

America

CAN EVOLUTION EXPLAIN MORALITY?

December 6, 2010 Issue [1] | John F. Haught [2]

Religion, science and the desire to be good

More than 200 years after the birth of Charles Darwin, the debate about God and evolution shows no signs of abating. Voices loud and soft continue to read Darwin's science as if it were irreconcilable with religious faith.

The noisiest Darwinian controversialists include Richard Dawkins, an evolutionist at Oxford; Daniel Dennett, a philosopher at Tufts; Paul Zachary

Myers, a biologist and blogger at the University of Minnesota; and Jerry A. Coyne, a biologist at the University of Chicago. These writers habitually festoon their scientific writings, philosophical musings and Internet offerings with extravagant claims about how Darwin has destroyed theology.

Most scientists and scientific journalists, by contrast, are reluctant to flash their views on evolution and faith so openly, even when they agree with the more combative Darwinian atheists. The Pulitzer prize-winning author Robert Wright (*The Evolution of God*), for example, whose religious skepticism is based directly on his reading of Darwin, prefers not to be called an atheist, though he admits he is a materialist and does not believe in a personal God. Wright looks kindly on religion but does not address the fact that materialism is incompatible with a coherent understanding of God.

While Nicholas Wade, a talented science writer for *The New York Times*, explicitly professes that he has no atheistic intentions, he claims in his book *The Faith Instinct* that religion



arose in human history for a single reason: to help human genes pass from one generation to the next. Wade insists that he has no interest in suppressing the “faith instinct,” which has been adaptively fertile, but says he would not be unhappy if the idea of God would just go away for good.

All of these writers are devotees of “evolutionary naturalism”: the belief that neo-Darwinian biology (a synthesis of Darwin’s theory of natural selection and the more recent science of genetics) can provide the ultimate explanation of all living traits. Evolutionary naturalism, which must be distinguished carefully from evolutionary biology, is now increasingly popular with scientists, science writers and other intellectuals. According to the evolutionary naturalist, religion and theology, far from being explanatory, are nothing more than obsolete adaptations themselves, fully understandable in evolutionary terms. Beneath the surface of all of the world’s myths and sacred traditions, what is really going on, they say, is that populations of human genes are blindly adapting, surviving and making their way from one generation to the next. And that is all. Evolution has even aimlessly concocted human morality to make people cooperate with each other to improve the chances of transferring their genes to subsequent generations.

The Morality of Babies

An interesting illustration of soft-spoken evolutionary naturalism appeared in an article in *The New York Times Magazine* (5/9) by Paul Bloom, a psychologist at Yale University. Entitled “The Moral Life of Babies,” the article seems innocent enough, but the tacit assumptions that guide it are theologically far-reaching. Commenting on new research in child psychology, Bloom surmises that babies, long before the age of reason, exhibit a rudimentary sense of right and wrong. They do not have to undergo lengthy inculturation before expressing their genetically determined moral propensities. Cultural formation gives content to morality, but evolution makes humans ready to receive it. Even apart from cultural influence, writes Bloom, “some sense of good and evil seems to be bred in the bone.”

What catches my eye is Bloom’s insinuation that the new research proves that Darwinian evolution, rather than any divine spark, ignites human moral instincts. Bloom tries to avoid the question of God, but his article cannot hide his fundamental agreement with the ultra-Darwinians: that evolution demonstrates the godlessness of life and the universe.

Above all, Bloom’s new science of babies offers no hope to those who still think people cannot be truly good without God. Babies, according to Bloom, do not come into the world as blank slates, morally speaking, any more than they do linguistically. Evolution, long prior to

socialization, “jump-starts” the process of moral development all by itself. Infants come equipped naturally with rudimentary moral tendencies only because this endowment has been adaptive—conducive to gene survival—in the past. Beginning with primates and hominids, the moral instincts inherited by modern humans were being sculpted by genetic accidents and natural selection hundreds of thousands of years ago. God is nowhere in sight.

Bloom takes the new research to mean that no divine invitation, no Platonic awakening to a transcendent realm of goodness, no sense of the holy is ever necessary to ground the seriousness of human morality. After Darwin, moral development and the refinement of virtue must be seen as the result of purely natural and cultural processing, all in the service of gene survival. There is no need, Bloom concludes, for divine intervention.

Theological Issues

After reading Bloom’s article and countless others like it, I find no good reason to deny the scientific evidence that human morality is somehow adaptive in a Darwinian sense. A theologian need not reject contemporary evolutionary accounts of human intelligence, morality and religion. Everything living is, at some level of inquiry, grist for the evolutionary mill. If the mill is that of evolutionary naturalism, however, theologians may legitimately protest, without being hostile to evolutionary science. I would immediately want to ask, for example, whether morality is “ultimately” or “nothing more than” an evolutionary adaptation (or perhaps a byproduct of other adaptations). Can one prove scientifically that gene survival is the ultimate meaning of ethics?

Bloom, like Wade, wears his evolutionary naturalism lightly, but it is not hard to detect the metaphysically provocative subtext in his ostensibly scientific essay. Bloom is not content to test his ideas by comparing them exclusively with other empirically based developmental theories, as one would expect a scientist to do. Instead he launches an attack on the conservative Christian apologist Dinesh D’Souza, who is cited in the piece as a defender of the Christian faith.

Why would a good scientist do this? Why not just stick with science? Perhaps Bloom still assumes that theology is little more than a primitive attempt to do science, which must now make way for Darwin. D’Souza, in his defense of the Christian faith against the onslaught of naturalism, appears unconsciously to share Bloom’s assumption that theology belongs to a generically scientific category of explanation, one that allows theology to compete with natural science. D’Souza grudgingly allows that evolutionary biology may explain some of the less noble instances of human morality, like people’s instinctive kindness to close relatives.

He adds, however, that more self-sacrificial acts, like donating blood to strangers or giving anonymously to a worthy cause, are evidence of “the voice of God within our souls.”

D’Souza’s way of making explanatory room for God after Darwin is theologically questionable. To claim that God rather than evolution accounts for highly altruistic expressions of morality is the inverse of the evolutionary naturalist’s declaration. Both positions are theologically meaningless, since they assume, first, that theology can provide scientific information and, second, that there exists only one explanatory level, rather than a plurality of them.

Bloom’s predictable response to D’Souza is that evolutionary biology can fully explain all levels of moral development. Even the selfless moral acts that for D’Souza point directly to the supernatural have for Bloom a purely natural rationale. “Giving up a bus seat for an old lady,” writes Bloom, “turns out to be a cold-bloodedly smart move from a Darwinian standpoint.” It is “an easy way to show off yourself as an attractively good person.” Such displays of altruism are good for attracting mates, hence for promoting gene survival. According to Bloom, Darwinian mechanisms (along with some degree of cultural influence) rather than divine influence explain ultimately and adequately every instance of moral aspiration and activity.

In his broadside, Bloom has moved away from objective reporting into theological disputation. Most evolutionary naturalists—as distinct from evolutionary scientists—habitually try to validate scientific theories by bringing them into competition with theology. Their strategy for debunking deity is to transform the idea of God into a crude scientific hypothesis and then announce that the “God hypothesis” cannot compete with natural selection as an “evidence-based” ultimate explanation.

This is why Richard Dawkins spends so many pages in *The God Delusion* trying to convince readers that the idea of God is a pathetically primitive scientific hypothesis. The biologist Jerry Coyne’s otherwise informative work *Why Evolution Is True* follows the same strategy, as does Victor Stenger’s book *God: the Failed Hypothesis*. The authors’ central assumption is that if only people today would come to their senses and realize that the God idea is nothing more than our species’ infantile stab at doing science, they would be more receptive to the superiority of Darwinian biology. Evolutionary naturalists expect in this way to purify science of all contamination by “faith.”

It backfires.

Whenever Darwinian scientists joust directly with religion instead of giving evidence of scientific purity, they insult both science and theology by transforming empirical information into atheistic propaganda. Evolutionary naturalists like Wade and Bloom may not speak as thunderously as Dawkins and Coyne, but their efforts contribute to the unhappy contemporary fusion of biology with materialist naturalism.

On the other side, D'Souza's way of responding to evolutionary naturalism is also suspect. He sabotages his apologetics by allowing theological accounts of morality to compete directly with those of Darwinian biology. Like the proponents of creationism and intelligent design, D'Souza cheapens theological commentary by placing it at the same explanatory level as natural science.

Evolution as Grammar

A thorough critical inquiry would ask Bloom and other evolutionary naturalists what exactly they mean by morality, goodness and evil; what makes behavior moral or immoral; how a purely evolutionary explanation of morality can escape moral relativism; whether an exclusively scientific account of morality can be compatible with claims to human freedom; whether Darwinian biology alone determines what true responsibility means; what it means that human beings pass through different stages of moral development. These all deserve lengthy comment. But the main issue is to avoid placing theology and biology into competition with each other in the first place. How can evolutionary science be kept from becoming evolutionary naturalism, and theology from appearing to be a primitive kind of science?

One way is to think of evolution as comparable to grammar. In written or spoken language grammatical rules generate the structure of sentences by placing constraints on everything one says and means. Analogously, one may think of Darwin's recipe for evolution—variation, inheritance and selection—as a set of grammatical rules that generate biological outcomes, including moral behavior. Scientists rightly claim that evolution “gives rise to” moral instincts, along with the whole suite of distinctively human traits. But it does so the way grammatical rules structure sentences and paragraphs.

It is good to learn both the grammatical rules for writing and the evolutionary constraints on life. Grammar, however, does not determine the meaning or content of what is written. An article is more than its grammatical structure, just as life and morality are more than the results of a Darwinian formula for generating biological forms. Just as one would not consult only a grammarian to interpret the meaning of a text, so one would not consult only the

evolutionary biologist to discover the meaning of life or whether (and when) one should submit to moral imperatives. The claim that evolution is contrary to theology, therefore, seems as nonsensical as the claim that the grammar underlying this article (or any article) is opposed to its content.

No doubt theology and evolutionary naturalism are incompatible belief systems, but biology and theology lie on distinct planes of inquiry and are logically incomparable. At one level of life, science explores the “grammatical” constraints of evolutionary process. At another level evolutionary theologians explore a still unfinished drama embedded in the grammar of life. Evolutionary naturalists notice the drama too, but summarily declare it pointless. Evolutionary theologians, however, have every right to comment on the story themselves, without having to repudiate the evolutionary rules. Theologically, the drama of life carries a momentous meaning that falls out of the range of what scientific method is wired to receive. Since the adventure of life is ongoing, humanity may have to wait—perhaps in joyful expectation—to see how it turns out in the end. Meanwhile, one can follow the drama without grumbling at the grammar.

*Browse articles from **America's** [special issue](#) [3] on the new atheism.*

***John F. Haught** is a senior fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center of Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. His latest book is *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life* (WJK Press, 2010)*

Source URL: <http://www.americamagazine.org/issue/758/article/can-evolution-explain-morality>

Links:

[1] <http://www.americamagazine.org/toc-past/2010-12-06>

[2] <http://www.americamagazine.org/users/john-f-haught>

[3] http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=12605



For more than a century the Jesuits at America have invested in you.

JESUIT LEGACY SOCIETY

Contact Dan Pawlucz at 212-515-9118 or pawlud@americamagazine.org

John Farley!

[DONATE](#)
[SUBSCRIBE](#)

America

THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC REVIEW

[MAGAZINE](#) [NEWS](#) [FAITH](#) [OPINION](#) [CULTURE](#) [BLOGS](#) [MEDIA](#) [RESOURCES](#)

[LOGIN / REGISTER](#)

From Intuition to Moral Principle

November 15, 2010 Issue [Kevin O'Rourke](#)

Examining the Phoenix case in light of church tradition

The excommunication in March of Sister Mary Margaret McBride for having participated in a decision to terminate a pregnancy threatening the life of the mother has precipitated widespread discussion on the morality of her action. (Sister McBride, a member of the Sisters of Mercy, was vice president of St. Joseph Catholic Hospital in Phoenix, Ariz.) The discussion has been reflected in *America* articles, letters to the editor and in the media at large. In the following article, Kevin O'Rourke, O.P., continues a discussion he began in "[Complications](#)" (*Am.*, 8/2).

—The Editors

Shortly after the case of Sr. Margaret Mary McBride became news, the Committee on Doctrine of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops issued a statement concerning abortion. The statement was occasioned by the Phoenix case ([see sidebar](#)) but did not declare that a direct abortion had been performed and said nothing concerning the canonical penalty of excommunication. The statement did reaffirm the traditional Catholic teaching that "nothing can justify a direct abortion." The purpose of this article is not to comment on the facts or decisions of the people involved in the Phoenix case, but rather to investigate whether there is a foundation for determining that termination of a pregnancy in such circumstances is an indirect abortion rather than a direct abortion.

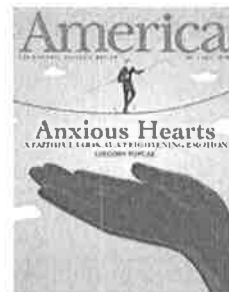


Since the Phoenix case became public, I have asked scores of people involved in Catholic health care—doctors, nurses and hospital administrators—whether they would approve terminating the pregnancy of a nonviable infant if a competent medical team stated that "both mother and child will die unless the pregnancy is terminated, but the mother will live if the pregnancy is terminated." As far as I could judge, the people questioned did not approve of abortion. Without hesitation, however, all said they would approve the procedure in order to save the life of the mother. One veteran nurse practitioner said, "That wouldn't be an abortion." An experienced administrator said, "Would you expect me to just sit there and let the mother die?" The responses were spontaneous, with no one asking for time to make a moral analysis. It seems there is an intuition that such an action would not be morally forbidden, would not be a direct abortion.

Intuition as a Moral Instrument

Intuition, when it is the apprehension of a particular good by an informed conscience, is a legitimate source of a justified moral decision. Christians believe such intuitions are often the result of virtue and the influence of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, it seems that many of the good actions people perform are the result of intuition, typically defined as a subconscious way of knowing. Some philosophers claim this is the only source of moral action. In the Catholic tradition, however, intuition alone is not a sufficient explanation of moral probity. Intuition must be supported by principle in order to provide a firm basis for moral action and application to

Search this site



[CUSTOMER SERVICE](#)
[GIVING](#)
[NEWSLETTERS](#)
[JOBS & CLASSIFIEDS](#)



For more than a century the Jesuits at America have invested in you.

JESUIT LEGACY SOCIETY

Contact Don Pasko at 312-515-0118 or don@americamagazine.org

John Pasko

similar cases.

In the history of Catholic moral theology, there is a famous case in which intuition led Catholic theologians to approve transplants of organs from one living person to another. When transplants between living persons first seemed possible 60 years ago, some Catholic theologians did not approve of such transplants. They maintained that the principle of totality, typically used as the basis for such transplants, allowed one to remove an organ to preserve one's own life but not the life or well-being of another. A statement of Pope Pius XII confirmed this interpretation and thus ruled out transplants based on the principle of

totality.

In 1956, however, Gerald Kelly, S.J., a pioneer in the field of bioethics, stated "that it came as a surprise to physicians that theologians should have difficulty with procedures which are performed with the purpose of helping others." Kelly maintained: "By a sort of instinctive judgment we consider that the giving of a part of one's body to help a sick person is morally justifiable." Following this intuition, Kelly and other theologians searched for a principle that would support transplantation of organs between living people. They realized that the principle of charity, in this case a desire to help other people prolong their lives or at least live with fewer complications, would justify the transplants if functional integrity of the donor's body were maintained. Functional integrity, as opposed to anatomical integrity, allows continued homeostasis of the body, even though an organ is missing. For example, one kidney from a donor could be transplanted to another person, provided the donor's remaining kidney continued to function. The principle of charity is the basis for the Holy See's encouragement over the years of the gift of life-prolonging transplants from one living person to another.



What if Both Mother and Child Will Die?



There seems to be an intuition that terminating a pregnancy that exacerbates pulmonary tension to such an extent that both mother and child will die unless action is taken to remove the source of danger would result in an indirect rather than a direct abortion. Is there a moral principle to support this intuition?

Please support our journalism. [Subscribe now!](#)

The eminent Catholic philosopher Germain Grisez has written that in some circumstances what seems to be a direct abortion may be performed if both mother and infant would die if nothing is done. In *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, Grisez lists four conditions that would justify removing a nonviable infant from the womb: 1) some pathology threatens the lives of both a pregnant woman and her child; 2) it is not safe to wait, for waiting will result in the death of both; 3) there is no way to save the child; 4) an operation that can save the mother's life will result in the child's death. Grisez uses as an example of a licit application of these conditions the case of craniotomy: "In such cases the baby's death need not be included in the proposal to remove the child with an oversized head from the birth canal. The baby cannot remain where it is without ending in both the mother's and the baby's death."

While Grisez's opinion is not without merit, it does not seem to have carried the day. It has not been cited widely in papal statements or standard textbooks as an example of indirect abortion. Perhaps it is because the example he considers when applying the four principles, a craniotomy, does not occur frequently in the United States. Advanced imaging and caesarian-section deliveries enable physicians to circumvent the danger that might occur if the infant has an oversized head. At any rate, Grisez's opinion cannot be rejected out of hand.

Fetal Death and Self-Defense

Another principle, perhaps more helpful in justifying the intuition in question, is that of self-defense. In his *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas justifies the act of self-defense and in so doing explains the conditions that are the basis for the principle of double effect. (It seems Aquinas conceived of self-defense as an application of the principle we now call double effect.) Over the centuries a more explicit set of norms for this principle has been developed, but Thomas presented the essentials. When considering self-defense, he points out that one act may have two effects, one of which is intended and the other not. The intended effect

This Christmas, James Martin, SJ Offers the Gifts of:

- Discovery
- Pilgrimage
- Wisdom
- Mirth

[Click to learn more.](#)

Subscribe Now! Save 71%

America

The Church To Come

MAURICE MARTEL
PHILIP J. PHILLIPS
STEPHEN BULLOCK
CHRISTOPHER M. BROWN
KATHARINE BECKER

CONTINUE >

the preservation of life or well-being of a person in danger of attack; the unintended effect is the harm, even death, that is inflicted upon the person threatening grave harm. Aquinas adds that moral acts take their specific character from what is intended; the unintended effect is accidental and does not determine the morality of the act. Such acts of self-defense are morally acceptable because it is natural to keep oneself in being (alive).

In moral reasoning the person threatening serious harm to another is often called "an unjust aggressor." Is it possible to consider an infant in the womb as an unjust aggressor in regard to the mother? Ordinarily no. But usually pregnancy is not an illness; with proper neonatal care, pregnancy is not life-threatening. But in the Phoenix case the effect of the pregnancy upon the mother is not "ordinary." The activity of the placenta threatens the mother's life.

Elsewhere in the *Summa*, Aquinas maintains that in some situations, factors that are usually circumstances of an act are no longer accidental. They become the principal condition of the moral object. In the case in Phoenix, the moral object no longer envisions a problem-free pregnancy but one that seriously endangers the life of the mother. Something that in most cases of pregnancy is a circumstance, namely the activity of the placenta, has become an essential element of the moral object.

Considering an infant who cannot reason to be an unjust aggressor seems to be an overstatement, but there is no thought that in analyzing the act of self-defense the aggressor must be rational. An irrational person or force of nature (a disease, for example) that attacks a person may still be resisted. The moral act in self-defense does not depend upon the personal qualities of the cause of danger. Perhaps it would be better to concentrate on the pathology as the aggressor rather than to consider the infant as an unjust aggressor.

If the cause of the harmful activity were localized in the placenta, the removal of the placenta could be a means of overcoming the danger to the woman. In the present day, of course, removal of the placenta also causes the death of the infant.

Finally, invoking the principle of self-defense is not a case of using an evil means to procure a good end, as prohibited by the statement from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' doctrinal committee. In the act of self-defense, there is one human act, one moral object. True, the act has two effects; but there is only one intention. That intention is morally good: the prolongation of the mother's life. The act of self-defense, as Aquinas explains, is a good, moral act. Avoiding personal harm becomes the principal condition of the act and thus specifies the human act in question.

As a result of this discussion it seems there is sufficient moral argumentation to support the intuition voiced at the beginning of this article. In cases similar to the Phoenix case, it seems reasonable to maintain that only an indirect abortion is involved.

The Phoenix Case: A Summary

In the fall of 2009, woman patient 10 weeks pregnant was diagnosed with severe pulmonary arterial hypertension. Pulmonary hypertension impairs the function of the heart and is exacerbated during pregnancy by increased hormonal activity of the placenta. In this case the medical records state that the mother had right heart failure and cardiogenic shock. The medical team caring for the woman informed her and the ethics committee of the hospital that both the mother and the child would probably die unless the infant were taken from the mother's womb. The mother originally did not wish to lose the infant but consented to the surgery when she heard the pregnancy was life-threatening.

The ethical code for Catholic hospitals allows the early delivery of a viable infant for a proportionate reason. At 10 weeks, the infant is far from viable. The code also allows an indirect abortion, that is, when the direct effect of a procedure is the cure of a serious pathological condition, for example removal of a cancerous uterus, and the infant dies as a result of the procedure. The code does not allow a direct abortion, however, in which "the sole and immediate effect of the procedure is termination of a pregnancy before viability." Thinking that both mother and infant would die if nothing were done, Sister Mary Margaret McBride, speaking for the ethics committee, gave permission to the medical team to terminate the pregnancy.

Within a few months Bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix, after learning that this procedure had been performed in the Catholic hospital, interviewed the chief executive officer of the hospital and Sister McBride, who had given permission for the surgery that terminated the pregnancy. The bishop declared that the sister had incurred an excommunication because she had cooperated in procuring a direct abortion.