to community morality—one hold-

ing that some humans deserve respect and protection, but that others do not, and can be killed with impunity. We can see this process at work today: in academic discourse, and increasingly, in the popular media.

Just 50 years ago, every nation voting at the United Nations flatly rejected this emerging ethic. In the preamble to the U. N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the U. N. General Assembly unanimously (with eight abstentions) declared that "the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world" is "recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal inalienable rights of all members of the human family." The articles themselves repeatedly emphasize an individual's value and rights.

The Personhood Ethic

The argument for moral relativism is appealing on the surface. Often it begins by reaffirming the biological (and biblical) truth that we are human from the moment of conception. But then we are told that a difference exists between a "human" and a "person"; that "personhood" is the category a human must attain in order to have a right to life. The qualifications for "personhood" vary—but generally self-consciousness is said to be a necessary requisite. Of course, no human is born with self-consciousness, and

many of us lose our self-consciousness temporarily or permanently because of injury, illness, or age. Enter Jack Kevorkian. . . .

The “personhood” ethic and the U. N. Charter’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights are colliding moral galaxies; they are incompatible. The galaxy represented by the U.N. Declaration is founded on the Judeo-Christian moral tradition—a tradition going back for millennia.

The galaxy of “moral individualism” and its clones propose that both humans and non-human animals are to be judged by the same relativistic criteria. In this moral universe, human beings have lost their inalienable right to life, something that Christians have always granted because “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27, NIV).

Pushed Off the Pedestal

Pushing humans off the pedestal of dignity on which the Bible has placed them has implications for everyone, not just for the comatose patients, the handicapped newborns, the old and feeble, and others not like “us.” Under the ethic of “moral individualism,” no principle prevents one race from classifying other races as less than fully human and enslaving or killing them. No principle calls to account those who seek to demote others to the status of “non-persons.”

No principle condemns parents who use prenatal testing to determine the sex of the unborn and then to abort the female. No principle stops a society from deciding that full human status isn’t reached until age 3 or 4, and establishing centers for elimination of unwanted “non-persons.” No principle prevents cloning a “desirable” individual, or the use of “undesirable” humans for a stock of

We may recoil at these suggestions, but the hard truth is that when we abandon the biblical imperative that human life is sacred and must not be touched, we are all at risk, because when the strong take over, “might makes right.”

Most current relativistic ethicists don’t have genocide in mind. They’re simply trying to create a non-dogmatic, rationalistic base for behavior they deem proper. History, however, offers demonstrations that slaughter follows a division of “our group” (protected) from “the others” (unprotected), whatever the rationale. Ask the Jews. Ask the Muslims. Ask the Christians. Ask.

I believe James Rachels succeeds in his arguments: One cannot be a Darwinist and logically hold the traditional view that human life is sacred. The more immediate question for the “people of the book” seems even more relevant: Can one hold that human life is *not* sacred and be, in fact, Christian? □