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The Futility of Ethics Apart from God

COREY WILLIAMS

If we think back to childhood, it is easy to recall moments when we attempted to place our own guilt or responsibility on others. It was always “Tommy made me do it,” or “Sally shouldn’t have done that,” or the ever popular, “It’s not my fault! I’m the victim!” For even if we knew that it was our fault, we had great hopes of convincing our accusers that perhaps the situation was not as black and white as it might have seemed. And not being as black and white, perhaps the behavior was in some way excusable, or at least deserving of a lesser consequence.

For the most part, these memories remind us of how good we were at manipulating our parents and teachers. But what about those times throughout our life when it really is not our fault, or at least not entirely our fault? I am certain that we can all think of times when others really were partly to blame. Someone’s action, or perhaps inaction, had a direct and seemingly unavoidable impact on our own behavior. Thus, even in adulthood we seem to believe that some things truly are beyond our control. There is this sort of understood principle that our environment, which is sometimes chosen and other times forced upon us, is in many ways responsible for limiting and maybe even determining the choices we make. But what if we could take this limitation or determination of choice and behavior even further? What if it was possible to eliminate these responsibilities altogether? What if all behavior, both good and bad, could be due to circumstances entirely beyond our control, such as our genetic code? What if that favorite childhood excuse, “It’s not my fault! I’m the victim!” was actually truer than we know?

In retrospect, history has held quite a different theory. By simply taking a brief look into past events it is easy to discover that people have been and continue to be held accountable for their actions. Take a look, for instance, into the history of court or prison systems. By the presence of such systems throughout history, it is quite easy to gather a general consensus on the issue. And this consensus has been and continues to be that because humans have the capacity to reason and make judgments, they can also be judged for their actions. And while there are certainly circumstances that extend beyond our ability to control them, this does not intrinsically imply that no responsibility can or should be owned up to. Instead, when we say that a person made an ethical or unethical choice, we actually believe that a conscious and rational choice was made, thus deserving either praise or punishment.

While this indeed might have been the standard throughout history and certainly even in our own day, a small group of sociobiologists are currently throwing such a standard to the wind. And while they often fail to fully disclose the logical outcomes of their work, this group is truly shaking and attempting to dismantle any traditional understanding of ethics and human behavior. In recent years, the field of sociobiology has been emerging from the halls of academia and making its way into a various assortment of books, magazine articles and television programs. In light of such mainstream attention, proponents such as Richard Dawkins are becoming household names. Although there is no doubt that many of the sociobiological theories are interesting and relevant, there is a chilling lack of understanding as to what these theories lead to. As such, it

is my purpose here to examine how and in what manner sociobiologists deal with the subject of ethics. For by dismissing any sort of transcendent and objective foundation, which Christians attribute to God, ethics no longer has any real meaning. Many sociobiologists mistakenly assume that they can somehow prescribe ethical behaviors even though they rip apart the very foundation of ethics. I hope to show that while it is easy to theorize about such matters, it is quite another to live up to the logical conclusions and consequences that result from buying into the sociobiological framework. In order to arrive at this conclusion, it is crucial to understand a bit of the background of sociobiology.

SOCIOBIOLOGY DEFINED

The term “sociobiology” was originally introduced in a lecture given by American behavioral geneticist John Paul Scott in 1946. Social behavior had certainly been written about prior to this time, but Scott provided the framework and the key term that would later be adopted and popularized by E.O. Wilson almost thirty years later. Wilson’s 1975 book, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, took this term and gave it a proper definition, saying that the new science was in essence “the systematic study of the biological basis of all social behavior.”¹ In other words, it is the branch of science that attempts to figure out why animals behave the way they do and if that behavior is written into their genes. To properly understand such a complex issue, Wilson decided to take a holistic approach by fusing together a variety of social and scientific fields, including biology, sociology, behavioral ecology, psychology and genetics. Ultimately, he went on to argue that an animal’s genetic inheritance had just as much or perhaps even more to do with behavior than its surrounding environment.² Wilson had been trained as an entomologist, so it came as no surprise that he would apply this theory to ants, but he quickly went beyond ants to include all animals. And because he saw *Homo sapiens* as merely sophisticated primates, he boldly proclaimed that there existed no practical difference between the social behavior of humans and that of any other animal species. Ultimately, this analysis begs the question of whether or not humans are any more ethical or unethical than the very ants that Wilson was studying.

Although this controversy began in the halls of academia, this conclusion quickly gained public recognition. In a 1977 *Time* magazine article titled, “Why You Do What You Do,” it became clear that the field of sociobiology was issuing a brazen challenge and alternative understanding for the foundation of ethics. The article reported that according to sociobiologists, “all human acts—even saving a stranger from drowning or donating a million dollars to the poor—may be ultimately selfish. Morality and justice, far from being the triumphant product of human progress, evolved from man’s past, and are securely rooted in the genes.”³ Consequentially, Wilson and others concluded that if ethics is rooted genetically, then no stable foundation is possible. Instead, ethics is illusory and bound to the forces of our own selfishness. And given this understanding of environmental and genetic determinism, no transcendent and objective reality, such as the Christian concept of God, can truly exist. Thus, it becomes not only difficult, but impossible to agree upon standards for ethical or unethical behavior.

SOCIOBIOLOGY SINCE WILSON

Since Wilson’s work in the 1970s, this field has taken off dramatically and his basic tenets have become the framework by which most sociobiologists operate. Within this field, it has become accepted that human behavior is solely determined by a combination of one’s environment and genetic inheritance. This is seen clearly in the work of Daniel Dennett, a prominent philosopher at Tufts University. He concludes in *Kinds of Minds* that “every human mind you’ve ever looked at . . . is a product not just of natural selection but

1. Corey L. Williams is a graduate student and research assistant at Pepperdine University, where he is currently working on his master’s degree in religion. E.O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1975), 4.

2. Ibid.

3. “Why You Do What You Do,” *Time*, August 1, 1977, 54, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,915181-1,00.html> (accessed April 6, 2009).

of cultural redesign of enormous proportions.”⁴ Yet when it comes down to it, the environment, or what Dennett terms as cultural redesign, is ultimately influenced and driven by one’s genetic inheritance. So as these factors work in concert, they ensure that all animals, including humans, take on behaviors and traits that permit the greatest probability of survival and reproduction. Thus, what we know as ethics no longer really exists. Instead, ethics is just whatever promotes the goals and needs that have been determined by each individual’s genes.

According to sociobiologists, evolution through natural selection works in such a way that those behaviors that are beneficial to a species are “chosen” to survive and eventually become typical in a given population. Since the dawn of humanity, then, we have weighed out what seems to be beneficial, so that some kind of consensus has been reached as to what is considered morally right or wrong. For example, most civilizations today seem to think that loving your parents is good, while stealing from your neighbor is bad. Instead of basing these ethical parameters on the concept of a transcendent power, such as God, they are based upon that which is beneficial to the majority. Ethicist Richard Taylor explains that instead of having a true foundation, our “basis for morality is conventional, which means the rules of morality were fabricated by human beings over many generations.”⁵ In other words, humans have made up their own version of what is right and wrong in order to help them survive and be happy in the process. As a general rule, Taylor states, “those things are good that satisfy [our] actual wants, those that frustrate them are bad.”⁶

This type of thinking is further illustrated by Richard Dawkins, perhaps the most well-known proponent of sociobiology, in his groundbreaking work *The Selfish Gene*. He states that “we are survival machines—robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes.”⁷ Accordingly, sociobiologists conclude that actions such as murder *became* wrong because of their negative effect on the survival of the community. In the end, any behavior that thwarts the goals of natural selection (survival and reproduction) is in danger of evolving into an unethical practice, and any behavior that promotes these goals will generally have a fair chance of being seen as ethical. Michael Ruse, a philosopher of science, hits this point home when he states that given such an understanding, ethics cannot be “considered as a rationally justifiable set of claims about an objective something . . . Morality is just an aid to survival and reproduction . . . any deeper meaning is illusory.”⁸ Morality then is not grounded in what is *truly* right or wrong, but rather, “the distinction between good and evil is . . . relative to goals, ends, and wants—in a word, to the will—and has no meaning except in relation to this.”⁹ Once again, just as Wilson concluded earlier, if no transcendent and objective reality—like God—may be taken into account, then the foundation of ethics becomes lost in a blind, selfish and chaotic universe that is constantly evolving. And just as actions such as murder *became* morally wrong over time, it is indeed not impossible to consider that such a behavior may in time be considered morally correct in order to help with the survival of our species.

IS EVERY ACTION REALLY SELFISH?

At this point, you might be wondering about those actions that really are not selfish. Are there not plenty of examples of people doing things without expecting anything in return? Even though this might seem to be the case, sociobiologists conclude that *almost* all actions can be linked to some sort of selfish motivator. For instance, a person might think that they actually love their family or community, but in reality sociobiologists argue that they are merely dependent upon them for the reproduction and survival of their own genes. Any

4. Daniel Dennett, *Kinds of Minds: Towards an Understanding of Consciousness* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 153.

5. Richard Taylor and William Lane Craig, “Is the Basis of Morality Natural or Supernatural?” Leadership University, October 8, 1993, <http://www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/craig-taylor1.html> (accessed April 6, 2009).

6. Richard Taylor, “Value & the Origin of Right & Wrong,” *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Louis Pojman, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2007), 148.

7. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), xxi.

8. Michael Ruse, *The Darwinian Paradigm: Essays on its History, Philosophy & Religious Implications* (London: Routledge, 1989), 262.

9. Taylor, *Ethical Theory*, 92.

action that protects or aids the community is essentially an act to protect and aid oneself; by providing a benefit to the community, you are often given benefits in return. This is evidenced by the fact that it is generally hard for people to love others without expecting the same in return. Even for those who seem to be giving without expecting anything in return, sociobiologists say that more often than not, people in this category benefit by being admired for their good deeds. In fact, such people often do charitable deeds to demonstrate their superiority and capability to provide for others. Anyone that has ever been able to give to those that cannot give back has perhaps experienced this ethical dilemma. Perhaps you think your heart is telling you to give unselfishly, but sociobiologists say that your genes are telling you to give, so that you will look and feel good about yourself.

But you still might be wondering about those actions that really do not fit into these nice categories. What about the possibility that people really do give freely and without thought to the benefits or praise they receive? For example, what about the person who gives to someone they will never meet, someone on the opposite side of the globe? Are acts of kindness during natural disasters, epidemics and famines always done for selfish reasons? If *almost* all behavior can be explained by selfishness, what about those instances when behavior truly is unselfish? In reply to such a question, sociobiologists explain this by insisting that actions that do not find their basis in selfishness are most likely just *accidents*. They are simply mishaps in evolution and do not give us any reason to think that there exists an ethical foundation such as God. As an example, Richard Dawkins compares the rationale behind our urge to kindness to what he insists is a similar urge for sexual lust. As he states, "Sexual lust is a strong urge which exists independently of its ultimate rationale... the same is true of our urge to kindness." In other words, there are traits that exist which overextend their original purpose and any unselfish behavior can and should be included in this category.¹⁰ In his 2003 book, *A Devil's Chaplain*, he furthers this point by saying, "if there is mercy in nature, it is accidental. Nature is neither kind nor cruel but indifferent. Such kindness as may appear emerges from the same imperative as the cruelty."¹¹

According to Dawkins, the best we can hope for is a sort of accidental good. But at this point, even calling something good seems absurd. And the truth is that the consequences of living in such a chaotic and merciless world go beyond the realm of ethics.

LOGICAL CONCLUSIONS & CONSEQUENCES

Indeed, the most apparent consequence of the sociobiological ethic is that humanity exists without any sort of ultimate purpose. As E.O. Wilson has concluded, "no species, ours included, possesses a purpose beyond the imperatives created by its own genetic history . . . we have no particular place to go. The species lacks any goal external to its own biological nature."¹² Attempting to get beyond such a purpose is not only impossible; it is downright absurd. Dawkins adds to this by stating, "the universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference . . . DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music."¹³ And because DNA is so indifferent and unsympathetic, we have no reason to believe that humans too as a species will not eventually become extinct and ultimately irrelevant.

However, at this point, rather than simply give up in despair, many sociobiologists seem to think that they can still somehow get beyond such meaninglessness. That even though life is pointless, they can somehow fight against such unpleasantness. For example, Dawkins tries to argue that we "have to get

10. Richard Dawkins, "Morality and the Selfish Gene," The Science Network, 6 November 2006, online video, <http://thesciencenetwork.org/programs/beyond-belief-science-religion-reason-and-survival/session-7-1> (accessed April 6, 2009).

11. Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 9.

12. E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 2-3.

13. Richard Dawkins, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 132-133.

our 'shoulds' and our 'oughts' from some other source, not from Darwinism."¹⁴ But the problem is that, given a sociobiological understanding of behavior and ethics, this argument can only be seen as delusional and absurd. As the Christian theologian Ted Peters has asked, "How can we *describe* ourselves as driven by selfish genes and then *prescribe* nonselfish or altruistic morality?"¹⁵ The fallacy of their prescription is apparent, as it goes against the very theory that sociobiologists are trying to prove. Philosopher and theologian Ravi Zacharias has properly asked, "If DNA neither knows nor cares, what is it that prompts our knowing and our caring?"¹⁶ The problem is that a purposeless creature cannot construct an existence that is ultimately meaningful, as it is illogical to assume that absurdity can be defeated with more absurdity.

The consequences of losing purpose and a foundation for ethics are simply countless. Given a sociobiological framework, humans have no real value and rights are merely based upon societal conventions. As Michael Horner has said, there is nothing that leads us to "*assume* the objective value of humans in a universe where everything is the accidental arrangement of atoms."¹⁷ Just because we happen to be at the top of the food chain does not mean that we can assign ourselves intrinsic worth. We end up being no more significant than a rat, or even a plant. Therefore, when it comes down to it, as Paul Copan asserts, "if morality is just the product of naturalistic evolution or cultural development or personal choice, then rights do not truly exist."¹⁸ And claiming such rights for oneself or others is illogical and unfounded.

This loss affects us more than some might think. For anytime you appeal for fairness or justice, you are appealing to the absurd notion that such qualities actually exist. And under such a blind system, it becomes impossible to affirm or condemn any action as right or wrong. Because without a foundation for ethics that is transcendent and objective, any affirmation or condemnation is simply relative and ultimately meaningless. As such, no ethical system can really be said to be any better than any other ethical system. To stay consistent with sociobiological theory, an individual like Mother Teresa is no better or worse than Adolf Hitler. The psychopath who tortures and sexually abuses children does nothing *really* wrong, because no vantage point exists for us to make such a judgment. The ongoing genocide in Darfur can just as easily be validated as respectable behavior, as it can be validated as repulsive behavior. Even attributes such as compassion and respect become relative to the principal goals of survival and reproduction. And while many sociobiologists attempt to get beyond such relativity, such an escape is out of the question. For as C.S. Lewis so famously stated, "the moment you say that one set of morals can be better than another, you are in fact measuring them both by an [ultimate] standard."¹⁹ And without any sort of transcendent and objective standard to appeal to, such as God, no responsibility can be implied and, therefore, no action deserves either blame or praise.

THE FUTILITY OF ETHICS

Purposeless. Meaningless. Pointless. Senseless. Empty. Vain. Illusive. Futile. These represent what happens to the foundation of ethics when sociobiological theory is taken to its logical conclusion. For without any transcendent and objective foundation to appeal to, ethics becomes lost in a chaotic and absurd universe. And despite what sociobiologists attempt to salvage after applying their theory, there is no reason to believe that any particular ethical system is better or more valuable than any other system. The consequences of their

14. Richard Dawkins, "You Can Survive without Understanding," interviewed by Frans Roes, *Human Ethology Bulletin* (December 1996), <http://www.froes.dds.nl/DAWKINS.htm> (accessed March 23, 2009).

15. Ted Peters, *Playing God?* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 41.

16. Ravi Zacharias, *Jesus Among Other Gods: The Absolute Claims of the Christian Message* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 114.

17. Michael Horner, "Is There Any Real Right or Wrong?" Campus Crusade for Christ Canada, <http://www.michaelhorner.com/articles/rightorwrong/page6.html> (accessed March 23, 2009).

18. Paul Copan, "The Moral Argument," *To Everyone an Answer*, eds. Francis J. Beckwith, William Lane Craig, J.P. Moreland, and Norman L. Geisler (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 113.

19. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 13.

conclusions are certainly unpleasant, but these unpleasanties are the only rational response for those who assume that we have no purpose beyond our biological initiative to survive and reproduce. With no ultimate meaning or purpose to guide us, we can only dance to the music of our DNA and continue on in an endless cycle of relativity, absurdity and despair.

ANOTHER WAY IS POSSIBLE

This is, however, not to be the fate of those who ground ethics in the transcendent God of the Bible. For it is God who provides the ultimate standard by which a judgment of punishment or praise is even possible. And because absurdity can in no way be defeated by more absurdity, God is the only foundation upon which intrinsic value and human worth can be assessed. For how can we find meaning and significance in a world in which we are just an accidental arrangements of atoms? But in a world in which we are made in God's image, these things are not only possible; they are promised. When the psalmist David was questioning his own meaning and significance, he wrote these words: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your hands, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what are mere mortals that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them?" (Psalm 8.3-4). While I will refrain from answering this question for God, there is no doubt that God has placed value in us and in effect given humanity its worth. With this infusion of meaning and significance that is found in God, we can only hope to do what David did and sing, "Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8.9).

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