TOWARDS A COMMON ETHIC

Thoughts arising from readings of The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are and Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny by Robert Wright, and Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics by Richard Holloway

Peter Abbott, April 2002

Every so often,” writes Robert Wright, quoting the historian Chester Starr, “civilisation seems to work itself into a corner from which further progress is virtually impossible along the lines then apparent; yet if new ideas are to have a chance, the old systems must be so severely shaken that they lose their dominance.”1 Augmenting and extending Starr, Richard Holloway observes that “it would be difficult to exaggerate the moral confusions of our day and the urgency and importance of finding an agreed basis for our conduct towards one another as sharers of life on this planet.”2

Both sentiments connect through an understanding of the present condition of commonality. A profoundly counter-cultural word, “common” sounds a dissonant chord within modern, Western society. From birth we are taught that individuality is the supreme goal, that only in difference can we find our own identity. Theories that emphasise commonality are viewed with suspicion; advocacy groups claim that individual needs are overlooked when theories of commonality are pursued. And they have solid grounds for such claims. In the past, homogenous communities have bred prejudice and concealed suffering. Gay communities around the world have at last found recognition of their difference, and have, rightly, become increasingly able to express it without fear of recrimination. Sexual homogeneity is rapidly becoming a thing of the past, as are racial and religious uniformities. Not only is this merging of lifestyles and cultures happening in metropolitan centres but, with the costs of travel and technology plummeting, the ability to and the necessity of interacting with cultures far removed increases.

Nevertheless, any vigorous, multicultural community that still seeks to be coherent, must be able to claim certain ties that bind it. To avoid the Balkanisation of communities, cities and nations, Holloway’s question remains: how do we find an “agreed basis for our conduct towards one another?”

The new science of evolutionary psychology believes it may have found the answer. Its founding principles rest on this question: if every page of Gray’s Anatomy applies to every person, in every country on this planet, why should the anatomy of the mind be any different?3 Evolutionary psychologists, Wright argues in The Moral Animal and Nonzero, are, at root, “trying to discern a second level of human nature, a deeper unity within the species;” they are focusing “less on surface differences among cultures than on deep unities.”4 It postulates that the mind, an organ like the heart or the lungs, evolved and developed in much the same way as other parts of the body. Such an apparently self-evident thesis has taken a long time to catch on. As Wright puts it “this is the state of evolutionary psychology: so much fertile terrain, so few farmers.”5 Part of the problem is the degree of interdisciplinary thinking that the subject requires: it does not fit snugly into university departments or faculties. Yet the impact is nevertheless being felt. Holloway observes its import when he writes that “we rarely acknowledge the formative influence of the early

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1 Robert Wright, Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny (New York, 2000), 136
2 Richard Holloway, Godless Morality: Keeping Religion Out of Ethics (Edinburgh, 1999), 151
4 Ibid, 9 and 7 respectively.
5 Ibid., 84
transmission of genetic material. As Wright puts it, “genes inclining a male to love his offspring – to worry about them, defend them, provide for them, educate them – could flourish at the expense of genes that counselled continued remoteness.”

Thus, he argues, does love grow from the dictates of natural selection, love not just for the child, but also for the woman: “the genetic payoff of having two parents devoted to a child’s welfare is the reason men and women can fall into swoons over one another, including swoons of great duration.”

Love between a man and a woman, that venerable source of poetry, music, literature, and fine art, is just nature’s way of sustaining the species.

It is out of this genetic milieu that, over hundreds of thousands of years, the institution of marriage eventually arose, for simple reasons of economy: monogamy concentrated possibly limited resources into a single unit. Although the huge majority of societies (most of which have been the world’s hunter-gatherer societies, the closest thing we have to a living example of the context of human evolution) have permitted a man to have more than one wife, within these societies polygamy tends to be the exception rather than the rule: “for cons and eons, most marriages have been monogamous, even though most societies haven’t been.”

Although he is at pains to stress the strangeness of institutionalised monogamy, Wright goes on to deny that the United States can be any longer characterised that way: “it is a nation of serial monogamy. And serial monogamy in some ways amounts to polygamy.”

The social and political ramifications of this are important, and worrying. Given that monogamy is, theoretically, the only system that can provide a mate for just about everyone, a polygamous society naturally limits the number of available women. “Men have long competed for access to the scarcer sexual resource, women. And the costs of losing the contest are so high (genetic oblivion) that natural selection has inclined them to compete with special ferocity.”

Male ferocity, however, can be dampened by circumstance, and one circumstance is a mate. “An unmarried man,” Wright observes, “between twenty-four and thirty-five years of age is about three times as likely to murder another male as is a married man the same age.” Furthermore, he is also likely to “incur various risks … to gain the resources that may attract women. He is more likely to rape. More diffusely, a high-risk, criminal life often entails the abuse of drugs and alcohol, which may then compound the problem by further diminishing his chances of ever earning enough money to attract women by legitimate means.”

Whilst the rigid sexual mores of the past held many women in suffocating marriages, on aggregate such strict codes were more beneficial to society as a whole than are the looser codes we may now prize. High divorce rates (“serial monogamy”) really do, it seems, contribute to an erosion of the societal fabric.

Wright frequently draws attention to the way in which the new Darwinian synthesis challenges traditional notions of left-wing and right-wing policies. One irony that would surprise conservatives, he notes, is the discovery that one of the best ways to strengthen monogamous marriage is to “more equally distribute income.” As Wright puts it, “Young single women will feel less inclined to tempt husband A away from wife A if bachelor B has just as much money. And husband A, if he’s not drawing flirtatious looks from young women, may feel more content.

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12 Ibid., 58
13 Ibid., 59
14 Ibid., 91
15 Ibid., 101
16 The reason why it is men who have lots of wives rather than vice-versa also has evolutionary roots, and goes back to the issue of the amount of time and energy men and women are required to put into reproduction.
17 Ibid., 100
18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 105
Although it would be futile to try and summarise Nonzero’s long-sighted sweep of human history and its social and cultural development, it is predicated on the simple premise that out of mankind’s initial, and fumbling, attempts at cooperation between individuals (operating under the dictates of non-zero-sumness and reciprocal altruism), grew cooperation between greater entities. The basic pattern—“deeper and vaster social complexity, more and more non-zero-sumness.” As populations grew, and villages evolved into chiefdoms into cities into nation-states, the potential gains from non-zero-sum relationships increased exponentially: “technological, economic and political development spur population even as population spurs them. In this symbiotic growth lies the inexorable power of cultural complexification.” With increasing populations, control over resources becomes vital and conflict between communities inevitable and leadership and hierarchy naturally emerges. Wright cites Kant’s description of man’s “unsocial sociability.” “Through the desire for honour, power or property, it drives him to seek status among his fellows, whom he cannot bear yet cannot bear to leave.” Herein lies the crux: “the fact that our species evolved amid both reciprocal altruism and social hierarchy may underlie not just personal grudges and reprisals, but race riots and world wars.”

Which brings us up to the present. Sort of. I am greatly simplifying Wright’s treatment of the ongoing and inexorable complexification of society and have omitted much of the detail. What is left after this swift précis are the moral and political ramifications of this new theory, the most important of which seems to be the extent to which mankind was not designed to do many of the things he is required to do now.

We aren’t designed to stand on crowded subway platforms, or to live in suburbs next door to people we never talk to, or to get hired or fired, or to watch the evening news. This disjunction between the contexts of our design and of our lives is probably responsible for much psychopathology, as well as much suffering of a less dramatic sort. (Moral Animal, 38)

People weren’t, of course, designed to be relentlessly happy in the ancestral environment... Still, people were designed not to go crazy in the ancestral environment. (Moral Animal, 139)

Cultural evolution is developing infinitely faster than biological evolution. Wright goes so far as to suggest that “evolution by natural selection is, for practical purposes, standing still” and Professor Steve Jones of University College London agrees with him. Yet if biological evolution has slowed to a standstill, everything else seems to be accelerating wildly: “the current era has the aura of a threshold; it has that unsettling, out-of-control feeling that can portend a major shift. Technological, geopolitical and economic change seem ominously fast, and the fabric of society seems somehow tenuous.” Try as we might to catch up, it is simply impossible. Yet, once a fuller awareness of this disjunction is reached, there is hope that something may be done about it.

 “[The] mental organs, it seems, are so flexible that they can participate in a virtual rebellion against the Darwinian logic behind them.” Wright suggests that we can transcend the demands through which natural selection has created us, body and mind. In Wright’s view, the fundamental unity of human nature, once widely understood, will bring about a vast and profound paradigm shift in the way that we view each other and the world. Once this new age has dawned, we can then consign

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26 Wright, Nonzero, 109
27 Ibid., 50
28 Wright, Nonzero, 27
29 Wright, Moral Animal, 257
30 Ibid., 296.
31 Wright, Nonzero, 9
32 Wright, Moral Animal, 261
moral assent. As he points out, society is moving “from a rules morality to a values morality, from a morality of command to a morality of consent.”⁴⁰ But what new system could command that kind of assent? What new system could be powerful enough to sustain Wright’s global utopia?

Edward O. Wilson has suggested that the “evolutionary epic” serve as our “binding myth in the modern scientific age – a myth not in the sense of an untruth, but in the sense of a story that explains our existence and helps us orient ourselves to the world.”⁴¹ Although the religious establishment has soaked history in blood for too long, the narrative and explanatory power of religious belief has brought great happiness and succour to millions. As Holloway points out, religious mythology is profoundly effective in helping people “design their lives into patterns that rescue them from chaos and confusion.”⁴²

Modern Christian thought must bear its own responsibility for smothering the mythical and narrative power of Christianity with orthodoxy and dogma. It has failed its adherents. What is needed, Holloway contends in Doubts and Loves: What is Left of Christianity, is a breaking apart of the original Christian myth, to discover anew its transcendent, life-giving intensity: “If religious narratives are to retain their power, they must be capable of constant reinterpretation.” Although these narratives are indeed capable of stimulating radical, personal transformation, they are equally prone to encourage profound blindness, and a retreat from the inquirers of science: the rise of creationism as a valid alternative to evolutionary theory illustrates both the explanatory power of religious texts and the dangers that they present. Whilst E.O. Wilson’s “evolutionary epic” may satisfy the scientist, it remains to be seen if it can inspire the artist and the poet. Society depends on both.

“Morality,” Holloway writes, “is something we construct in response to the tension created by nature or the life-force and the sense of personal responsibility that human consciousness creates.”⁴³ Yes. Morality can only be, and really only ever has been, a continued process of reinterpretation and relearning, of discovering God “in the struggle of life and not in some magical rescue from it.”⁴⁴ Coming to grips with the ramifications of this new science is a difficult, painful process, but to avoid that process is surely to deny God’s hopes for us. If He exists, He did not create our minds to be filled with superstitious ignorance. The revelations that evolutionary psychology is providing throws the everlasting moral struggle into new turmoil. Yet I can only believe that it is a creative turmoil. After all, belief in God is never easy, and never should be.

“The question of moral responsibility in the view of evolutionary psychology,” Wright cautiously observes, “is a large one, and dicey ... There are deep and momentous issues lying out there, going largely unaddressed.”⁴⁵ They are indeed momentous issues, and ones for which few can even begin to claim an answer. The implications of the new evolutionary synthesis are deeply, deeply profound, requiring what Wright acknowledges to be a great test of “moral imagination” to appreciate in all their magnitude. Whether or not they can be woven successfully into the new fabric of a common ethic, one that can bind the long, laborious and inevitably painful struggle towards rejuvenation, remains to be seen.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 57
⁴¹ Wright, Nonzero, 297
⁴² Ibid., 10
⁴³ Holloway, Godless Morality, 71
⁴⁴ Ibid., 75
⁴⁵ Wright, Moral Animal, 346