

# The moral implications of Darwinism

by Earl Aagaard

*We cannot be Darwinists and at the same time hold the biblical-Christian view that human life is sacred.*

**H**uman 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 Kevorkian assisting suicide and then being embraced as a serious and even valuable contributor to our moral conversation. The question looms: What is 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, or Pol Pot. But now we're not talking about the past. We are at the edge of the 21st century. Knowledge has been increased: astronauts crisscross space; satellites circle the globe bringing information from everywhere to everywhere in a few moments; galaxies beyond our own have become objects of study; and genes within our bodies are searched and researched for a clue to the mysteries of human life. And yet there remains the question—simple, yet most profound: What is so special about being human?

For many philosophers, including some who call themselves Christians, the answer is increasingly, nothing much. With all of 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 the 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, are we still talking about human rights and dignity?

## **The myth of origins**

The answer may be found 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 are not 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 Henry Ward Beecher, the renowned preacher, 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 the Darwinism and religion are not incompatible, that one can be both a theist and a Darwinist; while others (William Provine) assert that Darwinism makes all supernatural religion not just superfluous, but untenable.

Rachels argues ("Must a Darwinian Be Skeptical?") 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 argument is a powerful one, and 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 be physically different from non-human animals, but cannot be essentially so. Certainly 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," and it 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 deals first with human equality, and then rejects it! 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 "rele-

vant 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 chimpanzee 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, then the differences are irrelevant" (p. 181). This is no bulwark against the selfishness and evil we see in ourselves and in our fellow human beings.

Experience demonstrates that any soft, relativistic ethical standard will be twisted into whatever shape is needed to allow us to do whatever we want to our fellow human beings. 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. This is the difference between morality and amorality. There is no middle ground.

### Darwinism and amorality

The connection between Darwinism and amorality is now explicit. In the *New York Times Magazine* of November 3, 1997, Stephen Pinker wrote about "evolutionary psychology." He tells us that "moral philosophers have concluded that...our immature neonates don't possess [the right to life] any more than mice do," and alleges that "neonaticide may be a product of maternal wiring" since it has "been practiced and accepted in most cultures 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. In articles such as this, the formerly unthinkable is being presented as reasonable and acceptable. We are being "softened up" for a change in community morality—one holding that some humans deserve respect and protection, but that others do not, and can be killed with impunity. You 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 kind of reasoning. The emerging ethic in the West is a direct repudiation of the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In its preamble, 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 and inalienable rights of all members of the human family." In the Articles themselves, we find that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" (Article 1); "Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind" (Article 2); "Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person" (Article 3); "Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a per-

son before the law" (Article 6); and "All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law" (Article 7). This is not equivocal language; there can be no confusion about what was meant. Accepting what Rachels and Pinker are offering means turning our back on the settled wisdom of the past.

Maturity (and our safety) demands honest reflection. A system of ethics based on moral relativism will always end up with the strong in charge and the weak beneath their heel. The Darwinist worldview, followed to its logical conclusion, leads us nowhere else, and this should be sufficient for us to reject it. Perhaps we should not be surprised to find the secular and wholly naturalistic Darwinists espousing such a cold-blooded and utilitarian philosophy, but what is truly astounding is the number of ethicists, philosophers, and others who identify themselves as Christians and yet urge us to adopt an ethic that leads us down the Darwinist path.

The argument for moral relativism is subtle and 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 there is a difference between a "human" and a "person," and that "personhood" is the category a human must attain in order to have a right to life. The qualifications for "personhood" vary—but generally they include the possession of self-consciousness as a necessary condition to be a "person" with full moral status (for instance, to have a right not to be killed). Of course, no human being is born with self-consciousness, and many of us may lose our self-consciousness, temporarily or permanently, due to injury, illness or age. Here, then, is the convergence of Darwin's philosophy and that of some of today's Christian thinkers, "moral individualism" meeting "proximate personhood."

Moral individualism (or the "person-

hood" ethic) and the U.N. Charter's Universal Declaration of Human Rights are colliding moral galaxies; they are totally 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" purports to be founded on human reason, and is expressed in statements that begin with, "I argue...", "I see...", or "I contend..." "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" (Genesis 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," there is no principle preventing one race from classifying other races as less than fully human and enslaving or killing them. There is no principle calling to account those who seek to demote others to the status of "non-persons." There is no principle condemning parents who use pre-natal testing to determine the sex of the unborn and then abort the female. There is no principle to stop a society from deciding that full human status isn't reached until age 3 or 4, and establishing centers for the elimination of any unwanted "non-persons." There is no principle to prevent the cloning of a (very rich) individual, or the use of the human being that results as a stock of spare parts. We may recoil at these suggestions, but the hard truth is that when we abandon the biblical imperative that

innocent human life is sacred and must not be touched, we are all at risk, because when the strong take over, "might makes right."

When Christian ethicists reach the same conclusions as Darwinists about our obligations to our fellow humans, it's time to do some careful thinking. God created us, and He knows the evil of which we are capable. For this reason, He instructed us to treat all humans as worthy of equal dignity and respect. Neither "moral individualism" nor the ethic of "personhood" is compatible with the traditional interpretation of Scripture, and this should be reason enough for people of faith to reject them outright. But, in addition, for those whose faith is weak, history offers many demonstrations that before every slaughter there has been a division of the human population into "our group" (protected) and "those other guys" (not protected) that makes it permissible to do the killing. Most of the current relativistic ethicists have no such thing in mind. They are simply trying to create a non-dogmatic, rationalistic base for behavior they deem proper. This effort has been tried before, invariably with tragic consequences.

I believe that James Rachels succeeds in his argument: 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 still be a Christian?

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*Earl Aagaard (Ph.D., Colorado State University) is professor of biology at Pacific Union College. His mailing address: 3 College Ave., Angwin, California 94508. E-mail: eaagaard@puc.edu*

*For earlier essays on this topic in our journal, see David Ekkens, "Humans and animals: Are they equal?" Dialogue 6:3 (1994), pp. 5-8, and James Walters, "Is Koko a person?" Dialogue 9:2 (1997), pp. 15-17, 34.*