

EVOLUTION, ALTRUISM, AND THE IMAGE OF GOD

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Responding to a question of Pope John Paul II on what light evolution can throw on creation in the image of God, this article first considers how the creation of humanity in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26-27) has been variously understood. It then examines how sociobiology seeks to explain the origin and role of altruism. Finally it proposes a theology of altruism that originates in God's interpersonal mutual commitment, is humanly and archetypally expressed by Jesus as "the image of God" (Col 1:15), and invites the human species to pursue mutual concern as created in the image of the divine altruism.

POPE JOHN PAUL II ONCE DIRECTED a series of challenging theological questions to evolution: "Does an evolutionary perspective bring any light to bear upon theological anthropology, the meaning of the human person as the *imago Dei*, the problem of Christology—and even upon the development of doctrine itself?"¹ This article aims to answer one of these questions, namely, whether an evolutionary perspective can throw any new light on the meaning of the Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei*, or of the human person as created in the image of God. A major puzzle for many sociobiologists in understanding the process of natural selection among humans is how to find an evolutionary place and role for altruism, or for generous other-centeredness, as distinct from self- or group-interest. This article proposes that from an evolutionary perspective the idea of altruism can provide a fruitful fresh approach to the doctrine of *imago Dei* by exploring the idea of humanity's being created in the image of God's own altruism and by suggesting that this also throws light correspondingly on the nature of human altruism.

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¹ Letter of His Holiness John Paul II to Reverend George V. Coyne, S.J., Director of the Vatican Observatory, June 1, 1988, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/1988/ (accessed April 4, 2010).

UNDERSTANDING THE IMAGE OF GOD

The verses of Genesis (1:26–27) that describe God’s creating humankind in the divine image and likeness are among the most quoted and reflected upon passages of the Bible, and over the centuries they have been understood and explained in a variety of ways.² As we seek first to understand the verses in their original context, it is clear that this passage forms the climax of the creation narrative that began with the creation of light and culminated in the creation of the human race. After creating the physical universe and the plant and animal kingdoms, “God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”³

The clear role of man and woman here, as Gerhard von Rad expresses it, is to be “God’s representative” in the world, maintaining and enforcing God’s dominion over the earth and animals.⁴ Such a role for men and women implies a unique relationship and partnership between humans and God as they fulfill their God-given purpose in creation.⁵ As the Hebrew Bible became adopted by the Christian community as part of the revealed Word of God, however, the Genesis verses referring to humans being created in the image and likeness of God were seized upon by early theologians who had been influenced by Greek philosophy and metaphysics, and the passage was given a special anthropological interpretation based on what was considered uniquely characteristic of humanity above all other creatures: its possession of the power of reasoning. Thus, in his commentary on Genesis Augustine pointed out the significance of humanity’s being made in God’s image in order to have dominion over the fish and birds “and other animals lacking reason”: it was so that we should understand that humans were made in God’s image in possessing something that made them superior to irrational animals, namely, “reason, or mind, or understanding, or any more suitable term” (see Eph 4:23–24; Col 3:10).⁶

² See the informative and stimulating study of Stanley J. Grenz, *The Social God and the Relational Self: A Trinitarian Theology of the Imago Dei* (Louisville: John Knox, 2001).

³ Genesis 1:26–27. All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

⁴ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: SCM, 1963) 55–58.

⁵ J. P. Scullion, “Creation-Incarnation: God’s Affirmation of Human Worth,” in *Made in God’s Image: The Catholic Vision of Human Dignity*, ed. Regis Duffy and Angelus Gambatese (New York: Paulist, 1999) 7–28, at 9.

⁶ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 3.20.30; Migne PL 34.292. Translations, unless indicated otherwise, are mine.

The Bible had revealed, however, that God decided to create humankind in his image and also in his likeness, and some theologians followed Irenaeus in seeing a distinction rather than an accumulation in these two terms. In this way they applied on the one hand the divine “image” to humanity’s natural endowment of reason which was retained even after original sin and the Fall. On the other hand, they applied the divine “likeness” to a further divine gift of the Spirit in creation that humanity lost as a consequence of the Fall but subsequently regained in Christ.⁷ In the course of theological history, although the Irenaean distinction between image and likeness lost favor, the central idea remained that the divine image that was created in humanity related to the power of rationality; and this was given further powerful support through the influence of Aquinas. In true Aristotelian fashion he explained that “some things have a likeness to God, firstly and most generally insofar as they exist, secondly insofar as they are alive, and thirdly insofar as they are thinking or intelligent. . . . So, obviously only intellectual creatures are according to the image of God properly speaking.”⁸

The topic of *imago Dei* was transposed from the Hebrew Bible’s treatment of it as an anthropological statement about the creation of humanity to the center of Christian theology with Paul’s identification of Christ as “*the* image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col 1:15, emphasis added; see 2 Cor 4:4; Heb 1:3); and with Paul’s further statement that God predestined those whom he foreknew “to be conformed to the image of his Son,” so that he might be the firstborn within a large family (Rom 8:29). Through his human existence and actions Jesus has presented us with a unique *eikon*, or created representation, of his heavenly Father, and we in turn are being called to be associated with Christ as his brothers and sisters.

Mirroring God

A major departure from the traditional understanding of the image of God in humanity as being a constituent of the human makeup occurred with Luther when he emphasized that being made in God’s image was not a human possession or a human constituent. It was more a relationship between human creatures and their divine creator, whereby they could “image” or mirror the divine being. The implication was that being made in God’s likeness was a precarious possession: if humans were to turn away from facing God, as they did in sinning, then they would cease to reflect God, and God’s image would cease to exist in them, as happened, according to Luther, until it might be restored in Christ.

⁷ Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 5.6.1: Migne, PG 7.1137–38; Sources chrétiennes 153.76-77; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 3rd ed. (London: Black, 1965) 171.

⁸ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1, q. 93, a. 2.

In the wake of Luther, Calvin appears to follow the main current of theological tradition when he explains that “the image of God extends to everything in which the nature of man surpasses that of all other species of animals.”⁹ However, for Calvin it is not just in the possession of certain unique attributes that humanity images God but in the way in which humans are free to exercise those attributes in a manner reflecting God’s own activity, should they so choose. Thus, he continues: “Accordingly, by this term [*imago Dei*] is denoted the *integrity* with which Adam was endued when his intellect was clear, his affections subordinated to reason, all his senses duly regulated, and when he truly ascribed all his excellence to the admirable gifts of his Maker.”¹⁰ This new Protestant emphasis on the human activity of “imaging” God enables Stanley Grenz to explain that “for Calvin the *imago dei* does not lie primarily [n.b.] in the possession of the powers of reason and will but in their proper ordering and right functioning so that the human person mirrors God.”¹¹

A Social Image of God

Traditionally the attempt to interpret how humanity can be understood as created in God’s image has concentrated on the divine nature—for example, on humanity as imaging the divine lordship of creation or as imaging the divine reason, or—in the Protestant understanding—on how humans relate to the divine nature. A further approach has developed, however, based on the understanding that it was the trinity of Persons, and not just the single divine nature that lay at the heart of God’s creating humankind, an approach that has become known as the “social conception of the image of God.”¹² Christians contemplating the Genesis account of the creation of humanity in the image of God had always been to some extent conscious of their belief in this creator God as being a trinity of Persons and even perhaps as operating as such. For instance, Augustine commented on the wording of Genesis: “In making other creatures God said ‘let there be . . . ,’ whereas in creating humanity God said ‘Let us make . . . ,’ in order to hint, so to speak, at a plurality of persons on account of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But he immediately indicates that the unity of the godhead is to be understood when he says ‘And God made. . . .’”¹³ Viewing God according to this social model of the Trinity as comprising three interrelated divine Persons leads one to appreciate the meaning and

⁹ Jean Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* I.xv.3; 3 vols., trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845–1846) 1:220.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

¹¹ Grenz, *Social God and the Relational Self* 169.

¹² *Ibid.* 304.

¹³ Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* 3.19; Migne, PL 34:291.

significance of personhood, both divine and human, as both individual and communitarian, and to accept with Grenz that “‘personality’ has more to do with relationality than with substantiality and that the term stands closer to the idea of communion or community than to the conception of the individual in isolation from or abstracted from communal embeddedness.”¹⁴

The fullest pointer to this social understanding of God is found in the theology of the Greek term *perichoresis* (in Latin, *circumincessio*), which refers to the mysterious inner life of the Trinity, in which the Father, the Son, and the Spirit lovingly interpenetrate, as equal and equally divine, yet constituting a single divine essence and sharing the one Godhead.¹⁵ Christian theology arrived at this complex concept, largely developed by John of Damascus in the seventh century, through attempting to understand how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are all attested to in the New Testament as divine, are interrelated in such a way that the unity or uniqueness of God is not compromised. God is understood to be at heart relational, or in essence a Trinity, a community of divine Persons sharing their life and their love fully and eternally with one another. It is this triune God in whose image humanity was created; men and women called, in other words, to reflect God by becoming in their own way a loving community of mutually related, caring persons. As Grenz commented, “the ultimate foundation for human relationships resides in the eternal dynamic of the triune God. Thus humans fulfill their purpose as destined to be the *imago Dei* by loving after the manner of the triune God.”¹⁶

The International Theological Commission

This survey of the history of the Christian doctrine of humanity’s being created in the image of God can usefully close with an examination of the recent treatment of the subject by the Catholic International Theological Commission (ITC) entitled *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God*.¹⁷ According to the ITC, prior to Vatican II the theme of *imago Dei* had become neglected in Catholic thought, but on the eve of the council it had begun to be reconsidered, and now the ITC wished “to reaffirm the truth that human persons are

¹⁴ Grenz, *Social God and the Relational Self* 4. See Jack Mahoney, *The Challenge of Human Rights: Origin, Developments, and Significance* (Malden, Mass., Blackwell, 2007) 99–111.

¹⁵ Grenz, *Challenge of Human Rights* 316–17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 320.

¹⁷ ITC, *Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God* (July 23, 2004), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20040723_communion-stewardship_en.html (accessed April 17, 2010).

created in the image of God in order to enjoy personal communion with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and with one another in them, and in order to exercise, in God's name, responsible stewardship of the created world" (no. 4). Put more briefly, "communion and stewardship are the two great strands out of which the fabric of the doctrine of the *imago Dei* is woven" (no. 25).

These two aspects of the doctrine, human beings sharing communion with the divine Trinity and with one another, and the human sharing of God's governance of physical creation as God's steward, form the substance of the ITC's theological reflection (regrettably expressed in gender exclusive language) whose aim as a whole is, through focusing on humanity as made in God's image, "to reaffirm the divine truth about the universe and about the meaning of human life" (no. 5). Beginning by surveying the contributions of Genesis to the theme of human beings created in the image of God and created as man and woman, the ITC comments that the human is essentially a relational being who "exists in relation with other persons, with God, with the world and with himself" (no. 10). It goes on to add the New Testament enrichment that "since it is Christ himself who is the perfect image of God, man must be conformed to him in order to become the son of the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit" (no. 12). This process of individuals being conformed to the likeness of Christ occurs through their own personal history and their sacramental life. "Created in the image of God and perfected in the image of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments, we are embraced in love by the Father" (no. 13).

The ITC document traces the history of interpreting the doctrine of humanity created in the image of God much along the lines I have already described. With Vatican II the doctrine attained a central place in Catholic theological anthropology, in the proposition that "the *imago Dei* consists in man's fundamental orientation to God, which is the basis of human dignity and of the inalienable rights of the human person" (no. 22). Moreover, "on the basis of the doctrine of the image of God, the Council teaches that human activity reflects the divine creativity which is its model (*GS* 34) and must be directed to justice and human fellowship in order to foster the establishment of one family in which all are brothers and sisters (*GS* 24)" (no. 23). Since the council, the doctrine has developed, according to the ITC, in a number of ways, including the ideas that the *imago Dei* is not completed in creation but is in continual process of development in Christ, as intimated in Romans 8:29; that it is linked to the idea of natural moral law insofar as through imaging God "in his very being man possesses a participation in the divine law"; and that it is orientated toward the future fulfillment of God's design for the universe and humanity (no. 24).

One of the two major postconciliar developments reflected in the ITC document consists in exploring the social nature of God and how, through humanity's "radical likeness" to God, the divine Trinity plans to share its own inner communion of life with and among its human creatures. "Human beings are created in the *imago Dei* precisely as persons capable of a knowledge and love that are personal and interpersonal. It is of the essence of the *imago Dei* in them that these personal beings are relational and social beings, embraced in a human family whose unity is at once realized and prefigured in the Church" (no. 40). The communitarian point is worth stressing. "Christian revelation led to the articulation of the concept of person, and gave it a divine, christological and Trinitarian meaning. In effect, no person is as such alone in the universe, but is always constituted with others and is summoned to form a community with them" (no. 41). It follows, then, that humanity's being made according to the image of God, as described in the Genesis account of creation, applies not just to each individual human being, but to the human race as a whole. "In this sense, human beings share the solidarity of a unity that both already exists and is still to be attained" (no. 43). The ITC acknowledges the earliest Christian interpretation of the verses of Genesis as indicating that humans are "distinguished by their intellect, love and freedom" from the other bodily beings with which they share the world, but it now adds that it is through this distinctiveness that "they are ordered by their very nature to interpersonal communion" (no. 56).

The other major theme developed in the ITC treatment of the image of God refers to humans occupying "a unique place in the universe according to the divine plan, . . . the privilege of sharing in the divine governance of visible creation" (no. 57). The biblical imagery of stewardship shown in Christ's parables (see Mt 25:14; Lk 19:12) is used to develop this role of humans in relation to physical creation in terms of service rather than of mastery (no. 60). This enables the ITC to undertake two tasks: to remedy past attitudes of exploitative domination and abuse of creation, which have been ascribed, it is now claimed, to misunderstanding Genesis; and to counter modern scientific designs on the human genetic makeup and human reproduction, by claiming that "human beings exercise this stewardship by gaining scientific understanding of the universe [see nos. 62–70], by caring responsibly for the natural world (including animals and the environment) [see nos. 71–80], and by guarding their own biological integrity [see nos. 81–94]" (no. 61).

The ITC document provides the Catholic Church with its first detailed statement regarding evolution; the ITC recalls how in 1996 Pope John Paul II recognized evolution as "more than a hypothesis," while it cautions that "this cannot be read as a blanket approbation of all theories of evolution," particularly when they touch on the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and the creation of humanity in the image of God (no. 64).

THE EVOLUTIONARY CHALLENGE OF ALTRUISM

The above review allows me to begin to consider an answer to John Paul II's question of what light evolutionary reflection can throw on the idea of humanity as made in the image of God. To do so, I must turn to one of the major ethical discussion points raised by evolutionary science itself: the role and origin of human altruism. It is instructive to begin with the wider context of modern evolutionary thought regarding ethical behavior as this is considered to have developed in the evolving human species.

The Dawn of Ethics

In *The Descent of Man* Charles Darwin (1809–1882) ascribed the evolution of the human species to his wider principle of natural selection. In the course of applying this principle to the human species Darwin referred to a “moral sense or conscience” that he conjectured had evolved in early humanity and that he envisaged as originating in the common “social instincts” or feelings that “lead an animal to take pleasure in the society of its fellows, to feel a certain amount of sympathy with them, and to perform various services for them.”¹⁸ Central to this sociality, Darwin felt, would be the growing awareness of being a member of a community and of being influenced in one's actions by the community's wishes and its approval or disapproval of one's individual behavior.¹⁹ In this way, he argued, the sense of morality would emerge as a human characteristic acquired by the progenitors of humankind as favoring the survival of the community and encouraging “through natural selection, aided by inherited habit,” the acquiring of such social qualities as “sympathy, fidelity, and courage.”²⁰ He concluded, with copious practical illustrations:

As man is a social animal, it is almost certain that he would inherit a tendency to be faithful to his comrades, and obedient to the leader of his tribe; for these qualities are common to most social animals. He would consequently possess some capacity for self-command. He would from an inherited tendency be willing to defend, in concert with others, his fellow-men; and would be ready to aid them in any way, which did not too greatly interfere with his own welfare or his own strong desires.²¹

Not that Darwin considered that such human moral development progressed unimpeded or that human moral behavior was universally to be admired; he noted that the human individual's actions would be

¹⁸ Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1901) 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 151.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 199.

²¹ *Ibid.* 167.

determined “unfortunately very often by his own strong selfish desires.” However, he seemed to remain on the whole a moral optimist, observing that “as love, sympathy and self-command become strengthened by habit, and as the power of reasoning becomes clearer, so that man can [n.b.] value justly the judgements of his fellows, he will feel himself impelled, apart from any transitory pleasure or pain, to certain lines of conduct.”²² As Harry Gensler observed, in this way “our primitive morality becomes more rational and less instinctive.”²³ So much so, Darwin concluded rather grandly, that “he might then declare . . . I am the supreme judge of my own conduct, and in the words of Kant, I will not in my own person violate the dignity of humanity.”²⁴

Darwin considered the evolving moral sense on the part of human individuals a distinct asset to any community that would tend to result in that community’s surviving and flourishing. “A tribe including many members who, from possessing in a high degree the spirit of patriotism, fidelity, obedience, courage and sympathy, were always ready to aid one another, and to sacrifice themselves for the common good, would be victorious over most other tribes; and this would be natural selection.”²⁵ However, it need not necessarily follow that for Darwin tribal success was the point of ethics; he argued, in fact, that it was humanity in its specifically primeval state that saw actions as good or bad “solely as they obviously affect the welfare of the tribe,” which was why he commented that “this conclusion agrees well with the belief that the so-called moral sense is aboriginally derived from the social instincts, for both relate at first exclusively to the community.”²⁶ It should be noted that he is referring here to the human moral sense in a primitive phase of its development, in its “aboriginal” stage, whereas later for him the human moral sense evolved into becoming “a highly complex sentiment.” It originated in the social instincts shared by most animals and was in its early stages largely guided by social approval and disapproval, as I have already noted, but over and above all that, it came to be also “ruled by reason, self-interest, and in later times by deep religious feelings, and confirmed by instruction and habit” to become what we experience today as our moral conscience.²⁷ Hence, Darwin was prepared to envisage individuals at a later stage of evolution reaching moral conclusions that are not necessarily determined by, nor to be identified with, group interests. As he observed:

²² Ibid. 167–68.

²³ Harry J. Gensler, “Darwin, Ethics, and Evolution,” in *Darwin and Catholicism: The Past and Present Dynamics of a Cultural Encounter*, ed. Louis Caruana, ed. (London: T. & T. Clark, 2009) 121–33, at 122.

²⁴ Darwin, *Descent of Man* 168.

²⁵ Ibid. 203.

²⁶ Ibid. 182.

²⁷ Ibid. 203.

The social instincts, which no doubt were acquired by man as by the lower animals for the good of the community, will from the first have given to him some wish to aid his fellows, some feeling of sympathy, and have compelled him to regard their approbation and disapprobation. Such impulses will have served him at a very early period as a rude rule of right and wrong. But as man gradually advanced in intellectual power, and was enabled to trace the more remote consequences of his actions; as he acquired sufficient knowledge to reject baneful customs and superstitions; as he regarded more and more, not only the welfare, but the happiness of his fellow-men; as from habit, following on beneficial experience, instruction and example, his sympathies became more tender and widely diffused, extending to men of all races, to the imbecile, maimed, and other useless members of society, and finally to the lower animals—so would the standard of his morality rise higher and higher.²⁸

Hans Küng usefully draws attention to the emergence of human “empathy” in this development when he explains that “with the evolution of strategic thought there also developed a capacity for empathy, a feeling for the fears, expectations, and hopes of others, a fellow feeling that became basic to human social behavior.”²⁹

It is impossible to reconcile the moral sympathy Darwin expresses in the above passage for various “useless members of society” with the selective program of later social Darwinism that claimed to have his support for morally preferring both individual choices and social policies that favored only the socially useful, and that countenanced eliminating those not so favored. As Michael Ruse comments tersely, “natural selection cares only about winners, not about the best.”³⁰ Stephen Pope judges this “infamous ideological use of evolution . . . the antithesis of Christian ethics.”³¹ And as Louis Dupré explained, “the so-called ‘survival of the fittest’ does not mean the *best* survive in this game of chance. But the *toughest*.”³² Anthony Flew pointed out the simple fallacy: “To say within the terms of Darwinian theory that in natural selection the fittest must survive is to utter only a tautology. But this can be mistaken to be an urgent practical imperative, categorically demanding that we make every sacrifice to ensure that they in fact do.”³³

Darwin’s defender and champion, and a distinguished and respected intellectual in his own right, Thomas Huxley (1825–1895) brought welcome clarity to the ethical implications of evolution in his 1893 Romanes lecture,

²⁸ Ibid. 190–91.

²⁹ Hans Küng, *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2007) 192.

³⁰ Michael Ruse, “The Significance of Evolution,” in *A Companion to Ethics*, ed. Peter Singer (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Reference, 1993) 500–510, at 501.

³¹ Stephen J. Pope, *Human Evolution and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University, 2008) 82.

³² Louis Dupré, “Intelligent Design: Science or Faith?” in *Darwin and Catholicism* 169–80, at 170.

³³ Anthony Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* (London, Macmillan, 1967) 36.

“Evolution and Ethics.” For one thing, he summarily rejected any tendency to social Darwinism in observing “the unfortunate ambiguity of the phrase ‘survival of the fittest.’ ‘Fitness’ has a connotation of ‘best’; and about ‘best’ there hangs a moral flavour.”³⁴ This observation led him to draw a highly important conclusion:

The practice of that which is ethically best—what we call goodness or virtue—involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive. It repudiates the gladiatorial theory of existence.³⁵

For Huxley, in other words, “the ethical process is in opposition to the principle of the cosmic process, and tends to the suppression of the qualities best fitted for success in that struggle.”³⁶ In principle, ethics and evolution are eventually in competition, according to Huxley, as the individual’s innate drive in self-assertion, which is essential for survival, appears intrinsically hostile to that genuine concern for other individuals that is considered central to the whole idea of ethics. This contrast, and conflict, between evolution and ethics leads Huxley to acknowledge “the pressing interest of the question, to what extent modern progress in natural knowledge, and, more especially, the general outcome of that progress in the doctrine of evolution, is competent to help us in the great work of helping one another.”³⁷ No great Christian apologist—he is recognized as having coined the term “agnosticism”—he was emphatic about the need for an ethical approach to evolution; on which his last words may be considered: “Let us understand, once for all, that the ethical progress of society depends, not on imitating the cosmic process, still less on running away from it, but in combating it.”³⁸

Genetic Dominance

The new science of sociobiology has transformed our understanding and grasp of Darwinian evolution, largely through the discovery of the gene and the identification of its primary role in natural selection. As Alister McGrath explained the change: “The neo-Darwinian synthesis is grounded

³⁴ Thomas H. Huxley, *Collected Essays*, 9 vols., vol. 9, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1901–1905) 1–116, at 80.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 81–82.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 31.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 79.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 83.

in the assumption that small random genetic changes (mutations) over long periods of time occasionally have positive survival value. Organisms possessing these favorable mutations should have relative advantage in survival and reproduction, and they will tend to pass their characteristics on to their descendants.”³⁹

The influential E. O. Wilson, described by Ruse as “the doyen of today’s American evolutionists,”⁴⁰ roundly claimed that the time has come for ethics to be “biologized,” and in this he was certainly correct in maintaining that ethical reflection as well as moral behavior must be continually “earthed” in our human biological history and constitution.⁴¹ Whether, however, ethics can be reduced simply to biology, as Wilson seems at least inclined to contend, is much more debatable, and this involves considering his positions on the role of the gene as central to natural selection and on his view of altruistic human behavior as being intrinsically unfavorable to natural selection, the two aspects of sociobiology that are most pertinent to this study.

In the opening chapter of Wilson’s major work, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, significantly entitled “The Morality of the Gene,” Wilson identifies natural selection as “the process whereby certain genes gain representation in the following generations superior to that of other genes located at the same chromosome positions.”⁴² So much so, that evolutionary priority is now accorded to genes rather than to the Darwinian organism, whose function is now recognized as not being able to reproduce itself in some enhanced mode. Rather, Wilson argued, “it reproduces genes, and it serves as their temporary carrier.”⁴³ According to this version of evolutionary theory, then, various activities of the human organism may involve different human feelings, attitudes, and motivations, but these are simply orchestrated behavioral responses “designed not to promote the happiness and survival of the individual, but to favor the maximum transmission of the controlling genes.”⁴⁴ It was to emphasize the primacy accorded by Wilson and other evolutionists to genetic activity that Richard Dawkins introduced the popular, not to say notorious, modern myth of “the selfish

³⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005) 34.

⁴⁰ Michael Ruse, “Evolutionary Ethics Past and Present,” in *Evolution and Ethics: Human Morality in Biological and Religious Perspective*, ed. Philip Clayton and Jeffrey Schloss (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004) 27–49, at 36.

⁴¹ Edward O. Wilson, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1976) 562.

⁴² *Ibid.* 3. See the pertinent criticisms of Wilson’s thought by Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978) xvii–xviii.

⁴³ Wilson, *Sociobiology* 3.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 4.

gene” that systematically reduces everything and every activity to its own agenda of self-replication.⁴⁵ It is unnecessary here to do more than recall the eloquent rebuttals that have appeared since Dawkins first introduced his selfish gene.⁴⁶ Even when one can discount for purposes of serious reflection the imagery of the gene being remorselessly single-minded in all its activities and influences, however, there can still remain in some sociobiological writing a more pervasive vague notion of purpose, a purpose that is ascribed uncritically or, at least unconsciously, to nature itself in the whole process of “natural selection” with its apparent implication of choice. The very phrase “natural selection” is to some extent an unfortunate one. Despite its original usefulness to Darwin in offering a contrast with the “artificial selection” deliberately engineered by horticulturalists and stockbreeders, “natural selection” can easily be misunderstood as ascribing to “nature” some capacity for choosing among available lines of reproduction. Yet, as Flew pointed out, “the whole point of natural selection is, one is tempted to say, that it is not selection at all”; one could even urge, he adds, that as an expression it is self-contradictory. Indeed, he would contend, in reality there is no design, only its empty appearance.⁴⁷ It is therefore disconcerting to read Wilson describing human feelings of love, hate, aggression, and so on as operating in blends “*designed* . . . to favor the maximum transmission of the controlling genes.”⁴⁸

Egoism and Altruism

The need for particular care in scrutinizing any temptation to ascribe purpose to genes or to “nature,” even metaphorically, becomes the more important as one moves to consider the other main plank of Wilson’s sociobiological program: “biologicizing” ethics.⁴⁹ What Wilson judged to be “the central theoretical problem of sociobiology” is “how can altruism, which by definition reduces personal fitness, possibly evolve by natural selection”?⁵⁰ Or, as he expanded it, how can one explain in evolutionary terms “the surrender of personal genetic fitness for the enhancement of personal genetic fitness in others”?⁵¹ The term “altruism” was introduced

⁴⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University, 1976).

⁴⁶ See Mary Midgley, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (Hassocks, UK: Harvester, 1978) 102; Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears*, rev. ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002) 143–50; Keith Ward, *God, Chance, and Necessity* (Oxford: One World, 1996) 71, 90; McGrath, *Dawkins’ God* 12.

⁴⁷ Flew, *Evolutionary Ethics* 15.

⁴⁸ Wilson, *Sociobiology* 4.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 562.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 106.

by August Comte to contrast with the idea of egoism,⁵² and, literally meaning “for the other,” altruism is commonly applied to human behavior that is directed at voluntarily helping others with no purpose or prospect of recompense or reward for oneself. Occasionally it is taken to include the idea that what one does altruistically entails a cost to oneself; indeed, Edward Vacek appears almost to identify altruism unjustifiably with the idea of self-sacrifice.⁵³ However, apart from the acceptance of the obvious opportunity costs, such self-sacrifice is not essential to the original idea of altruism, which is rather a notion of contrasting action performed for others with action undertaken for one’s own sake. Thomas Dixon noted that “Comte trumpeted it as one of his great scientific discoveries that humans were innately altruistic. He contrasted this with the traditional theological teaching that humans were innately selfish and sinful.”⁵⁴

Ruse makes the valuable point, for clarity’s sake, that altruism has been given a special sense by sociobiologists, who distinguish between what is commonly considered altruism, in the sense of doing good with no strings attached—what Ruse calls “literal altruism”—and the idea of mutual cooperation and working together, where the idea of doing good is accompanied with that of some recompense. “In this sense,” Ruse explains, “evolutionary altruism is a metaphorical sense of the term,” which points to the biological strategy of cooperation between individuals within the same group to the long-term advantage of the group in terms of survival.⁵⁵ Human beings had to improve in cooperating and working together in order to survive; in other words, they had to improve in terms of “biological altruism.” “By working together,” Ruse concludes, “humans succeeded, and those that worked together more successfully tended to have more offspring than those who did not. Hence, down through the ages we evolved as highly successful ‘altruists.’”⁵⁶

Among various attempts at explaining such altruism one approach invokes the ideas of kinship and group selection. It seems to make evolutionary sense for an individual to act altruistically toward others if they all belong to a recognizable group sharing the same genes, since the genetic opportunity costs for the individual, or what is given up by the individual personally, will be compensated for in other members of the group, or in the group as a whole, either then or later.⁵⁷ In addition, however,

⁵² Stephen J. Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love* (Washington, Georgetown University, 1994) 5.

⁵³ Edward C. Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 1994) 184.

⁵⁴ Thomas M. Dixon, *The Invention of Altruism* (New York: Oxford University, 2008) 5.

⁵⁵ Ruse, “Significance of Evolution” 502.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 503.

⁵⁷ See Wilson, *Sociobiology* 106, 117.

sociobiologists entertain the possibility that altruistic kindness can redound on oneself, or that, even without individual hope of reward or return, multiplication of altruistic activities can shape a group over time for its evolutionary betterment. Interestingly, Darwin recognized that humanity's moral sense evidently operates on a variety of reasons and motives, including what he assessed as the "low motive" for the early human being of learning that "if he aided his fellow-men, he would commonly receive aid in return."⁵⁸ It is this "low motive" of which Darwin appeared to be less critical morally when he wrote that "we are led by the hope of receiving good in return to perform acts of sympathetic kindness to others," and then added that this feeling of sympathy "will have been increased through natural selection; for those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members, would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring."⁵⁹

It may appear difficult to avoid the conclusion from these arguments, which aim to explain—or explain away—what is ordinarily viewed as altruism, that human beings are being "conned" by their genes into being altruistic, or having a moral sense. This could appear to underlie the exploration of Matt Ridley into the origins of virtue and the evolution of cooperation, in which he was impressed by "the surprisingly social nature of the human animal," and set out to explain how this could have come about in evolutionary terms.⁶⁰ Contrary to the common perception of life as one of continuous competition, he concluded that "life has become a team game, not a contest of loners."⁶¹ Yet it turns out to be a team game played and conducted by all its members with only one dominant purpose, that of "genetic interest." In other words, "selfish genes sometimes use selfless individuals to achieve their ends."⁶² Indeed, individual humans may at times consider that they are being altruistic to a fellow-human, acting generously without an ulterior motive or the prospect of return in mind. If so, however, it appears, according to Ridley, that they are being deluded by their genes to act in this way.

In so interpreting all human behavior as gene-centered and gene-determined, however differently the individual agent might perceive such personal conduct, Ridley's approach is similar to Wilson's in discounting the significance of individual motives. Indeed, Wilson observed that the "theory of group selection has taken most of the good will out of altruism,"⁶³ particularly when one considers what he calls mutually advantageous

⁵⁸ Darwin, *Descent of Man* 201.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 163.

⁶⁰ Matt Ridley, *The Origins of Virtue: Human Instincts and the Evolution of Cooperation* (London: Penguin, 1996) 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 14.

⁶² *Ibid.* 20.

⁶³ Wilson, *Sociobiology* 120.

“tradeoffs of reciprocal altruism.”⁶⁴ It has even been suggested that the good Samaritan situation can be advantageous for the Samaritan as well as for the victim for whom he cares, should their situations come to be reversed sometime in the future. Indeed, it is even possible that “altruistic genes” will develop in the course of time, which may result in varying degrees of unselfish, altruistic, behavior on the part of individuals resulting in overall survival and enhancement of the group.⁶⁵

Central to these considerations must be the idea of human motivation, but in her criticism of Wilson, Mary Midgley claimed to search in vain for his views on humanity’s internal experiences of purpose, intention, motivation, and the like, and she charged that he “scrupulously avoids any discussion” of them.⁶⁶ Yet his reference to altruistic individuals “trading” with each other must, she considered, involve motivation and a calculation of comparative profit.⁶⁷ Indeed, agreeing with Midgley, one may conclude that it is difficult to see how Wilson can accord any genuine reality to such human phenomena as motivation and choice, given his earlier claims for the centrality of the gene’s selective power and his overarching criterion of potential genetic fitness. In fact, Wilson appears to dismiss freedom to act or to abstain from acting as illusory in ways similar to Freudian, Marxist, and other forms of determinism. This appears to be implied by his explanation that “the hypothalamic-limbic complex of a highly social species, such as man, ‘knows’, or more precisely it has been programmed to perform as if it knows, that its underlying genes will be proliferated maximally only if it orchestrates behavioral responses that bring into play an efficient mixture of personal survival, reproduction, and altruism.”⁶⁸ Ridley is another popular writer on sociobiology whose approach to human motivation leaves much to be desired. As he observes reductively, “what matters to society is whether people are likely to be nice to each other, not their motives.”⁶⁹ Rolnick similarly concludes that “rather commonly, biologists have recently defined altruism solely in terms of sociobiological assumptions regarding reproductive value.”⁷⁰

Welcome light on human motivation in an evolutionary context is provided by Pope’s useful identification of four areas in which he considers that much modern sociobiological writing is significantly defective: (1) *reductionism*, which explains “higher” human capacities in terms of biological or genetic principles, ultimately genetic fitness and the “selfish

⁶⁴ Ibid. 114.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 120.

⁶⁶ Midgley, *Beast and Man* 113.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 127.

⁶⁸ Wilson, *Sociobiology* 4.

⁶⁹ Ridley, *Origins of Virtue* 21; see also 120, 260–61.

⁷⁰ Philip A. Rolnick, “Darwin’s Problems, Neo-Darwinian Solutions, and Jesus’ Love Commands,” in *Evolution and Ethics* 307.

gene”;⁷¹ (2) *determinism*, which considers the human mind “no more than a biological means by which irresistible genetic forces determine external acts,” thus concentrating on one causal factor of action and neglecting all others;⁷² (3) a disregard for the contribution of *culture* to human consciousness and choice, such that “the amazing plasticity and variety of the human emotional constitution . . . needs culture of some kind or another to be actualized”⁷³ and “even fundamental genetically based inclinations can be overridden by other factors”;⁷⁴ and (4) a preference for invariably explaining human actions in terms of self-concern and *egoism*.⁷⁵

The last area in particular, which highlights the whole issue of human motivation and intention, is something that many, if not most, sociobiologists appear almost to take for granted. As Pope remarks, “the predominant assumption in sociobiology is egoistic, maintaining that human behavior is always or almost always motivated ultimately (often unconsciously) by self-concern and that apparent altruism is illusory.”⁷⁶

Room for Real Altruism

Not all sociobiologists, however, are so skeptical, nor indeed so cynical, about genuine altruism. Rolnick, for instance, notes important work by Daniel Batson and Laura Shaw⁷⁷ that challenges “the fairly common assumption among psychologists (and sociobiologists) that the motivation for all intentional action, including the intention to help others, is egoistic”;⁷⁸ and, indeed, Paul Rigby and Paul O’Grady, reviewing the experiments of Batson, indicate that the scientific consensus has begun to move in favor of accepting genuinely altruistic motivation.⁷⁹ Midgley writes approvingly that as sociobiology has developed, “the crude rhetoric of selfishness has been toned down.”⁸⁰ And Frans de Waal argues with many illustrations for the existence of an evolved altruistic trait in all animals, including humans.⁸¹ If this is so, and a place can be found for genuine

⁷¹ Pope, *Evolution of Altruism* 94.

⁷² *Ibid.* 95.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 106.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 107.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 109–14.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 110.

⁷⁷ C. Daniel Batson, and Laura L. Shaw, “Evidence for Altruism: Toward a Pluralism of Prosocial Motives,” *Psychological Inquiry* 2 (1991) 107–22.

⁷⁸ Rolnick, “Darwin’s Problems” 307.

⁷⁹ Paul Rigby and Paul O’Grady, “Agape and Altruism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 15 (1989) 719–37.

⁸⁰ Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion* x.

⁸¹ Frans de Waal, *The Age of Empathy: Nature’s Lessons for a Kinder Society* (New York: Harmony 2009).

altruism as a feature of ordinary human behavior, with no strings attached, as it were, then it would be mistaken to maintain that human evolution is just one more instance of “nature red in tooth and claw.” There is room for *human* evolution in terms of genuine moral experiences, insights, and actions that make room for generosity and empathy in living.

Ruse warns us that “the claim is not that humans are hypocritically consciously scheming to get as much out of each other as they possibly can whilst perhaps pretending to be nice. But rather that humans do have a genuinely moral sense and awareness of right and wrong . . . which motivates them.”⁸² Even if this is the case, this moral sense must be emphasized by recognizing and maintaining Pope’s clear distinction between, on the one hand, conscious intentions, desires, and motives that are not illusory and can include altruism in the ordinary meaning of that term, and, on the other hand, “biologically based instinctual proclivities, inclinations and drives,” the stuff of sociobiology, that can evidently influence, but not determine, the activities of conscious reflection, motivation, and decision.⁸³ In other words, as Pope concludes, “a great deal of human experience seems to make sense only if human nature has evolved in such a way as to include not only egoistic inclinations but also capacities for genuine altruism and related affective capacities like empathy, sympathy, and compassion.”⁸⁴ In developing this line of reflection Pope would certainly merit Midgley’s approval by confirming her comment on altruistic behavior that “it is important that we understand such actions for what they are, as done with the motives that they actually are done with, rather than distorting them to fit a tidy theory.”⁸⁵ Dixon’s observation is relevant here that some scientists still today, like Wilson and Dawkins, mistakenly believe “that Darwinian evolution has always been thought of as a process favouring ruthless selfishness. In fact, . . . it was recognized by Darwin himself, and by virtually all scientific writers throughout the Victorian period too, that instincts of sympathy, cooperation, and love were just as much a product of nature, and in certain circumstances, just as necessary for survival, as were instincts of aggression, competition, and self-preservation.”⁸⁶

Colin Grant reaches similar conclusions after a thorough detailed examination of the altruism literature. He describes and evaluates the experiments of Batson and his colleagues, based on the hypothesis “that altruism is a reflection of empathy,”⁸⁷ and concludes with them that “in spite of the

⁸² Ruse, “Significance of Evolution” 502.

⁸³ Pope, *Evolution of Altruism* 111. ⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 114.

⁸⁵ Midgley, *Beast and Man* 129; see Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion* 146–50.

⁸⁶ Dixon, *Invention of Altruism* 3.

⁸⁷ Colin Grant, *Altruism and Christian Ethics* (New York, Cambridge University, 2001) 45; see also 44–50.

predominant assumption that human beings are characterized fundamentally by self-interest, regnant in academia and trumpeted in popular culture, the evidence shows that people do act with concern for others. That such behaviour persists against such massive insistence that it is folly to indicate that something like what we call altruism is present in human life at a profound level."⁸⁸

I sum up this contrast between egoism and altruism by noting that, to account in evolutionary survival terms for human moral behavior, Darwin found the origin and basis of morality in the social instincts of early humans, while many modern sociobiologists have concentrated on what they term reciprocal altruism, or what is more accurately farsighted, or gene-dominated, mutual egoism. Recent work argues from game theory, and specifically the intricacies of the prisoner's dilemma, that the human race has evolved a sentiment of social trust that, when practiced, is a much more effective device for racial survival than is overt selfishness.⁸⁹ Ultimately, however, it appears that science has not yet accounted for the development of the quite unique human moral sense, perhaps mainly because it just cannot handle human motives. Christopher Boehm commented that in sociobiology genuine altruistic behavior "has remained an ultimate mystery,"⁹⁰ partly, it appears, because human altruism in all its fullness and potentiality is beyond the competence of sociobiology. Pope, for instance, advises that as a matter of fact "the particular norms of altruism promoted by various cultures may or may not contribute to the inclusive reproductive success of those individuals who are its members."⁹¹

Commenting on the sociobiological displacement from human purpose to genetic purpose and agency, Jeffrey Schloss remarks that "the loss of agency, at organismal not to mention mental levels, has profound implications for understanding morality."⁹² It is one thing to experience and develop a primitive sense of loyalty to the groups to which one may belong, motivated at least partly by concern for self- or group-survival; it is something else to come to recognize and to respect the competing interests of individuals with whom, indeed, one may share membership of a group, but who may also be individuals who belong to other or to no groups.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 225–26.

⁸⁹ Ridley, *Origins of Virtue* 54–7, 224–45; Ken Binmore, *Natural Justice* (New York: Oxford University, 2005).

⁹⁰ Christopher Boehm, "Explaining the Prosocial Side of Moral Communities," in *Evolution and Ethics* 78–100, at 80.

⁹¹ Pope, *Evolution of Altruism* 10.

⁹² Jeffrey Schloss, "Evolutionary Ethics and Christian Morality: Surveying the Issues," in *Evolution and Ethics: Human Morality in Biological and Religious Perspective*, ed. Philip Clayton and Jeffrey Schloss (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2004) 1–24, at 5.

The single motive that appears to have been dominating modern sociobiological thought is the conviction of Thomas Hobbes, rejected by many of his contemporaries, that everything humans do is dictated by sheer self-interest,⁹³ an idea that Midgley characterized as “crude psychological egoism.”⁹⁴ Darwin may have expressed the matter rather idealistically, but at least he had a view of human morality going far beyond evolutionary survival through egoism when he wrote:

As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him. This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races. If indeed, such men are separated from him by great differences in appearance or habits, experience unfortunately shews us how long it is, before we look at them as our fellow-creatures.⁹⁵

The enormous leaps in logic contained in this disarming conjectural narrative serve only to confirm the conclusion of Joseph Poulshock that “as the Darwinian paradigm continues to find more and more universal application, it still faces serious challenges with regard to explaining altruism, ethics and morality.”⁹⁶ John Polkinghorne sums up the situation well:

I believe that all human beings have a degree of moral knowledge that exceeds what science may be able to explain in terms of evolutionary strategies for survival and gene propagation. Notions of kin altruism (protecting and propagating the family gene pool) and reciprocal altruism (helping an associate in the expectation of an eventual return) are enlightening and no doubt express part of the truth. The same could be said of game-theoretical maximal strategies, such as tit-for-tat (respond to others as they do to you). However, these insights do nothing to explain the kind of radical altruism that impels someone to risk their own life in the attempt to rescue an unknown and unrelated person from drowning. Anthropological accounts of diverse societies help us to see how cultural effects can mould the shape of public morality, but I am unable to believe that my ethical convictions, for example that torturing children is wrong and that there is a duty of care to the weak, are just conventions of my society. They are facts about the ethical reality within which we function as morally responsible persons.⁹⁷

⁹³ Mahoney, *Challenge of Human Rights* 11–14.

⁹⁴ Mary Midgley, *The Ethical Primate: Humans, Freedom, and Morality* (New York: Routledge, 1994) 5.

⁹⁵ Darwin, *Origin of Species* 187–88.

⁹⁶ Joseph Poulshock, “The Leverage of Language on Altruism and Morality,” in *Evolution and Ethics* 114–31, at 129.

⁹⁷ John Polkinghorne, *Exploring Reality: The Intertwining of Science and Religion* (London: SPCK, 2005) 64.

IMAGING THE DIVINE ALTRUISM

Given this understanding of the origin and potential of altruism in the process of human evolution, it is attractive within a theological context, I now suggest, to recognize that the source and primary analogue of all altruism must be God's and to develop from that realization a theology of altruism. Pope observes, however, that "Christian ethicists do not often use the word 'altruism,' because the term is not morally helpful,"⁹⁸ since it is capable of expressing extremism and fanaticism as well as beneficial behavior.⁹⁹ In addition, when the term was first introduced by Comte, Christian theologians objected to it as an antireligious and positivist move, even although later it gradually became identified by religious writers "as a synonym for Christian love."¹⁰⁰ Denis Edwards acknowledges the theological work that has focused on the central role of altruism, but he also judges that altruism can be abused, since "indiscriminate calls to altruism and self-sacrifice can function to maintain oppression"; more importantly, he claims, altruism as located in God does not do justice to love as viewed from the perspective of trinitarian life, which has more to do with "mutual and equal relationships."¹⁰¹

However, against such reservations it can be observed that not only altruism but even calls to love can be abused in some situations, so rather than avoid the term, what is called for is a continual critical awareness of the demands of particular human situations where altruism is involved. In addition, so far as altruism and the deity are concerned, as I will be arguing, the richness of divine personal interaction is perfectly capable of being described in terms of *mutual* altruism among the persons, an attribution that stresses the element of complete self-giving that is the essence of God. Moreover, I suggest, the central significance of altruism in contemporary sociobiological reflection and discussion on human evolution renders its use perfectly appropriate and topical, both scientifically and theologically, such that, considered in the context of contemporary reflection on human evolution, the term takes on a particular ethical significance, indeed a central significance, in becoming capable of describing the mission of Christ in the incarnation, and indeed in identifying the divine purpose of creation and its intended destiny, as well as the moral vocation of the human species.

A Theology of Altruism

It is not uncommon for Christian catechisms to begin by asking "why did God make you?" and to answer in terms of how God expects us to behave,

⁹⁸ Pope, *Evolution of Altruism* 227. ⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 227–28.

¹⁰⁰ Dixon, *Invention of Altruism* 371.

¹⁰¹ Denis Edwards, *The God of Evolution: A Trinitarian Theology* (New York, Paulist, 1999) 16.

such as our being created to know, love, and serve God in the present life and as a result to be happy with God for ever in the life to come. Such replies, however, in expressing what is required of us in creation can have the undesirable effect of obscuring the really fundamental answer to the question why God made us: it was simply to share his life with us. We are entirely the product of divine altruism, the effect of the sheer creative generosity of Supreme Being. The fifth-century theologian known as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite made much of the Neoplatonic idea that it is of the nature of goodness to communicate itself,¹⁰² a theme taken up by Aquinas and other theologians in the Latin maxim *bonum est diffusivum sui*, that is, “the good spreads itself.”¹⁰³ When this insight is applied to the divine work of creation, it is well captured by Keith Ward in his explaining that “God creates the world out of overflowing goodness,”¹⁰⁴ enabling us to appreciate the simple no-strings-attached reply to the catechism question why God made us: to share the divine life generously with humanity. Moreover, as we have become more aware that God is essentially social as Father, Son, and Spirit, as noted above, we are correspondingly in a position to appreciate more just how, in bringing us into existence, God is planning to share with us, and among us, his own eternal life, that dynamic love that is, as it were, continuously circulating in the life of the Trinity, which we have seen earlier generations identify as the divine *perichoresis* into which we are to be caught up.

Originating in God, altruism also epitomized the behavior of Jesus, God become man, who continually proclaimed his Father’s unconditional love for his human creatures, exemplified this throughout his own life, and is forever inviting his fellows to show that they take after their Father (Mt 5:45) by exercising on their own part complete indiscriminating altruism toward each of their neighbors (Mk 12:31). As John Meier summed up the teaching of Jesus, “if one joins together all the authentic sayings that deal with mercy, compassion, forgiveness, and similar obligations towards others, the results portray a Jesus who stressed the need to show mercy without measure, love without limits.”¹⁰⁵ It follows that a major purpose of God’s deciding to become a member of the human species was precisely to reveal the human face of divine altruism and to teach humankind what selfless altruism means and entails. Daryl Domning expresses this well when he observes that God “knew that we would eventually need an

¹⁰² Pseudo-Dionysius, *De divinis nominibus* 4.20; Migne, PG 3.720.

¹⁰³ Thomas Aquinas, *ST* 1a, q. 5, a. 4, obj. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Keith Ward, “Christian Ethics,” in *Keeping the Faith: Essays to Mark the Centenary of Lux Mundi*, ed. Geoffrey Wainright (London: SPCK., 1989) 224–49, at 225.

¹⁰⁵ John P. Meier, “Jesus,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, Roland E. Murphy (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990) 78:23.

incarnate example of perfect, divine altruism to show us how to transcend our original selfishness.”¹⁰⁶

Jesus’ moral teaching on what altruism involves, and his appeal to his fellow-humans to imitate his own archetypal human altruism, can thus be seen as a major evolutionary step in the moral advancement of the human species. Unhappily, however, it ran up against the buffers of human sin in Jesus’ own contemporaries, meeting with endemic self- and tribe-centeredness and the collective refusal to look out beyond one’s selfish interests to a wider horizon of generosity and solidarity, which Darwin recognized would be so difficult,¹⁰⁷ and to which Huxley alerted us when he observed, as I have indicated:

The practice of that which is ethically best—what we call goodness or virtue—involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive. It repudiates the gladiatorial theory of existence.¹⁰⁸

In accepting the violent death thrust upon him Jesus held out to his fellow humans an abiding example of supreme altruism in living out his unselfish loyalty to his understanding of his Father and to his Father’s will.

As I commented earlier, the individual’s innate drive in self-assertion, which seems essential for survival, often appears intrinsically hostile to that genuine concern for other individuals that is considered central to the whole idea of ethics and is at the heart of altruism. Sin emerges as humanity’s yielding to evolutionary selfishness and declining to accept the invitation to self-transcendence; it is a refusal to transcend oneself in the interests of others. As Daly expressed it succinctly, “Refusal to love constitutes the essence of sin.”¹⁰⁹ It can be argued, then, that part of the role of ethics, and of the example and appeal of altruism, is to train the human evolutionary urge by focusing it on others and on their interests rather than exclusively on one’s own.

It is significant, however, to note, as I have argued, that work is being done in sociobiology to show that a place can be found for genuine human altruism as a feature of ordinary behavior, and that it would be mistaken to maintain simply that human evolution is just one more instance of “nature red in tooth and claw.” As I expressed it above, “there is room for *human*

¹⁰⁶ Daryl P. Domning, “Evolution, Evil, and Original Sin,” *America* 185.15 (November 12, 2001) 14–21.

¹⁰⁷ See Darwin, *Origin of Species* 190–91; and above, p. 686.

¹⁰⁸ Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics* 81–82.

¹⁰⁹ G. Daly, *Creation and Redemption* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988) 1.

evolution in terms of genuine moral experiences, insights and actions that make room for generosity and empathy in living.” If humanity has at heart some rudimentary sense or inkling of regard for others, as Darwin developed it, then a case can be made for arguing from such a natural disposition to be concerned for one’s fellows to a recognition that there is inserted into human beings an image of the primordial altruism that is central to the life of God, as I have developed this. Indeed, it becomes possible, and attractive, to propose that humanity is created to image God as supremely and essentially altruistic. As dynamic circulating interpersonal love is central to the nature of God conceived as a community of Persons, an innate concern among humans for their mutual welfare can be identified as a distinctive feature in which they are created to image God, not only as individuals but also as a species.

In such a case, we cannot regard Jesus as merely saving us from an evolutionary drive to be solely egoistical. It would be more appropriate and positive in evolutionary terms to view Jesus as inserted into the human species for the purpose of building upon the human image of God’s altruism that has been created in all men and women. He is thus conceived by Paul as *the* image of God (Col 1:15), providing a “prime example,” and reminding us of the importance of complying with what is deeply human and divine within us as the moral driving force of our creaturehood. As in many other ethical instances, the purpose of divine revelation then becomes that of, on the one hand, confirming and reinforcing a moral insight already accessible to human reason, and, on the other hand, of enriching that insight by locating it in the context of an all-pervading design of divine life and love. Here the theological awareness of divine altruism giving rise to human altruism serves to confirm and strengthen the awareness of genuine human altruism that, as previously noted, is evident in the thought of some of those involved in sociobiological exploration, while at the same time providing an enveloping and transforming religious context to enrich that ethical awareness.

The upshot of these reflections, then, is to suggest that, as our understanding of God and of the divine triune nature has expanded or deepened, and with it our understanding of what constitutes human personality and human community, so our grasp of how humankind can be understood to image God can reach new dimensions and depths in imitating the divine altruism. In other words, God created humankind in the image of his own altruism. In this theological development we can, in response to the question of John Paul II with which I began this article, witness to a fresh nuance of the traditional doctrine that humans are all created in the image of God. We are invited to imitate in all our actions within the human species the altruistic solidarity and community of the divine Trinity, and in the process, as Romans 8:29 tells us, we are called to

be daily conformed to Christ, who is the prime image of God's own altruism.

Thus conceived, altruism is not just one expression of trying to lead a good life. As other-centeredness, or neighbor-love, it is the common element of what actually constitutes a good life, to be found also in God's creative enterprise and in the self-giving achievement of Jesus. As such, wherever and whenever it is to be found, human altruism or generosity, the breakout from any evolutionary self-obsession, can be seen as a reflection of, and participation in, the creative altruism and *agape* of God himself. It can also be seen as either an anticipation of or a participation in the generous human love by which Christ won our way through death, as a step in the evolutionary development of the human species. Altruism can, in fact, be identified as the divinely inspired moral evolutionary goal of the human species, a goal that, conjecturally, countless human persons have in fact achieved in the course of their lives, even if only partially or occasionally, and whether or not they were aware of Jesus and his teaching. Certainly in the preaching, life, and dying of Jesus, we may consider, is to be found the definitive and all-exhaustive act of human altruism as imaging God's. As totally non-self-centered and other-serving, human altruism ushers the evolving human species to a new level of existence and moral activity whose purpose is to increase the solidarity of the human race as collectively and individually created in the image of an altruistic God and, as such, destined to share fully in the inner richness of the divine life.