

Selfish Genes and Christian Ethics: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Evolutionary Biology, by Neil Messer. London: SCM, 2007. Pp. viii + 280. ISBN: 978-0-334-02996-0. Paperback. £19.99.

Very soon in the introduction of his book, Neil Messer, Senior Lecturer in Christian Theology at the University of Wales, Lampeter, acknowledges the essentiality of issue of ethics to evolution. On page 2, he highlights that ever since Darwin's time, both the insiders and the outsiders of the evolutionary theory produced a plethora of literature and debate on the topic. However, Messer is quick to "call into question the terms of the debate as they are commonly set out in the literature" (p. 2). The problem, the author explains, is that evolutionary biology is thought to be in conflict and indeed to be a threat to Christianity. Messer's purpose in his *Selfish Genes and Christian Ethics* is to show that this should not be the case and that Christian ethics and evolutionary biology are able to stay together and that "Christian theology is well able to engage critically and constructively with discussions of evolution and ethics, and to assimilate insights from biology into a Christian moral vision...." (p. 2).

Chapter 1, "Introduction" has three components. Before anything else, Messer acquaints the reader with his methodology, source, tradition, and approach. It does not take long before the reader realizes he or she is going to witness to the struggles of a theistic evolutionist ethicist, though Messer does not use these terms. Following the theistic evolutionist approach, Messer rejects the reductionism of atheist evolutionists such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett as well as creationism and even Intelligent Design (p. 3), although it appears he rejects the latter group based on their critics and not on his own study (p. 3-4; see also pp. 47-51). He also expresses his "dissatisfaction with styles of Christian engagement that, preoccupied with demonstrating the credibility of Christianity in the face of modern science, accept more than they ought of the terms on which secular Darwinist attacks on Christian belief are set up." Instead, he calls upon his theological tradition (Reformed Protestant) "not [to] be content to accept the terms of those debates as they are standardly set up, but [to] ... be ready to reframe the questions and make creative responses that can appropriate insights from evolutionary biology without being subsumed to the latter" (p. 3). Thus, facing the difficulty of reaching a consensus in any area of this discussion, Messer "chooses an approach influenced by Karl Barth, in which Christian doctrine sets the terms of the encounter and insights from biology are critically appropriated" (pp. 4-5, see also p. 48).

After briefly introducing the three parts of the book (pp. 4-6), Messer presents a succinct history of evolutionism. He highlights and describes clearly and meaningfully such generally known aspects of the history of

evolution as Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, Gregor Mendel's theory of "discrete units of inheritance" (genes), the "modern synthesis" between Darwin's and Mendel's theories, the discovery of molecular genetics and the "neutral theory," the debates on the level of the operation of natural selection, the origin of humanity. But Messer's real interest in this historical summary is the development of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, the locus of his discussion on ethics. Thus, Messer ends each discussion by briefly highlighting the controversies in each area of debate, but, naturally, he takes three pages to present five major pieces of criticism addressed to sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. Nevertheless, these controversies and criticisms do not help Messer cast a doubt on the theory of evolution as such; instead, he uses them to "redraw the map" of evolution and ethics to fit his theistic evolutionism.

The rest of the nine chapters of the book are divided into three major parts. In Part 1, "Mapping the Territory," comprising chapters 2 and 3, Messer follows the issues raised by Thomas H. Huxley's 1893 Romanes Lecture "Evolution and Ethics," which Messer thinks to be up to the task, to "map" the territory of the twenty-first century discussion of evolutionary biology and ethics. In the first part of Chapter 2, Messer places Huxley's lecture in its historical context by highlighting a major difference in ethical approaches of the time. On the one hand, evolutionists like Alfred R. Wallace with his concept of the superiority of the white human race and Herbert Spencer with his concept of "survival of the fittest" supported a brutal capitalistic sociology and ethics, which later translated into rude eugenics programs. Though agreeing in principle with these concepts, both Darwin and Huxley promoted a "sympathetic" attitude toward the weaklings of society, hoping to make them fit by means of education. Darwin promoted this sympathy in order to preserve "one of the most valuable parts of our evolutionary inheritance." Thus, discarding the Buddhist withdrawal from the "evolutionary process" and the Stoic call to follow nature, Huxley calls for the moral humans to combat nature (pp. 28-31). This explains why Huxley distinguished between the "ethical" and "natural" (p. 26), that is, humanity has to renounce drawing moral values and requirements from the study of nature.

Messer continues the chapter by highlighting 6 issues explicitly or implicitly raised by Huxley's "Evolution and Ethics." (1) "Can an evolutionary explanation be given for the existence and the particular characteristics of human morality?" Messer noted that more recent philosophers rejected reductionist answers such as those of E. O. Wilson or R. Dawkins. (2) "Is it possible to construct an 'ethic of evolution' – that is, to draw normative moral conclusions from putative facts about

evolutions?" Messer identifies three contradictory answers given by various evolutionists, the most prominent of which stipulating that "biology can *explain* the phenomenon of morality, but denies that there can be any objective *justification* of moral claims" (p. 34). (3) "What implications, if any, does evolutionary biology have for the content of normative ethics? Messer finds evolutionists disagreed on the answer, from J. Rachel's "*moral individualism*" to E. O. Wilson's tolerance and respect for universal human rights. (4) "In our efforts to live as we know (or believe) we ought, does our evolutionary inheritance help us or hinder us, or is it simply irrelevant?" Despite the variety of answers, Messer's description shows the writers agreeing more on the affirmative answer: humans still have to deal with the nature of "the ape and the tiger" (Huxley), nature (selfish genes) whose "designs we have to upset" (Dawkins). (5) "What moral assessment, if any, should we make of the evolutionary history of the earth?" This question has brought more agreement from evolutionists: nature is either non-moral (Huxley) or immoral (George Williams), discarding any perception of a designer in nature. (6) "If, as Huxley thought, the 'ethical progress of society' depends on combating the 'cosmic process', what means may legitimately be used in that combat?" To this question, Messer found a large array of answers, from eugenics (social intervention) to technological developments.

Having resolved that Huxley's conclusions were biased and thus unsatisfactory, in chapter 3, Messer proposes to redraw the map of the evolution and ethics by appealing to a theological component. At the beginning of the chapter (p. 44), he correctly identified the key problem of evolutionary ethics: what can be the "ought" derived from in the absence of any divine origin? But the methodology Messer employed is at least questionable. Together with Alisdair McIntyre, Messer points out that the "'Enlightenment' in ethics is an attempt to justify moral language and conclusions by means of a form of reasoning detached from the older and richer tradition which gave rise to that language and within which it makes sense" (p. 46). However, Messer continues, "[i]t is not at all clear that the new anthropology and the old moral concepts can be made to cohere. It may be that, if a reductionist view is right, it will require a radical revision of our moral language and concepts" (47). Notwithstanding these challenges to ethics by evolutionism, Messer "suggest[s] that it is a mistake to believe that evolutionary biology entails a reductionist account opposed to Christianity." Instead, he affirms that it is "possible to articulate an account of that tradition that can incorporate whatever is well-founded in the evolutionary accounts on which reductionists draw, that will give grounds for thinking that ... Darwinism does not imply a preference for reductionism. If it turns out that there are issues and evidence that reductionist accounts have trouble handling convincingly, but that this Christian account is better able to handle, that

will give grounds for thinking that the latter is *preferable* to reductionist accounts" (47).

On the next page, Messer says that "[t]he most obvious way to show that such an account can be developed is to develop it" (48). The way to achieve this is not by a "knock-down argument against reductionism or in favour of Christian ethics," but by building "a cumulative case that this Christian moral tradition has more to offer than reductionism in response to the ethical questions raised by evolutionary" (p. 48). Two pages on, Messer writes: "Since the purpose of this book is to explore the possibility of an *alternative* to reductionism, the option offered by Dennett hardly seems promising. I suggested earlier that if it proves possible to articulate a richer account that meets the conditions I proposed, that will in itself be a reason for rejecting the reductionist view" (p. 50). However, from the perspective of this reviewer, this argument or method is not convincing, especially in the context of Messer defeating Dennett's weak arguments of the same: that the reductionist evolutionism is superior to Christianity (p. 52-53). On the one hand, Christian ethics could offer even more satisfying answers to the problems of the world without accepting at all the framework of the evolutionism. It is true that Christian ethics could offer answers to the problems raised by evolutionism, but this is not by accepting the so called "well-established" evidence for evolutionism. On the other hand, truth is not measured by a "richer" account provided by a system of thought; truth should be marked by more objective characteristics, and not by the concept of "richness."

Another aspect of Messer's approach is his reduced interest in creationism, one of the five "typologies" of science-religion interaction: (1) evolutionary reductionism, (2) science-directed dialogue, (2) equal-status dialogue, (3) religion-directed dialogue, (4) creationism. While choosing the third typology for himself, Messer rejects most of the others more or less successfully. However, in my view, Messer's least successful argument was the one brought against creationism. First, for Messer, creationism is represented by Henry M. Morris, a young-earth creationist, and thus identifying creationists with a heavy, rather negative rhetoric against science (although I do not claim Henry Morris was a negativist). Second, in order to give justice to his own typology (Christian doctrines determines the dialogue and critically examines the proposals of science), he misrepresented creationism by describing it as "[o]nly the contribution of Christian doctrine is admitted, the scientific contribution being denied or dismissed" (p. 50). Messer himself realized the unfairness of his description of creationism in acknowledging the existence of "creation science," although he is quick to label it "scientific in a fairly unconventional way" (p. 54). Third, Messer dismissed creationism out rightly, giving it the least space (one paragraph) in his study and

description from all the other science-religion relation theories. The only creationist work he refers to is Henry M. Morris' 1974 *Scientific Creationism*, and even then only to the latter's preface. Elsewhere (p. 4), Messer seems to base his conclusions on books about creationists and Intelligent Design rather than on his own study. In any case, this displays either Messer's ignorance of creationism or his lack of willingness to study it adequately. Either of these two options is unacceptable for an objective approach to truth. Fourth, Messer then accuses creationism of rejecting the conclusions of biological science on "human life and the world" "on the ground of a particular reading of Christian doctrine." Just few pages earlier, however, describing his methodology, Messer was convinced that his "one long argument" will work "by articulating one particular account of a Christian tradition ... Reformed Protestantism" in relation to evolution-ethics interaction (p. 48). Is not the whole of Messer's approach based "on the ground of a particular reading of Christian doctrine?" Was not it *a priori*? Later on, Messer would affirm that his own typology should set the agenda for science-religion dialogue (p. 60). However, the question arises: how and why is it more adequate than Morris's position?

Chapter 4 of the book presents several substantial sections. In the first, Messer presents a fascinating history of "evolution of ethics," with ample analysis and able critique. The story reveals the struggle of key scientists over the genesis of altruism. Among them are William Hamilton and his "kin selection" model, Robert Trivers' "reciprocal altruism," Helena Cronin's manipulation model, Loren Haarsma's "adaptation and genetic basis" model. Messer concludes that these theories cannot explain satisfactorily the origin of altruism, thus the need of the Christian doctrine of Creation, which is supposed to "redraw the map" of evolution and ethics.

In Messer's view, three major concepts of the doctrine of creation are crucial for this discussion (pp. 74-78): (1) creation is a creedal affirmation; (2) creation *ex nihilo* is a foundational Christian concept; and (3) creation is a "loving" act of the triune God and therefore it is contingent and inherently good. While these concepts are indeed essential to the Christian doctrine of creation, Messer's problem here is that he finds them not primarily on biblical study, but builds them upon the controversial views of two theologians. On the one hand, Messer puts forward Barth's concept of the a-historical nature of creation and eschaton, whereby the biblical account of creation is made merely a saga, not communicating factual knowledge and thus being "different" from the "scientific discourse" (pp. 76-77). On the other hand, Messer relies upon Irinaeus' concept of an "[un]finished" creation to be "perfected" in the eschaton (pp. 74-75), although Messer does not explain how does he

reconcile this last idea with the concept of the goodness of creation (pp. 75, 77-78). However, Barth's and Irinaeus' concepts constitute Messer's "particular reading of Christian doctrine," to use Messer's accusation against the creationists, to which I would add a "controversial" reading. In this context, Messer's rejection and dismissal of creationists is not only unconvincing, but also counterproductive to his own methodology and eventually to his stance.

Messer's discussion continues to mingle insightful aspects of Christian theology with inappropriate conclusions, biased by his self-imposed purpose of the book. Thus, in discussing human creatures (pp. 79-83), Messer concludes that, generally, Christian accounts of humans as *imago Dei* risk "to become to a greater or lesser extent disembodied" (p. 81) and that "biology," critically appropriated into Christian doctrine of creation, can "remind us to give due weight to the fact that human personhood in the image of God is physically embodied existence in a material world" (p. 82). While this is a valuable observation, Messer does not show how biblical creationism and anthropology (that is, the monist one) fail to serve as such reminders. Another problem, with Messer's approach is that he seems to use the terms "biology" and "evolutionary biology" (same paragraph, p. 83) interchangeably. This is misleading, for the creationists, for instance, distinguish between the two terms: while accepting the contribution of the former, they dismiss the second as philosophical-historical hypothesis.

In his discussion of the doctrine of creation, Messer identifies four points: (1) "The Christian doctrine of creation includes an *evaluative comment on the material world*" (p. 84); (2) "The Christian anthropology ... suggests an *account of the formation of personal identity that might lend itself to an understanding of moral formation*" (p. 88); (3) "This Christian anthropology ... suggests a *structure of call and response* in the human moral life lived before God" (p. 89); (4) "The Christian doctrine of creation and theological anthropology ... suggest an *account of human relationships with non-human creation*" (p. 90); (5) The doctrine of creation also point "towards the Christian doctrines of *salvation and sin*." It is obvious that various Christian traditions will have more or less a different content to these points. However, Messer failed to show how his approach is better than another Christian tradition, for instance, from the creationist model, which he rejected as non-operational in the science-faith interaction. He also failed to show how only a TE ethics could be operational, and not the other options, say creationists, who accept micro-evolution and the role of natural selection in it.

In chapter 5, Messer discusses the "is-ought" relation from both evolutionary and theological perspectives, that is, could one derive the "ought" from what is in nature, especially using scientific research.

Messer rightly concludes that the right "can never simply be read off our scientific understandings of the world" and that "our knowledge about the ways of being and acting in the world ... must be rooted in the biblical witness to the creative activity of God and the Christian tradition's reflection on that biblical witness" (p. 106). Notwithstanding the truism of this affirmation, Messer does not show why one should be a theistic evolutionist and theistic evolutionist ethicist to reach such conclusions. Of course, as it becomes clear from the rest of the chapter, Messer took the route of theistic evolutionary ethics because he followed an interpretation of his own tradition (Barth). However, this tradition does make theistic evolution ethics more biblical than creationism. For instance, Barth's concept of ethics as "the command of God the Creator" (p. 106) is not foreign at all to special creationism, thus there is no need to introduce concepts such as creation as a "'theatre' where God's reconciling work takes place" (p. 122). This concept does not transpire from the Bible, but comes from a theistic evolutionary perspective, presenting God as reconciling Himself to a world in evolution.

Part three of the book consists of four chapters discussing crucial issues to Christian anthropology and ethics. In chapter 6, Messer raises the issue of limitations and determinism in relation to human nature. He surveys the discussions among evolutionary, theological and philosophical circles. Although coming from a Calvinistic background himself, Messer inclines to combine some aspects of natural determinism of the human nature (the determinism of genes) with our moral freedom and responsibility. He pictures a "human agency in which we have choices and act for reasons that we can call our own, but in which our thinking, feeling and acting are influenced, perhaps sometimes radically constrained, by factors out of our control; among those factors may be aspects of our evolutionary inheritance" (p. 159).

Chapters 7 and 8 study the doctrines of salvation and sin, emphasizing the original sin and salvation in Christ. After Messer defines sin with the help of concepts of several theologians (Peter T. Forsyth's concept of sin as rebellion against God's holiness and Karl Barth's concept of sin as pride, slothfulness in accepting God's salvation), he follows the usual theistic evolutionist explanations of sin as humanity's failure to submit to God's plan in the process of evolution and as transmitted genetically to posterity. Messer also inclines to dismiss the biblical study of creation and of the historical Adam, as well as demons and Satan, as mythological in nature. Salvation is seen as God's continued work to bring humanity through the process of evolution to the level of consciousness presented in the person of Jesus Christ.

The last chapter received the suggestive title "Working Out Our Own Salvation?" Here, Messer addresses issues such as medical and biological

technologies. He concludes that humanity needs to participate in God's creation by improving the level of life, the plight of the poor and morality.

It is interesting to note that Messer delves into a scientific and theological narratives and then loosely connects these accounts with the theory of evolution. Quite often he acknowledges that these are pure speculations. But he continues to do this throughout the book.

The book is highly interesting for readers interested in the science-religion interaction. But it proposes a model with a highly speculative, non-objective nature. The book is informative and thoughtful. I recommend this book for those who study religion and science, but also Christian ethics.

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