

## *Evolution and Ethics: Suffering, Moral Evil, and Virtue*

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### **I. Preliminary Remarks**

I suspect that most of us have said or heard the words: “What is this world coming to?” Not a bad question when we’re reflecting on evolution. Not a bad question at all. Yet the question is not ordinarily prompted by information or conversations about evolution. More often it arises when we have heard about a tragedy of some sort: a random shooting in a movie theater; planes crashing into buildings killing thousands, or the systematic massacring of people. We tend to ask the question because people have done something that shocks us; something that seems beyond what we could imagine; something terribly wrong. People intentionally hurt other people, or us, and we wonder where this could possibly have come from and where it will take us.

Prof. Domning considered at length this morning the question of what is traditionally called physical evil. I would like to reflect with you on moral evil, that is, wrongdoing that finds its source in human beings.

A preliminary remark would be helpful regarding criteria for judging something as morally wrong. Roman Catholic moral theology made a shift in reasoning in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century to what may be called “person-centered” reasoning in morality, with the result that an action is judged morally evil when it conflicts with the authentic human good of a person, as John Paul II stated in his encyclical *The Splendor of Truth*.<sup>1</sup> Even though the Catholic tradition judges actions as morally wrong when one intentionally harms authentic human good, it has a fuller description of the consequences of misusing one’s freedom in an earlier document, the *Constitution on the Church in the Modern*

*World*, from the Second Vatican Council, when it notes that the humanity's abuse of freedom results in a rupturing of a fourfold relationship with God, others, oneself, and "all created things."<sup>ii</sup> So the whole of the created world is included in the relationships of persons. While the tradition now consistently speaks of the moral agent in a fourfold relationship with God, others, self, and all of creation, we are only scratching the surface as to how the relationship with all of creation might enter into moral analysis. Yet, in light of what we are discussing here, and in light of evolution itself, it seems all the more essential to attend to the close relationship that humanity has with all of creation.

Now I return to the question: What is this world coming to? I think it is safe to say that we long for a world like that described in the Book of Revelation, chapter 21: 1-5, where we read:

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people and God himself will always be with them (as their God). He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, (for) the old order has passed away." The one who sat on the throne said, "Behold, I make all things new."

This vision captures where, I suspect, we hope that the world is heading, a world where there is no more tears or mourning or death itself.

Yet we find ourselves in a world of tears and death and mourning and wailing and pain. It is a world captured by St. Paul in his letter to the Romans, chapter 8, verses 18-23, where he reflects on this vision, this paradise yet to come, while in the midst of an imperfect and sinful world. Paul writes:

"I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us. For creation awaits with eager expectation the

revelation of the children of God; for creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but because of the one who subjected it, in hope that creation itself would be set free from slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that all creation is groaning in labor pains even until now; and not only that, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, we also groan within ourselves as we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.”

In these times between the Big Bang and the fulfillment of the vision of the Book of Revelation, we find ourselves, like St. Paul, in a world touched by a variety of experiences of suffering, sometimes asking ourselves, “What is this world coming to?” As I said, I will focus on moral evil as a source of suffering and see what challenges and insights from theories of evolution might assist us in this reflection. Then, also with reference to insights from theories of evolution, I will reflect briefly on human virtues called for in such a world and identify seeds of human virtue in the seemingly empathic behavior of non-human animals.

A first question, however, is “Do traditional categories of moral theology regarding freedom and responsibility hold up in light of the emergence of humanity or are they an illusion?” In other words, is there truly moral evil that arises from free and responsible human beings or are these harmful actions of human beings simply another example of physical evil in a broken world, or actions that “must” take place in the ongoing process of natural selection? Or is there a middle ground between this either/or proposal?

## **II. Types of Suffering Arising from Moral Evil**

First a word about moral evil itself and this particular type of suffering. Dr. Daniel Sulmasy, O.F.M. speaks of three ways in which moral evil may be operative as a cause of suffering:

The first is suffering which is the result of our own moral evil "without any intervening material occasion; examples include the pangs of conscience, remorse, and guilt."<sup>iii</sup> I remember, for example, a young man who had an affair that undid the bond between him and his wife and was the cause for a divorce. They had three children. He never got over the harm that he had done to his family. Even though the relationship was friendly, he suffered tremendously over his own moral failure. The source of his suffering was his own remorse over his wrongdoing. There was nothing materially to cause him suffering.

A second type of suffering is the "result of the moral evil of others without any intervening material occasion. . . ."<sup>iv</sup> We might imagine the suffering that someone experiences when not invited to participate in a conference on a topic about which he or she is an expert; or the experience of someone who is intentionally ostracized from the family or marginalized because of race. Intentional exclusion would be hurtful, although we would have no physical bruises to show for our suffering.

A third kind of suffering is the "result of the moral evil of self or of others mediated through material occasions of suffering. The long and horrible list of examples included self-mutilation, torture, assault, rape, poisoning, murder, war, and willful negligence."<sup>v</sup> Here, the examples speak for themselves.

Catholic moral theology would suggest that the three types of suffering are not due to accidents or that unhappy phrase "acts of God," but from moral evil, whether occasioned by some material cause or not.

### **III. Traditional Criteria for a Fully Human Act/Responsibility for Moral Evil**

In traditional moral theology, two qualities are necessary for living the moral life and for an act to be judged truly human: freedom to exercise one's will and consciousness about what one intends to do. When these two characteristics are present, a person may be held responsible for his or her action.<sup>vi</sup> Absent these two qualities, one may speak of an act of a human person, but not a truly human act. So, a person who drives on an icy road and accidentally crosses the double lines and crashes into oncoming traffic has not knowingly and freely chosen to bring harm to another; the same cannot be said for the driver of a Humvee who intentionally bumps into the car slowly plugging along in the passing lane!

If we look back at those three types and examples of suffering, we may see that the cause of the suffering is associated with human choices made with freedom and knowledge which, in one way or another, harmed others and were sources of suffering for the victim and even for the one who caused the harm.

#### **IV. Challenges to Freedom, Responsibility, and Moral Evil**

According to the Catholic tradition, the questions of the existence of moral evil, indeed morality itself, hinges on freedom and knowledge. Moral theologian Stephen Pope writes: "Morality itself would be fatally compromised if science somehow demonstrated that human freedom and moral responsibility were illusions."<sup>vii</sup> Whether "demonstrated" or not, some scientists suggest that human freedom and moral responsibility are illusions. Pope summarizes the thought of some contemporary evolutionists precisely on the question of freedom and, consequently, moral responsibility, and moral evil. What do representative thinkers say and how are their arguments countered?

William Provine, representing an extreme view of Neo-Darwinists, suggests that, according to modern science, “free will as it is traditionally conceived – the freedom to make uncoerced and unpredictable choices among alternative courses of action – simply does not exist. . . There is no way that the evolutionary process as currently conceived can produce a being that is truly free to make moral choices.”<sup>viii</sup>

On what basis might Provine or others make this claim? For some thinkers, the presumption is that natural selection and random events have produced the creatures that we are today. If this is the case, it is foolish to speak of freedom and responsibility. We are simply the products of evolution and have evolved as other species in order to continue in being as individuals and as a species. All of our behavior is about fitness. And behavior today continues to be guided by this evolutionary drive.

Sometimes the “cause” of human behavior is attributed to genes alone, a kind of genetic determinism; sometimes to an interaction between genes and the environment, a type of environmental determinism. But ultimately, the notion that we human beings are free and responsible for what we do is counted as “illusory.” E.O. Wilson writes: “The agent itself is created by the interaction of genes and the environment. It would appear that our freedom is only a self-delusion.”<sup>ix</sup> In a sense, we do what we are “programmed” to do by natural selection, by genes alone, or by genes in interaction with environment.<sup>x</sup>

## **V. Response to Critique**

Stephen Pope critiques this position by arguing three points principally. First, he points out that sociobiologists and evolutionary psychologists who hold this position concerning human freedom and ultimately the possibility to live the moral life and to cause moral evil, rely on a presupposition that the only way that we can understand all of

reality is through the scientific method. He does not question in any way the validity of the scientific method but suggests that scientists are mistaken to presume that this method is sufficient and the only way to understand and to explain the whole reality of life, particularly our experience as conscious and free human beings. Pope writes: “[T]here is a difference between trying to use science to explain as much about phenomena as possible (methodological reductionism) and assuming that science alone has the ability fully to explain all phenomena (epistemological reductionism). There is also an important difference between employing science to discover whatever can be known about the material world (methodological reductionism) and assuming that the material world alone is real (ontological naturalism or ontological reductionism).”<sup>xi</sup> John Polkinghorne concurs when he says that “The boundary set by science does not negate the meaning of inquiry and practice beyond that boundary; rather, it demarks the onset of other dimensions of human knowledge and action.”<sup>xii</sup>

Pope’s second critique specifies a bit further the first. He looks at the difficulty of presuming to explain or to understand the whole of anything, but of human beings in particular, as only the sum of its parts. This would be called a mereological relationship between the parts and the whole, where “entities belonging to a given level, except those at the very bottom, have an exhaustive decomposition, without remainder, into entities belonging at the lower levels. Entities at the very bottom have no physically significant proper parts.”<sup>xiii</sup> So, if there is no evidence or capacity for freedom, consciousness, and moral responsibility in the part at the lower level, the argument goes, how could there be in the whole? Pope responds that “Living organisms manifest properties that are not reducible to the properties of their physical and chemical components. . . . [W]holes can

posses ‘emergent properties’ that do not exist in their individual components taken as isolated units.”<sup>xiv</sup> He speaks of “holism” as descriptive of an evolutionary process where one sees “the gradual emergence of more and more intricate and complex webs of reciprocal influence.”<sup>xv</sup> Conway Morris also notes that “[o]rganisms are more than the sum of their parts” and compares Dawkins’ explanation in terms of genes alone as an attempt to describe a picture by addressing the ways the different colors were formed and so forth.<sup>xvi</sup> Similarly, Polkinghorne says that if a scientist were asked to articulate everything that he or she could with regard to music from a scientific point of view, they might speak of “a neural response to the impact of sound waves on the eardrum.” But the “deep mystery of music” experienced as “timeless beauty”<sup>xvii</sup> cannot be captured there, anymore than the whole of a symphony may be appreciated by playing the single notes from the score of the second violin.

Implicit in the “part vs. whole” critique is the notion of emerging complexity, which Pope marks as accounting for the existence of freedom and consciousness in human beings. He points out that evolution witnesses to the fact that “[n]ature as a whole is organized in such a way as to produce more and more complexity and higher and higher capacities for responsiveness, intelligence, and consciousness.”<sup>xviii</sup> The existence of *Homo sapiens* is evidence of such emerging complexity. One attempt at explaining emerging complexity is the debated notion of “downward causation,” which suggests that, as Richard Campbell and Mark Brickard note, “complex systems, in virtue of their macro-level properties, are able to bring about changes at lower levels.”<sup>xix</sup> Pope notes further that “[t]he essential implication of the notion of human emergent complexity is that the human good embraces all aspects of human nature: not only the physical,

chemical, and biological but also the social, cultural, psychological and emotional, intellectual, moral, and religious dimensions of human existence.”<sup>xx</sup> Far from being reduced to the sum of its parts, this “whole” possesses the capacity to feel, reflect, relate, deliberate, act, and to be held accountable for his or her actions.

A third point may appear more an assertion than an argument, but Pope appeals to human experience itself. While acknowledging factors that influence the exercise of freedom in human beings, Pope writes:

Every person has the daily experience of deciding to act in one way rather than another on the basis of good reasons, or moral principle, or an overriding loyalty or a desired goal. To dismiss all of these motives as illusory, or as ‘slaves’ of deeper genetically driven motivations, runs too profoundly against the experience of what it means to be human, to be persuasive.<sup>xxi</sup>

The bottom line for Pope is that there does seem to be evidence both in evolution and certainly in human experience to speak credibly of free persons who have the ability to deliberate and to make choices.

## **VI. Free Persons: Determined and Determining**

To state that freedom and knowledge or understanding are part of the natural reality for human beings is not to suggest that human knowing and the exercise of freedom take place in a vacuum and are not influenced by external and internal factors. Rather we recognize that human experience presumes some degree of self-direction and self-determination “within contexts that are to a large extent not of [the human person’s] own making.”<sup>xxii</sup> Freedom is exercised by limited human beings.

The Catholic tradition has long noted impediments or obstacles to fully human acts, again, those acts that presume knowledge and freedom, and for which we might be held responsible. Traditionally, ignorance was the greatest obstacle to knowledge. For

example, someone is out hunting and shoots a person thinking that he is a deer. We call it an accident because the person did not knowingly shoot to kill a human being.

Ignorance presented an impediment to knowledge. With regard to freedom, the tradition noted factors affecting full freedom such as the threat of violence, fear, emotions, and ongoing impediments such as personality traits, poor education, prejudice, harmful habitual behavior, and so forth.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Perhaps the most significant aspect of freedom as understood in the moral life is not simply that a moral agent has the ability to choose this or that course of action. Rather, it is that in making these choices one is shaping oneself as a person. Karl Rahner once wrote: "Freedom is . . . the capacity to make oneself once and for all, the capacity which of its nature is directed towards the freely willed finality of the subject as such."<sup>xxiv</sup>

So freedom has this twofold effect of making a choice for a particular action but also making a choice about the type of person one will become through the exercise of one's freedom. One who consistently tells the truth becomes trustworthy and is known as such. By contrast, one who habitually lies will be known as such, a liar, dishonest. "Trustworthy" and "dishonest" are not merely words that are applied to actions; in fact they would not ordinarily be used in this way. They refer to persons and precisely to the kind of person a moral agent has become due to his or her particular choices. There is some wisdom from Professor Dumbledore of Harry Potter fame who says to Harry: "It's our choices, Harry, that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

When we consider the evolution of human beings, we must note the influence of the process of evolution itself, particularly with the bent toward selfishness, and the way it affects the exercise of freedom in human beings. We recognize as well the limiting

effect that realities such as personal and social sin have on the shaping of persons. At the same time, we must recognize the positive impact of the evolutionary process and of the goodness of people on moral agents. While acknowledging that human freedom presumes the ability to shape oneself into a particular type of person, we must also recognize that the capacity to do so varies greatly, depending on the particular context of the moral agent.

So, when moral theology addresses the existence of freedom in terms of certain theories of evolution, it addresses more than the ability of a moral agent to make this or that choice. More significantly, it speaks of the capacity to shape the “interior” of persons toward or away from what is good, toward or away from the vision of the Book of Revelation with which our talk began.

Moral theologian Paul Wadell summarizes well the purpose of freedom within Christian ethics when he writes:

In Christianity, freedom does not exist for its own sake; rather freedom exists for the sake of doing good in all the ways good can be done. Freedom is for the sake of justice and love, for the sake of mercy and compassion. Freedom is given us so that we can be generous, patient, and faithful. . . . In Christianity, freedom hinges on loving and desiring the good. Freedom is for excellence. And this means that the perfection of freedom is found not in the person of power and wealth, but in the virtuous person, in the saint.<sup>xxv</sup>

## **VII. Conclusion of First Part: Free Persons Exist and Are Responsible for Some Suffering in the World**

Returning to the situations of suffering that were described at the beginning of this paper, it seems in the view of the scholars whose work I have presented here that free persons exist: we meet them and inter-relate with them in actions and reactions. We are not deluded in judging them to be free: they are not deluded in considering themselves

free. Freedom and knowledge constitute the essentials for human moral action. Persons are not free from internal and external factors that affect them. Those who use their freedom to harm others, as in the situations of suffering described, have abused their freedom and may rightly be held responsible. They have used it not for justice and love but for harm and evil. The result is moral evil and suffering, brought about through human agency.

### **VIII. Responding to a World of Suffering**

What might be the proper human response to suffering? More particularly, what kinds of persons ought we seek to become so as to be capable of responding to suffering, whether it arises from physical or moral evil?

Thirty years ago Dr. Eric Cassell wrote a seminal work on suffering in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, later developed into a book.<sup>xxvi</sup> He notes that suffering is "experienced by persons, not merely by bodies, and has its source in challenges that threaten the intactness of the person as a complex social and psychological entity."<sup>xxvii</sup> Although Cassel is writing from his experience as a physician, his description of suffering and its effects rings true, it seems to me, including suffering arising from physical evil and moral evil. People who are suffering may feel that both their internal and external worlds are coming apart, leaving them less than intact.

In teaching courses on bioethics and the sacraments of reconciliation and anointing of the sick over the years, I always begin with a reflection on suffering where I ask the students what feelings they associate with suffering. While many feelings surface such as confusion, anger, resentment, fear, invariably the bottom line revolves around feelings of isolation from oneself ("I don't quite feel myself"), from others, and often

from God. Sufferers experience alienation. What brings comfort to the sufferers? More often than not, it is simply the presence of another person who cares for them. I certainly do not downplay the significance of efforts to find the cause and a cure for suffering, yet, most comforting is the sense of belonging that others communicate by their presence. There are two aspects to the comfort: presence and the care of another, expressed through presence and action.<sup>xxviii</sup>

Sometimes presence is experienced simply by the physical presence of one to another, sitting quietly with a person who has discovered that her husband has been unfaithful; holding the hand of someone undergoing chemotherapy; listening quietly as someone tells of an act of prejudice against them. Other times there is more than presence alone: assisting the woman to figure out what the next steps will be for herself and her family; driving someone to the hospital for treatments; painting a garage door that was spray painted with racial epithets. Whether something is done or not, it is the care behind the action, what we would term a virtuous action, that brings comfort to the one suffering.

#### **A. Evolutionary Roots for Virtuous Human Behavior?**

Are we able to detect virtuous-like behavior in other animals that might be the seeds of human virtue, particularly regarding responses to suffering? Mary Midgely, while not addressing specifically “virtuous behavior” insists that our attempts to understand more fully the “complex nature” of animals “has been a great contribution to our understanding of our own lives. . . . If we do not grasp our links with that world,” she say, “we cannot properly understand ourselves?”<sup>xxix</sup> My focus here is precisely on evolutionary roots for virtuous behavior in non-human animals. It is worth pointing out,

however, that there is evidence of cooperation at all levels of evolution. At the April conference in this Atom & Eve Series, Dr. Unlanowicz spoke of the precedence of mutuality to competition. He wrote:

It is ironical that today one continually encounters conferences and papers devoted to resolving how observed mutualisms could possibly arise out of a natural world that is driven everywhere by competition. That problem, of course, is ill-posed, because it is mutuality that is fundamental and out of which competition ultimately derives.<sup>xxx</sup>

So, is there evidence from the non-human world of pre-virtuous behavior, if you will? An example may help. Frans de Waal tells the story of a chimpanzee name Jakie who helped another older chimpanzee, Krom. In the area where the chimpanzees were kept there were tires, which presumably provided some source of entertainment for the chimps. At the end of the day, the zookeepers hosed down the tires and hung them on a horizontal log in the enclosure. Water remained in one of tires. Krom was interested in the tire with water and tried to pull the tire off the log but could not do so because six other tires were in front of it on the log. After trying for about ten minutes, she gave up. Jakie, a seven-year old chimp who had been cared for by Krom when he was a juvenile, promptly went over, pulled the six tires off the log and then pulled the last one off, without spilling the water, and brought it to Krom, who immediately began to scoop the water out of the tire.<sup>xxxi</sup> Why did Jakie do what he did? I think that the most accurate answer is to say that we do not know. However, de Waal argues that we find roots of human morality in the behavior of Jakie and other animals and particularly in hominoids. There is no time to go into it here and I only have a limited knowledge of it, but the work with bonobos by people like De Waal and Susan Savage Rumbaugh is also fascinating.

De Waal is quoted as saying: “we are looking at an animal [that is, the bonobo] so akin to ourselves that the dividing line is seriously blurred.”<sup>xxxii</sup>

So, how does De Waal read the actions of Jakie? He suggests that in this instance Jakie was moved emotionally to help Krom. But he also suggests that Jakie has some kind of cognitive awareness of Krom’s feelings. De Waal offers the image of a Russian doll as instructive in describing how empathy works in non-human animals and in humans as well. At the core, and what we might find in many animal species, is what he calls the Perception-Action Mechanism. So, at the sight of the suffering of another, there is a response on the part of the observer. It is an emotional response. De Waal speaks of it as emotional contagion where the mere sight of the suffering of another stirs an emotional response within the animal or human. The second level of the Russian doll is cognitive empathy where the observer comes to some understanding of the reasons for the other’s emotions. De Waal would suggest that Jakie “understood” in some way the difficulty that Krom had in getting the tire, and even that Krom was interested in the water in the tire. The outer level of the Russian Doll he calls “attribution,” where the observer comes to adopt as completely as possible the perspective of the other.<sup>xxxiii</sup> De Waal argues that attribution is not possible without the other two levels. It would seem that attribution in the sense of actually understanding the perspective of the other is most possible for human beings but that this ability arises through the process of evolution, which provides building blocks for our present abilities. In other words, attribution would not have been possible without emotional contagion and cognitive analysis.

There is not time to address it here, but there is something appealing about the role that De Waal attributes to emotion as stirring one to action; in particular how

emotion might be the most fundamental motivator for human action. For too long in the Catholic moral tradition, emotions were viewed primarily as negative influences on human moral action and not for the way they move person to charity, mercy, and justice. A caution regarding de Waal is that his approach may seem too close to intuitionism and emotionalism, where one acts based more on one's gut and feelings than on reason in dialogue with one's gut and feelings. Yet he raises good points with regard to the role that emotions play in responses in the non-human and human world.

De Waal has been criticized for an excessively anthropomorphic analysis of animal behavior, but, to a non-specialist like myself, his observations have some merit as he attempts to explain, for example, why an ape might pick up an injured bird and attempt to throw it in the air to help it to fly again or why a chimp might come and put his arm over the shoulder of another chimp who has lost a fight.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Related to De Waal but distinct are evolutionary thinkers who see the development of altruistic behavior in non-human animals as roots of altruistic behavior in *homo sapiens*. Stephen Pope, summarizing the thought of some of these thinkers, points first to "kin altruism," where "organisms can be expected to prefer to aid other organisms to the extent to which they share genetic similarity."<sup>xxxv</sup> It is suggested that this behavior accounts in part for the tendency among human beings to prefer kin to non-kin and may account in part for xenophobia rather than trust in strangers. A second type of altruism, termed "reciprocal altruism" by Robert Trivers, proposes that "biologically unrelated individuals will trade beneficial acts under certain circumstances."<sup>xxxvi</sup> Robert Wright explored this notion further in his work *The Moral Animal* where he writes at length of TIT FOR TAT behavior in non-human animals, from bats to chimpanzees.<sup>xxxvii</sup> A third

theory suggests that “group selection” provides the grounds for altruism. This theory, proposed by Elliott Sober and David S. Wilson suggests that altruism within a group would be reasonable if it is beneficial to the individual in that group whereas if the individual lived in a non-altruistic group the same individual would not be as well off.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Pope suggests that there is no difficulty whatsoever in looking for areas of overlap between “evolutionary theories of altruism” and “Christian interpretations of the ethics of love” as long as a Christian interpretation of the ethics of love is not somehow reduced to what is known of altruistic behavior in non-human creatures. Each of the theories of altruism described by Pope presumes that, at the core, altruistic behavior is somehow motivated by selfish concerns. Wright puts it this way regarding reciprocal altruism: “If indeed the genetically selfish roots of sympathy and benevolence are grounds for despair, then extreme despair is in order. For, the more you ponder reciprocal altruism’s finer points, the more mercenary the genes seem.”<sup>xxxix</sup> Acknowledging these “selfish” roots, Pope writes:

While striving to develop, hone, and deepen our evolved natural tendency to care for self, family, and friends, Christian ethics also takes deliberate steps to extend our concern beyond these spheres to encompass what sociobiologists call ‘non-kin’ and ‘nonreciprocators.’ For its part, Christian ethics offers a helpful warning to sociobiologists that we should not confuse our natural bent to self with the full scope of our moral responsibilities to others.<sup>xl</sup>

## **B. Marks of Authentic Human Virtue**

Given that even the “best” of virtuous behavior in the animal may be characterized as “selfish” at some level, are human beings destined to this same kind of behavior or might we, through the gift of consciousness and freedom, and more

particularly through grace, choose to act in a different way. May we not choose to “be” different?

For example, some evolutionists read the golden rule to love one’s neighbor as oneself as a form of reciprocal altruism where one acts for the good of another with the expectation that there will be a payback. Or, Richard Alexander interprets the Good Samaritan parable as an exercise in indirect altruism where one acts in such a way to build up one’s reputation and place oneself in a better position. Pope counters, however, that these interpretations run contrary to the actual purpose of the golden rule and the parable. The follower of Jesus Christ is expected to act lovingly toward the neighbor and stranger regardless of payback. “The Samaritan,” as Pope says, “is motivated by compassion rather than enlightened self-interest.”

And here is the key to human virtue: what motivates the moral agent, what the moral agent intends. “Human love, including Christian love, and indeed all love” writes Pope, “is inevitably a psychological reality that includes the motivations, motives, and intentions of agents.”<sup>xli</sup>

Human virtue presumes not simply a particular action, but an action done in a virtuous way. For example, one may indeed help a person who has been beaten and robbed and do so for the sake of boosting one’s reputation. However, to judge whether such an act is genuinely virtuous, one looks not simply to whether the victim has been helped; one looks to the motives and intentions of the helper. If these motivations and intentions are self-serving, they are not fully virtuous. We must recognize that all motivations are mixed but with virtuous behavior, one’s primary motive and intention are not self-serving, although, ironically, virtuous behavior does ultimately shape people into

better disciples of Jesus Christ. Far from doing virtuous deeds for purposes of self-promotion, one does them because seeking goodness is what it means to be human. Paul Wadell writes:

We are not virtuous in a complete and unqualified sense until we perform acts of justice, mercy, compassion or forgiveness not only characteristically, but also with a certain pleasure and ease; thus a virtuous person does the good not because she is constrained to it, but because she embodies goodness—she enjoys doing good because she enjoys being herself.<sup>xliii</sup>

I can almost hear the argument, though, that, if virtuous behavior serves to make persons into who they intend to be, it IS self-serving. But it depends what is meant by “self.” I may intend to form my “self” as one who is more open to loving others. “Self” is not necessarily a negative term. Whereas in natural selection the ultimate goal is to survive, to continue in being, Christian ethics points to one Jesus Christ whose ultimate goal was to love others, first the Father and then the Father’s loves; and to do so at whatever cost. Whereas in the ordinary understanding of the process of evolution, losing one’s life would appear the ultimate loss, losing one’s life while remaining faithful in love is the ultimate gain in Christian Ethics.

### **C. Virtues for a Suffering World**

So, what virtues are particularly necessary for a world of suffering? I suggest at least two: mercy and solidarity. These are particularly what we see in God’s action throughout salvation history, most especially in the incarnation and the life, death, and resurrection of his Son. There are certainly other virtues that are necessary for a suffering world, such as compassion and justice, but mercy and solidarity, perhaps, presume these and specify them a bit further.

#### *1. Mercy*

A scriptural understanding of mercy as *hesed*, presents it as a covenantal relationship where two parties are expected to love one another faithfully. Yet, scripture also speaks of God's ongoing fidelity even in the face of betrayal on the part of Israel and on our part, so, no reciprocation. John Paul II wrote in his encyclical *Rich in Mercy*, that a "deeper aspect" of *hesed* "showed itself as what it was at the beginning, that is, as love that gives, love more powerful than betrayal, grace stronger than sin."<sup>xliii</sup> So, mercy implies faithful love, even in the face of betrayal. Mercy is also expressed in the graphic image of a womb (*rahamim*), indicating the life-giving nature of mercy, the effect of mercy on the one who receives it. Contemporary theologian, James Keenan describes mercy as "the willingness to enter into the chaos of others."<sup>xliiv</sup> Julia Upton speaks of it as "the compassionate care for others whereby one takes on the burden of another as one's own."<sup>xlv</sup> Jon Sobrino says that "Mercy is a basic attitude toward the suffering of another, whereby one reacts to eradicate that suffering for the sole reason that it exists."<sup>xlvi</sup> Mercy may show itself in a variety of moral choices, but these actions are genuinely merciful and virtuous when they flow from a heart that is centered on the other and intent on being present to the other in suffering and alleviating it, if at all possible.

## 2. *Solidarity*

Finally, the virtue of solidarity, John Paul II say, is "not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."<sup>xlvii</sup>

Both of these virtues presume the loving care of the other, so necessary for those who are suffering, but they go beyond mere presence to take action to relieve the suffering of others. The ultimate goal, of course, is to be instrumental in bringing about the kingdom where there will be no more tears or pain, but the movement toward this vision is painstakingly slow, especially for those suffering from physical and moral evil.

## **IX. Conclusion**

Human freedom and consciousness, having emerged in the process of evolution, sustained by the Creator, are interpreted as gifts to be used to harmonize human relationships with God, others, self, and the created world. Too often these gifts have been used to rupture those relationships through sin, with disastrous consequences for fellow human beings and for creation itself. Although we must maintain a clear distinction between physical and moral evil, we might note how many people see the causes of what we call “natural disasters” as both the limits of a material world and abuses of freedom by human beings. In the wake of the most recent hurricane, Sandy, many have raised the question of global warming and, consequently, humanity’s role in this phenomenon. Even James Patterson’s new novel *Zoo* draws attention to the harmful effects of humanity’s use of technology on the environment, the animal world, in particular. You can see the high class of literature that I delve into! The invitation in Christian ethics is to act so as to harmonize the fourfold relationship with God, others, self, and creation. More specifically, nurturing virtues of mercy and solidarity for a suffering world will give some direction to what this world is coming to. People who are merciful and in solidarity with their suffering neighbor, near and far, will be more fully disciples of Jesus Christ and, by cooperating with the grace of God, will move creation

toward its fulfillment in Christ, toward the vision painted for us in the Book of Revelation: a world where “there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain;” indeed, a world of “a new heaven and a new earth.”

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<sup>i</sup> John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis splendor)*, Papal encyclical, 1993, # 80.

<sup>ii</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, # 13.

<sup>iii</sup> Daniel Sulmasy, OFM. "Finitude, Freedom, and Suffering." Chap. in *Pain Seeking Understanding. Suffering, Medicine, and Faith*, edited by Margaret E. Mohrmann and Mark J. Hanson (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999), 94.

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> See for example, Henry Davis, S. J. *Moral and Pastoral Theology. Volume One: Human Acts, Law, Sin, Virtue* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1938), 11. For a more contemporary rendering see Richard Gula, “Freedom and Knowledge,” chap. in *Reason Informed by Faith* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 75-89. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* offers a summary of Catholic Church teaching. In its treatment of the human act it focuses more on human freedom as the condition for acting morally and for being held accountable for one’s actions. See # 1731-38; 1749.

<sup>vii</sup> Stephen Pope, *Human Evolution and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 158.

<sup>viii</sup> William Provine, “Evolution and the Foundation of Ethics,” *Marine Biological Laboratory Science* 3 (1988): 27-28; as quoted in Stephen Pope, *Human Evolution and Christian Ethics*, 159.

<sup>ix</sup> E.O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*, 71; quoted in Pope, 166.

<sup>x</sup> Authors Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon Kamin summarize the conclusion of some sociobiologists in this way: “[H]uman lives and actions are inevitable consequences of the biochemical properties of the cells that make up the individual; and these characteristics are in turn uniquely determined by the constituents of the genes possessed by each individual. Ultimately, all human behavior – hence all human society – is governed by a chain of determinants that runs from the gene to the individual to the sum of the behaviors of all individuals. The determinists would have it, then, that human nature is fixed by our genes.” See Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon J. Kamin, eds., *Not in Our Genes* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 6; as quoted in Pope, *Human Evolution and Christian Ethics*, 161.

<sup>xi</sup> Pope, *Human Evolution and Christian Ethics*, 72.

<sup>xii</sup> John Polkinghorne, “The Christian Belief in Creation and the Attitude of Moral Responsibility,” *Journal of Law, Philosophy, and Culture* III/1 (2009), 138.

<sup>xiii</sup> Jaegwon Kim, *Mind in a Physical World*, (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1998), 15; quoted in Richard Campbell and Mark H. Bickhard, “Physicalism, Emergence and Downward Causation,” found online at: [www.lehigh.edu/~mhb0/physicalemergence.pdf](http://www.lehigh.edu/~mhb0/physicalemergence.pdf). Last accessed October 23, 2012.

<sup>xiv</sup> Pope, 59.

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<sup>xv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xvi</sup> See Conway Morris, *The Crucible of Creation: The Burgess Shale and the Rise of Animals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 9; as quoted in Pope, 58.

<sup>xvii</sup> Polkinghorne, "The Christian Belief in Creation," 138.

<sup>xviii</sup> Pope, 112.

<sup>xix</sup> Richard Campbell and Mark H. Bickhard, "Physicalism, Emergence and Downward Causation," found online at: [www.lehigh.edu/~mhb0/physicalemergence.pdf](http://www.lehigh.edu/~mhb0/physicalemergence.pdf), 25. Last accessed October 23, 2012.

<sup>xx</sup> Pope, 317.

<sup>xxi</sup> Pope, 176.

<sup>xxii</sup> Pope, 176.

<sup>xxiii</sup> See Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, 16-33. See also Timothy O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, Revised Edition (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 53-57.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Karl Rahner, "Theology of Freedom." Chap. in *Theological Investigations VI: Concerning Vatican Council II* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 183.

<sup>xxv</sup> Paul Wadell, *Happiness and the Christian Moral Life: An Introduction to Christian Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 100.

<sup>xxvi</sup> See Eric Cassel, M.D. "The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine." *New England Journal of Medicine* 306/11 (March 18, 1982): 639-45. See also Eric Cassel, M.D. *The Nature of Suffering and the Goals of Medicine*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Cassel, "The Nature of Suffering," 639.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Stanley Hauerwas develops the importance of presence to the sufferer in his work. See especially "Salvation and Health: Why Medicine Needs the Church." In *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflection on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 63-83.

<sup>xxix</sup> Mary Midgely, "Darwinism and Ethics," chap. in *Medicine and Moral Reasoning*, ed. by K.W.M. Fulford, Grant, R. Gillett, and Janet Martin Soskice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 14.

<sup>xxx</sup> Robert E. Unanowicz, "Mutualism in the Darwinian Science," 6. Paper given at the Atom & Even Conference, Washington Theological Union, April 14, 2012. Available at: <http://atompluseve.com/>

<sup>xxxi</sup> Frans de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 31-32.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Found in the brief article "Bonobos," at <http://cda.morris.umn.edu/~meeklesr/bonobo.html>

<sup>xxxiii</sup> De Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, 39.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> See de Waal's discussion of "Changing Places in Fancy" and "Consolation Behavior" in *Primates and Philosophers*, 29-36.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Pope, 215.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Pope, 216. See Robert Trivers, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46 (1971): 35-57.

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- <sup>xxxvii</sup> See Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 189-209.
- <sup>xxxviii</sup> Pope, 219-220. See Elliott Sober and David S. Wilson, *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). Pope also reviews a theory of “indirect altruism” developed by Richard D. Alexander. See Richard D. Alexander, *The Biology of Moral Systems* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1987) Finally, Pope studies altruism used to manipulate others. See Richard Dawkins and J. R. Krebs, “Arms Races within and between Species,” *Proceedings of the Royal Society*, series B, 205 (1979): 489-511; and David Livingstone Smith, *Why We Lie: The Evolutionary Roots of Deception and the Unconscious Mind* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2003).
- <sup>xxxix</sup> Wright, *The Moral Animal*, 204.
- <sup>xl</sup> Pope, 215.
- <sup>xli</sup> Pope, 241.
- <sup>xlii</sup> Paul Waddell, *The Primacy of Love. An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1992), 117.
- <sup>xliii</sup> John Paul II, “Dives in Misericordia,” footnote # 52.
- <sup>xliv</sup> James Keenan, S.J., *The Works of Mercy: The Heart of Catholicism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 3.
- <sup>xlvi</sup> Julia Upton, s.v. “Mercy,” in *Dictionary of Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1993), 653.
- <sup>xlvii</sup> Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 18
- <sup>xlviii</sup> John Paul II. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, encyclical letter, December 30, 2987, # 38. Available at:  
[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html).

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