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TRANSCENDENT GROUNDS NATURAL SELECTION AND THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF TRANSCENDENCE

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Abstract

James Gustafson and others have argued that theological reflection, which intends to make a difference to the ecological crisis, must start with attention to the natural world and not with biblical accounts of Creation. It is the Earth and the Universe around us that is the referent for such religious stories. Science is the source of contemporary knowledge of the not-so-obvious workings of the natural world. Some scientific findings are quite challenging to traditional religious beliefs. One of these is the theory of natural selection as a mechanism for the on-going evolution of the Cosmos. The basic Christian doctrine of transcendence is often seen to be challenged by this science. Furthermore, it has been convincingly argued by many eco-theologians that the doctrines of a transcendent God and of the transcendent purpose of the Universe are complicit in the ecological crisis. This paper examines the latest accepted scientific understandings of natural selection. While the term 'natural selection' is problematic for what it is intended to represent, as Alister McGrath has pointed out, yet it still enables scientists to offer feasible explanations of the multiple forms within an emergent universe. This paper argues that the Theology of transcendence, in particular that of Canadian theologian, Bernard Lonergan, is not only compatible with such scientific explanation, but also necessary in understanding a hopeful Christian response to the threat of ecological death.

Keywords: Ecotheology, natural selection, transcendence, inscendence

1. Introduction

Two problems in the present status of Ecotheology lie at the basis of this paper. The first is the claim about the way in which Science, in particular Evolutionary biology, is used by ecotheologians, and the second is the status of the doctrine of transcendence within Ecotheology. The paper will attempt to clarify the relationship between these problems by examining briefly the present articulations of the meaning of natural selection as the tool of Darwinian and

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neo-Darwinian evolution and by inviting an exploration of the doctrine of transcendence that takes natural selection seriously.

Lisa Sideris critiqued many recent ecotheologians for the romantic way in which they used scientific concepts. Well-known theologians such as Sallie McFague, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Michael Northcott, and process theologians, John Cobb and Charles Birch, were accused of paying almost exclusive attention to the non-competitive, cooperative and altruistic behaviours of animals and ignoring the conflictual, competitive and aggressive aspects in an effort to inspire the creation of human communities based on the interdependence and harmony of nature [1]. Some who do deal with the issue of suffering in nature, she claimed, generally interpret it theologically as the fallenness of nature resulting from original sin. While Sideris might be accused of too much certainty regarding what constitutes the 'reality' of nature which she says is being ignored, her point is well taken.

While it is highly unlikely that the ecotheologians she critiques are unaware of the suffering present in nature, most Christian ecotheology has a corrective agenda. It is an attempt to construct a new kind of theology in which the place of humans in the natural world is taken seriously. Ecotheologians respond both to the indifference of traditional theology to nature, as well as to the traditional emphasis within Evolutionary biology on the struggle and competitiveness inherent in nature. Most link the ecological crisis with issues of social justice and so are critical of the 'survival of the fittest' ideology which has reigned both in biological understanding of evolution as well as in the understanding of human systems, such as the economy. They are correct to accuse Western society (scientists and all) of an over-emphasis on nature and human society as 'red in tooth and claw'. In the latter part of the twentieth century, we became poignantly aware of the nature of all human knowledge, including Science, as human construction.

Despite all of this, however, the predominant assumption of scientists and ecotheologians is that there is a 'natural world' that precedes human existence and does not depend on human perception and constructions for its existence. Yet, human perception and construction cannot know or describe it in its fullness. This is the critical realist position which also underlies the understanding of nature in this paper. Within that perspective there is, as Sideris claimed, an overcorrection in most Ecotheology on the side of a peaceful, harmonious natural world, sometimes described as a fallen world — a world that came forth from the hand of the Creator in Edenic state, but then suffered the results of the human fall. Natural selection then as it is presented by contemporary Science describes a kind of unreal, 'waiting-for-full-redemption' kind of world. But does this kind of theology do justice to the natural world as it is? Is it really a good basis for ecological responsibility? Can we really establish an effective ecological ethic, a system of normative behaviour, that does not take natural selection, including humans as subject to natural selection as 'real'?

2. Natural selection

In her book, *Habitat of Grace*, Carolyn King, a biologist and theologian, argues persuasively that no adequate ethic that would hope to transform human attitudes and especially behaviour to address the ecological crisis can afford to ignore the biological basis of human behaviour. The best scientific account we have of that basis is the theory of natural selection. King's account of natural selection and its impact on human behaviour is compelling. The most dramatic aspect of Darwin's proposal that natural selection is the mechanism of evolution was the fact that it fairly conclusively replaced the notion of a Universe intentionally designed with that of a mindless system of adaptation to the environment. Through chance and determinism successive generations of individuals found convenient niches in their environments; the fittest survived. The survival of the fittest means quite simply that successful rate of reproduction guarantees survival [3]. This theory was as much a product of the social understandings of survival of the fittest as it was of the observations of Darwin on the Galapagos Islands. However, such a mechanism operating at the biological level is also bound to show itself in human society; thus it is an instance of the circularity of the hermeneutical process or more colloquially the 'chicken and egg' syndrome.

Natural selection since Darwin has benefited greatly from genetic research. Today scientists understand evolution as the handing on of coded information, DNA coding known as genes. From generation to generation it is the handing on of this information that is primary, not the survival of individuals, per se. Hence, the male lion taking over a pride of females will kill all the cubs so that the female will go in heat and be available to bear his cubs. On the other hand, a male fox will not. As King points out, this is not because foxes are more compassionate than lions. It is because vixens' reproductive cycle is seasonal and there would be no advantage in killing off the young. Richard Dawkins has named the drive of the gene to reproduce itself the selfish gene [4]. However, the reality is more complex. Even Darwin recognized that the mechanism of survival of the fittest did not explain apparent altruism among animals. Young foxes stay at home to help raise the next litter of cubs sometimes even to the exclusion of their chances to mate and reproduce. Even in fish one sees some species cleaning the gills of other species [2, p. 205].

Part of the explanation of such altruism is the notion of kin selection. Kin selection means that individuals which are genetically related work together to hand on the genes of their younger near relatives. Adolescent foxes' (and jackals and others) caring for their younger half-siblings increase greatly the chances of their survival and more importantly the handing on of the genes. Branching off on their own to produce their own young, they have far less chance of handing on their genes to the next generation than if they stay together to protect the existing litter; similarly for bees and ants. Bees and ants' genetic structure is such that siblings have far greater genetic similarity than do parents and offspring [5]. Hence, the kinship that allows them to work together in such a

spectacular way to ensure the handing on of those genes by one representative, the top female. This is further illustrated by brother lions who cooperate to enable one of the brothers to take over a pride; and by the overwhelming instance of more parental care by mothers than fathers. Mothers are much surer that their genes are carried by the young than are fathers in most species. Mothers invest just enough to give the young a fighting chance of survival; then they send them off and hand their own and a deserving male's genes on to the next litter. It is all in the interest of the genes.

But what about altruism between unrelated groups of the same species or between different species, such as the two species of fish mentioned above? As far as scientists can tell, it works on reciprocity and only in groups small enough that individuals can remember one another. An individual will work for another or for the group provided the favour will be returned somehow in the future. This is the basis of much of social cohesion within and between groups, and is certainly observable within human communities. Those who 'cheat'; that is, the individual who gains today but refuses to return the favour is socially censored. A clear example of this is social grooming by chimps. Those who do not return the favour face exclusion from the group and often death.

Humans share with other animals an overwhelming percentage of genetic material. Thus they share much of the behavioural proclivity that is identifiable in other animals. Human genes like all other animal genes possess a drive to reproduction of their own kind. Protective, kinship and altruistic instincts originating in the genetic coding are as potentially operative for humans as they are for lions, or foxes or chimps. Serious indifference to this fact, even if we allow that modifications will occur in our scientific understanding of it, is to our own detriment. Most particularly, we cannot begin to elaborate codes of behaviour to confront the ecological crisis within taking it seriously [6]. We do not easily go beyond considering ourselves or our kin before everyone else. For instance, the moral inclusion of others beyond our knowable community for whom reciprocity is not easily observed can not be understood or achieved by reliance on our biological inheritance only. Neither can it be achieved by suppressing or ignoring our biological natures. Any credible ecological ethic is likely to be more effective if it builds on our biological potential than if it attempts to ignore or repress it.

King observes that what traditional Christian teaching has identified as original sin is nor unlike that which we observe as the dynamic of natural selection expressed in humankind [2]. But it may not only be a stretch but also not helpful to grounding ecological responsibility to view Creation as normatively harmonious but fallen, for example. In other words, that the 'not so pleasing' (to human sensibilities) qualities of nature are not attributable to divine will, but are the result of human original sin. Likewise, the traditional attribution of human tendencies to 'look out for number one' or to expect reciprocity for charitable acts or to put family concerns ahead of universal good to sinfulness while ignoring the functionality of such tendencies within humans as a species denies who we are as created within all creation. Better that we acknowledge the

wonder of our capacity to survive and its mechanisms and look elsewhere for the resources we need to reach our full capacity, which includes more than biological materialism.

3. Cultural selection and religion

Humans have also the genetic potential for the creation of culture. And certainly while many of the aspects of natural selection as it is presently understood are observable in the behaviour of humans as well as in the construction of human institutions (political, social, economic or religious), there is a very large component of cultural selection. The degree to which natural the dynamics of natural selection can be observed in cultural selection – which cultural products survive — is a matter of controversy. However, one can hardly maintain that the human is a product of the evolutionary process without admitting to some degree the presence of natural selection as operative within human behaviour. In the dualism that has evolved within Christian theology, what are natural biological tendencies are often conceived as sinful or temptations to sin, as indicated above. While the fact that religious traditions have identifying mechanisms of natural selection is interesting, the denunciation of such as unintended by the Creator and against our 'true' nature as children of God is in the very least unhelpful, but more often damaging to any ecological ethic. In King's words, "We do not need to let the ruthlessness of natural selection deny the wonders it has produced." [2, p. 118]

Culture's foundation in genetic information ought not to sit on top of Biology to repress it or to replace Human biology with some kind of super animal or almost-divine being. King points to Thomas Aquinas as one who understood the relationship as grace building on and perfecting nature, not replacing nature [2, p. 21, 29, 116]. In more contemporary terms, Bernard Lonergan sees the relationship as one of sublation [7]. In terms of Biology and culture, the biological is 'taken up into' the cultural and integrated into a new level of being; the biological is not denied but built on by cultural constructions, including religious or theological constructions. This is not merely a conceptual process but an active, concrete integration effectively participating in the on-going emergence of new forms of life and living. There may not be a genetic drive for humans to provide systems of care for 'other' animals, for example, but the genetic proclivity to care for one's own is taken up and transformed into a larger context. The power to inspire such sublation of human tendencies is exemplified most profoundly within the world's religions (although not exclusively so).

Charles Taylor has given an account of the development of what we refer to as modernity in the West [8]. Taylor's view is that modernity evolved around a particular social imaginary that comprised the mutual interplay of ideas and practices in imagining and approximating that imagination of how humans ought to organize their lives together. This capacity for imagination is encoded as potential in human genes but is open and contingent to particular historical,

geographical and personal conditions. Religion operates within this capacity for imagination. It often presents and certainly traditionally has contained the myths by which and for which humankind constructs life both for its good and often unwittingly for its detriment. There is no doubting the power that religion can wield over its adherents. It is in the cause of religion that moral inclusion can extend beyond kinship and reciprocity. The biological attachment to genetic survival can be extended to a species level and beyond. Compassion coded in our animality can be inspired to reach beyond those closest to us to 'others' who seem quite different; that genetic survival can extend to cosmic sustainability. Even in so-called 'secular' societies, we have recently become all too aware of the power of religious commitment and the significance of how one interprets and acts on faith. The direction of this power to meeting the ecological crisis is by many arguments the only hope we have of sustaining a viable world into the future. If we are to claim that it is in the power of the mythic vision that emerges through the joint interplay of idea and action that religion has its power, then the myths one lives by are critically important. Traditionally in Christianity, the doctrine of a transcendent God, in whose image humans were created, has inspired adherents to transcend many of the human tendencies attributable to natural selection.

4. Transcendence

Christian ecotheologians, have strongly critiqued the doctrine of divine transcendence as being complicit in the idea and value system underlying the current ecological crisis. As a result, most Ecotheology focuses on divine immanence. This is strongly related to the way in which Ecotheology uses Natural science. If the nature of the divine is such that God is predominantly present and revealed in the natural world, then we should find there the qualities we attribute to God. Hence the emphasis on cooperation, compassion, and harmony as characteristic of nature and the difficulty of reconciling this God with the more aggressive elements of natural selection. Furthermore, if we are to claim a human embeddedness in the natural world and the necessity to listen to nature to find the corrective needed for responsible ecological practice, then nature must be constructed as a space in which desirable ecological values are rampant.

While the case is credible that the notion of a transcendent God and transcendent humans (constructed in God's image) colonizes human relationship to the natural world negatively, a theology that moves too far to the side of immanence raises its own problems. Transcendence as a quality of divinity places God outside the process of natural selection; God creates natural selection and forms the underlying foundation for the continuing evolution of the Cosmos, but God is not subject to this process. In fact, the notion of radical freedom of creation and its contingency requires a conception of divinity that permits the messiness of the natural, including human, world.

This being said, there are new conceptions of transcendence that attempt to escape the baggage of traditional connotations as well as avoid the pitfalls of an over emphasis on immanence. One that deserves exploration is the Thomas Berry's notion of inscendence [9]. While a superficial reading of this notion would seem to indicate a radical immanence, a more careful reading shows it is not so. Through the use of this term, inscendence, Berry replaces only the spatial metaphor associated with transcendence — depth for height. The Divine is not above the natural world, but deep within, deeper than the observable but revealed in the observable. This kind of conception pays attention to the reality of God as foundation and sustainer of the dynamic freely evolving Cosmos rather than to a God who brings the Cosmos into being and then rules above it. This is not to be confused with the theological notions of God of process theology, where, by God's own will, the God-self becomes subject to the evolutionary processes of the Cosmos. It also differs from the Teilhardian notion of the divine as 'ahead' of the evolutionary process, drawing all things forward in a progression toward fullness of being [10]. But from an ecological perspective, the notion of a God that 'inscends' Creation, passes through, feels its depth, intimately knows its intricacy, beauty and suffering, but maintains a foundational presence free of natural selection and the other 'laws' of the Cosmos is a metaphor that captures the ecological ethic. The foundation precedes but sustains the Creation, but leaves and open 'top' or future. While one could argue rightly that this notion is not significantly different from the original explanation of the experience that early Christians called the transcendence of God, inscendence does not carry the traditional baggage. What is more important is the invitation to explore this significant perception as it relates to human ethical response to the ecological crisis, a horizon of faith that was not available to those who first articulated the doctrine of God's transcendence.

In terms of the human relationship to nature and the Christian notion of humans made in God's image, the understanding of transcendence is critical. A responsible ecological practice requires an understanding of humans as animals naturally selected for genetic survival. At the same time, if humans are to embody an ethic that is concerned with no less than the sustainability of the whole planet, then our genes alone are not sufficient. A culture of ecological sustainability that extends our desires and capacity from kin care to all creature care, from small community reciprocity to Earth community reciprocity, and from concern for reproduction of our own genes to the concern that a rich variety of genes of all species be handed on. This is a tall order and involves a transcendent (or better inscendent) set of practices. We are much better equipped genetically to act locally than to think globally provided the local consists of recognizable individuals (social studies have set the number at less than 150 for humans) [2, p. 121]. Religion has traditionally played a role here and so far there has been no adequate replacement for its imaginative and motivating vision that can transform human desires and actions beyond our own immediate interests. However for religion to be effective in facing the ecological crisis it must

seriously acknowledge our ground (our biological ground) and the potentiality that lies beyond. A renewal of the wisdom that underlies the doctrine of transcendence, an understanding that is functional and effective with regard to human practice, is a critical component of the transformation required. Such a new understanding requires grounding in the scientific theory of natural selection.

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