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Sociobiology and the Origins of Morality:

A Christian Perspective

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## Sociobiology and the Origins of Morality: A Christian Perspective

### **Introduction**

During the last decade, several provocative accounts of “morally significant” behavior in animals have been documented on film and in the print media for the general public. Lyall Watson (1994) in his book, *Dark Nature: A Natural History of Evil*, compared events of the recently described battles between troops of chimpanzees to war atrocities in Rwanda and at Auschwitz. Animal examples of ruthless murder and sexual emasculation forced this author to conclude: all animal and human behavior is the result of biological determinism.

Near the end of his book, *Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals*, Frans de Waal noted, “We seem to be reaching a point at which science can wrest morality from the hands of the philosophers and theologians”. Earlier he had suggested we should look to the primates for simple examples of sympathy, empathy, and justice: “ethical” behavior in nature, e.g. such as, whales and dolphins risking their lives to save injured companions, chimpanzees coming to the aid of their wounded, and elephants refusing to abandon slain comrades. These complex social behaviors, with significant moral implications, have now been found to occur in groups of animals in the natural environment (Wilson 1998).

These and other potentially startling observations of animal behavior have ignited a second wave of sociobiology: evolutionary psychology as it is now called. This popular new science that draws on the biological and social sciences attempts to explain all human and animal behavior as the unguided result of natural selection. “Always, without exception” asserts Matt Ridley, (1996) “living things are designed to do things that enhance the chances of their genes or copies of their genes surviving or replicating”. These scientists propose a wholly deterministic understanding of the human species. “We must look down, not up: to nature, not its Creator. Sooner or later, political science, law, economics, psychology and anthropology will all be branches of sociobiology” exclaims another major player in the field (Trivers, 1994). Others include ethics and the study of religion on this list.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the implications of these new developments in the behavioral and biological sciences by reflecting on two very similar observations of two mothers: one human, the other animal. Then we shall consider their possible proximal and distal causes. Finally, we shall reflect on a possible model for determining the difference between morally significant behaviors in animal and humankind.

### **The Two cases for Consideration**

Several years ago, I was deeply moved by the press coverage of a tragic incident in my home community. I can still remember the hauntingly,

surrealistic photograph of a tiny wooden shanty engulfed in flames. To its left, a Goliath of a fire fighter brandished a heat shield in one hand and reached out with the other. He was stuffed into fire retardant clothing, and seemed to be permanently attached to oxygen tanks on his back, while barely bending from the waist, in robot fashion. A photographer had caught him grasping for the thin, flimsy jacket worn by a poor immigrant woman who would not be stopped.

The narrative of the news story that day told of her terrible mistake. Leaving two infant children asleep, she had driven to the local mini-mart for some cheap food. She had not been gone long, but in the interval, sparks from an open wood stove had dropped to the floor. The rest was little less than an inferno.

Her sudden return had surprised the fire-fighting team. One even shouted for her to stop; but all the giant could do was lean out to stop her. And all he got was jacket.

Next day all the media showed was a heap of smoking charcoal. I vividly remember the smell of the dark, acrid slurry and the sight of dying wisps of smoke as it finished its task; when our family car rolled by. I read how three bodies were found, two in the arms of one, together, but not the same size.

An old spinster in our church said it was a real shame the poor girl went back into the shack. "Suicide," I think she said. My dad wished the firemen had stopped her: it would clearly have been better for one fewer to die. But her

only really good friend simply wept, “I’d have done the same thing myself, and I’d tell her to do it again”.

For days afterward, I pondered the details of this tragedy when I was alone. What would I have done? Had I been the poor young mother, what should I have done? Had I been a member of the fire-fighting team, what would I have done? For what should I give my life, my health, my future?

I wondered.

Only recently did it occur to me that a similar experience was part of my early childhood memories. When I was barely a child, our family raised white leghorn chickens. Though I did not like feeding and watering them, it was fun to collect their eggs. My favorite hen – Girdy – was such a steady layer...often more than 7 eggs a week.

And what a mother, even of eggs; she would lay and set, and sit and set, and set and set, until there were chicks. Faithful as ever.

It may have been a short from the single electric cord that fed a tiny heater. Anyway, Girdy’s end of the coop burned first and we never had a chance of putting it out. The next day I smelled acrid wisps of smoke again, but not this time from our family car. Soon after my dad got out the old garden rake, Girdy’s body came up; right where she had been setting those many days and nights. And underneath, were four chicks and two eggs—alive and well.

I continue to puzzle at the superficial similarity of these two events. I admit to admiring self-sacrificing behavior. I know other Christians who feel the same.

And so I question “Which mother should have behaved differently?” “Which could have behaved differently?” Why?

Frankly, I guess the chicken never really had a chance. Some would say she was nothing but a genetically-programmed, hormonally-controlled, protective mechanism for her eggs. I know Richard Dawkins (1976) would agree, for he maintains that we are all simply handy collections of selfish genes. Girdy probably did not know why it was getting hot. She probably did not think of getting up. She surely did not think of eternal punishment or reward for doing the right thing. And yet she paid the ultimate price, for a thoughtless deed that appeared so morally good to some.

The human mother may have thought about things like these before; reflecting on what she might do if harm ever threatened her young. In the quietness of eventide, the choice may have seemed easy as she touched the warm skin and felt the hesitant breath that had originated in her own body. She might have found Christ’s example comforting when it really didn’t matter—love and life that lead to death and back to life again; and a Special Spirit’s soft silence consciously confirming committed choosing.

### **Thinking about Choices**

Prior to the last century, Christians might have seen these events as having the same original cause: God's Holy Spirit; for our scientific and religious forefathers attributed all morally right behaviors to an intervening, transcendent God. Today our answers might be different.

Modern scientists explain behavior in terms of interactions of muscle anatomy, neurophysiology, cognitive psychology, and behavioral ecology. For example, complex behavior such as mating can be studied and selected for. In fruit flies for example, in as few as 15 generations, two new species can be artificially generated based only on the speed of courtship. That means that fast courting males are no longer acceptable to the slower females, and visa versa. In these few generations, this complex behavior so crucial to keeping a species alive, though unlearned, has been changed. In our own species, many behaviors seem to be unlearned as well. For instance, from our earliest hours, sucking is an essential action of normally-developed infants. And when they are older, children fear heights, as measured on a visual cliff, consistently and without learning. Parents of human teenagers are quite sure that much if not most of adolescent behavior occurs without much thinking and is driven by lots of genes and the hormones they make. In fact, recent quantitative observations of human sexual behavior show that the motor patterns during the time of intercourse is essentially identical and probably therefore genetically determined in many different human cultures around the world. The nearer to

the moment of climax, the more alike the biological responses; and the body never needs to learn them. Thus, here is a deeply moral and emotional behavior that seems to be more innate than learned.

Most of us are accustomed to thinking of almost all human behaviors as learned; and many are. For instance, food preferences are now known to be conditioned at a very early age. Vocabulary and speech patterns are naturally absorbed with astonishing speed during the first few years of life. Love for parents, respect for authority, dating rules, chess, and arithmetic, are all examples of even more complex learning tasks that can lead to habits and abilities we hope our children learn quickly and efficiently. But how many of these behaviors really matter in the larger scheme of things? How many are related to salvation and eternal life?

Maybe some. Maybe none.

For those of us seriously interested in spiritual things, understanding the processes of and qualifications for eternal life is critically important. We read, discuss, meditate and act upon ideas of related worth. For most of us, God and Scripture are a major source of direction. From these, we develop principles of moral worth—central core values that guide our lives and decisions.

Recently, biologists and social scientists thinking about the origins of these qualities in primitive human groups have decided that they are the product of evolution; just like every other biological trait. They argue that natural



selection favored individuals with collections of genes for these behaviors and they reproduced more successfully. Sharing food with one's children resulted in more of them surviving. Giving alarm calls upon the approach of a predator allowed one's offspring to hide. Even delaying the start of one's own family by helping to raise siblings has been interpreted as an act of altruism, and thus of moral worth.

Observations like these are the basis for the suggestion that there may be less difference between animal and human behavior than we once thought. More and more actions traditionally reserved for our own species are being discovered to occur in primates. Conversations between man and monkey via sign language have led to inferences of feelings about hunger, thirst, sexual interest and fear; all being part of another species cognitive ability. And the cooperative acts of violence, I have already referred to, would be punishable crimes if performed by members of our own species.

The implications of this new "biological morality" are troubling to even the most headstrong naturalist scientists and philosophers. Philip Yancy quotes John Maynard Smith, in a review of Daniel Dennet's book, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*:

"Is there any way in which we can decide, with certainty, which actions are right? Dennet's view, which I share, is that there is not, unless you hold that some book, for example the bible, is the word of God, and that human beings are here to do God's bidding. If a person is simply the product of his or her genetic make up and environmental history,

including all the ideas that he or she has assimilated, there is simply no source where absolute morality could come from. Of course, this does not exempt us from making moral judgments: it only means that we cannot be sure that we are right.”

Most contemporary scientists subscribe to this philosophy. And the implications of not being clear about our moral and ethical roots are ominous. Stephan Chorover’s book, *From Genesis to Genocide*, traces the frightening misuse of biology in recent history. He shows how biological explanations have been used to justify slavery, imperialism, racism, and sexism. As Klaus Fischer’s *Nazi Germany: A New History* asserts, “our century’s worst crime, the genocide orchestrated by Hitler, was made possible in part because of the eugenic consequences that German intellectuals drew from Darwin’s survival of the fittest philosophy.”

The Western intellectual community now finds eugenics repulsive and roundly condemns racism based on Social Darwinism. Yet its allegiance to philosophical naturalism leave it vulnerable to abuse, especially now that advances in genetic research allow for genetic improvement.

But that is what modern science is hoping for, thinking for, striving for, even ‘praying for’ in its own way. How can moral decisions about right or wrong, better or worse, be made in the future?

The following few statements form a tentative model for guiding our thinking about morally significant behavior. They are related to basic observations of animal and human actions and core issues in Christian belief.

**1. Observable actions of animals and humans are the result of physical processes.** Neurological processes in the brain initiate signals that are sent by nerves to the muscles that cause actions we are able to perceive. Genes and learning are the mechanisms by which these connections are made. As yet we have not discovered any basic physiological differences between animals and humans.

**2. Only humans have the ability to reflect on the meaning and implications of their behavior.** This difference is due to mans' "higher nature". Inspiration suggests that our mind and conscience are to control the "lower nature" which refers to "genetic and cultivated tendencies" (White 1940, p.296). Secular scholars point to learned experience as the source for cultural standards with which such behavior is compared. Christians have traditionally included a study of Scripture as an even more important standard of human behavior. The ability to reflect on the outcomes of decisions and to compare them with moral standards of behavior are two key differences between humans and animals.

**3. The motives for human action are what provide moral value.** Inspiration records that "It is the motive that gives character to our acts, stamping them with

ignominy or with high moral worth.” (White 1940) That suggests that that the reasons behind our actions are what really matter in an eternal sense. Exactly the same behavior might be righteous in one case but sinful in another, depending upon the motive initiating it.

For instance you and I might be walking down the street of nearly any major city and be confronted by a beggar. As we near a decision point of what to do, I see you move to make a small gift. Past experience and compassion for those less fortunate nudge this action from your heart. Quickly, and with some jerky hesitation, I search my pocket for change. There is none. So out comes my wallet. But I will not be outdone by you. Soon a dollar bill is flipped into the beggar’s little tin cup along with your coin. Two very similar actions; two very different motives; and two very different marks in the books of heaven.

**4. “Every right impulse comes from Christ” via the working of the Holy Spirit in the life** (White 1956). Whether or not an individual knows it, acknowledges it, or believes it, morally right motives for behavior come only from one source outside oneself. There is no middle ground; we are under the influence of one spirit or another. This is not a popular concept with clever, capable, educated people. We have learned many things. We have disciplined ourselves. We take pride in being able to make free moral decisions based on moral and philosophical information far beyond the ordinary. But could we be wrong?

Inspiration is very clear that there is only one source of morally right choices (righteousness) and our best efforts to make these on our own are simply as “filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6)

In summary, morally good behavior occurs in human beings only as a result of the Spirit of God moving on the mind. As animals do not have conscious, self-awareness, God or His Spirit does not immediately direct their decision-making. Similarity between the behavior of animals and man is just that; apparent similarity; and does not take into account the motives for the behavior itself. Animal behavior is the result of genetic and learned factors; whereas, human behavior that is morally good is ultimately a response to the leading of the Creator God.

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