

The Evolution-ID Controversy and Same-Sex Unions in Theocentric, Naturalistic, Ethical Perspective

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Byron C. Bangert**

In my book, Consenting to God and Nature, I argue for a theocentric, naturalistic, theological ethics that is congruent with, and therefore characterized by, two features common to the pursuit of knowledge in contemporary science: 1) a critical realist perspective that affirms ontological realism and accepts epistemological fallibilism; and 2) the endorsement of what Franklin Gamwell calls “the modern commitment,” which privileges human experience and reason over traditional authorities in the validation of all our knowledge and understanding.¹

I am primarily concerned in the book with providing a coherent and compelling conceptual framework for the articulation of a theological ethics that one can claim to be both intellectually and religiously adequate. The notion of adequacy here includes truthfulness, or adequacy to reality as best we can know it. The *naturalistic* perspective, with its critical realism and commitment to human experience and reason, bears particular practical and ethical significance in terms of what are taken to be valid descriptions or depictions of real world phenomena in light of which human action proceeds. It thus reflects a moral concern for truthfulness. In our contemporary cultural situation, debates over morally contested issues are often defined by competing views of what constitutes normatively valid accounts of, e.g., the origins of the world, the origins of human life, when life begins, the nature and function of human sexuality, the status of human life vis-a-vis other life, and so on. In these debates, the knowledge of contemporary science is often challenged by religious, theological, and ideological claims that do not share the modern commitment, with profound implications for human valuing and action.

The *theocentric* perspective also bears considerable practical and ethical significance, for at least two primary reasons. First of all, it serves to critique and reject the claim that human beings are the measure of all things and the culmination of the creative process. Second, by removing

¹Gamwell, *The Divine Good: Modern Moral Theory and the Necessity of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 3. I recognize that anyone who does not share a critical realist perspective, or rejects the modern commitment to human experience and reason, may have a hard time taking my argument seriously. I am simply reporting on the intellectual world that I inhabit, the world that seems real to me in ways so compelling that I literally cannot fathom any other. In consequence, I have difficulty taking seriously the claims of those who do not inhabit this world.

While it seems obvious that traditionalists may take exception to my position, post-modernists may likewise find my privileging of human experience and reason to be spurious. However, mine is also a distinctly post-modern perspective. That is to say, I take seriously the insights coming from the sociology of knowledge, and regard the claim that all social reality is constructed to be non-controversial. However, I am not a total deconstructionist, or post-structuralist. The apparent view of some post-modernists that all knowledge is merely a discourse is patently absurd. Surely we inhabit a real world not of our own making, a world that we encounter and experience continuously through our bodies, and there is no talking ourselves out of it. Process philosopher David Ray Griffin, one of the three thinkers whose work I examine, critique, and appropriate in my book, describes his own position as a constructive, or reconstructive, postmodernism, and that sounds good to me.

human beings from the moral center in reflection on problematic features of existence that are typically perceived in terms of ambiguity, suffering, tragedy, and evil, this perspective also removes from human beings primary accountability for these problematic features. An opening is thus provided for a more empirically based rather than theologically driven account of human nature. Perhaps the most immediate and apparent moral implication of a theocentric perspective appears in the articulation of a religiously-based ecological ethics, in which human claims and interests are often perceived to be incommensurable with the claims and interests of other species and their habitats. In a theocentric perspective, human claims and interests do not necessarily trump the interests and claims of other life. Another important implication arises in considerations of human sexual morality, inasmuch as human impulses, desires, and inclinations are not to be judged, *ipso facto*, as morally problematic. In theocentric perspective, moral thinking must be regarded more as guide, less as counter, to natural human inclination.

In the balance of this paper I will focus on two particular issues, the intelligent design-evolution controversy, and same-sex unions, in terms of how the theocentric, naturalistic approach of my book informs and shapes ethical reflection about these issues. I will indicate some of the implications such reflection has for moral, legal, and/or social practice.

With respect to the ID-evolution controversy, it is often pointed out that there really is little controversy within the scientific community. From the point of view of most scientists, the call of ID advocates to “teach the controversy” is but special pleading. Biologists in particular, and scientists in general, regard evolutionary theory as thoroughly tested and confirmed. Debates may remain about the ability of evolutionary theory to explain, e.g., the origins of life, the emergence of consciousness, and the pace of change during the so-called Cambrian explosion. But there are few other known features of the development of biological life that seem obscure to evolutionary theory, with its principles of random variation and natural selection. ID advocates like Michael Behe and William Dembski claim that certain biological organisms exhibit an “irreducible complexity” for which evolutionary theory cannot provide an adequate account, but the vast majority of biologists reject this claim, and leading evolutionary biologists have taken pains to refute it. In short, given that it is a scientific theory, evolution may not exactly be a proven fact, but it seems as irrefutable as the theory of gravity.

The naturalistic perspective that I take in Consenting to God and Nature leads me to assess scientific and empirical claims on scientific and empirical grounds. Behe, Dembski, and other ID proponents publicly profess to be making scientific and empirical claims. However, those claims amount to little more than the assertion that evolutionary theory fails to account for all the phenomena of biological life. Their critics in the scientific community note that they have not proposed any sort of research agenda that would, or possibly could, substantiate their claims of intelligent design. It becomes quickly evident that ID claims are not scientifically testable or verifiable, and that there are no grounds for teaching intelligent design in the science curriculum.

That does not mean that ID claims are wholly irrelevant, however. Science requires a naturalistic perspective, but there are various forms of naturalism, not all of which entail a wholly

materialistic or deterministic account of biological events. A naturalistic perspective does not entail, *ipso facto*, the claim that evolution is an *unguided* process, or its currently favored and essentially equivalent alternative, a *self-organizing* process. It is also unwarranted to claim that evolution can provide an exhaustive and complete explanation of the origins and development of biological life. These are not scientifically valid, empirically verifiable claims. They are essentially metaphysical claims. In the first place, evolutionary theory does not currently provide an exhaustive and complete explanation of the origins and development of biological life as we know it. Whether or not it ever could do so is of course another question. But in the second place, and more basically, evolutionary theory, insofar as it is science, has no warrant to make pronouncements about the ultimate ontological nature and status of the phenomena under its study. In other words, and contrary to the pronouncements of evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, divine influence cannot be ruled out of the evolutionary process, any more than evolution can rule out the existence of God.

In my experience, most educated religious people continue to hold to two convictions about the natural order. First, they believe it is a divine creation, and second, they believe that science, including evolutionary science, provides a descriptive and explanatory account of how that creation occurred and, to some extent, still occurs. Conceptually, there is no problem in claiming that science *describes* what God has done. The claim that science *explains*, however, can clearly be problematic. If the occurrence of a natural event can be wholly explained in materialistic terms, as science often seems to assume, then how can it also be said that it is God's doing? In my book, I address this issue from the perspective of a process metaphysics. Here I wish simply to note that the ID-evolution controversy is a real controversy, insofar as it accents the conflict between a theistic worldview, in which God is understood to be the Creator of the universe, and the implicitly atheistic worldview of those evolutionary scientists who hold that all biological events can be wholly explained without reference to God. This is not, however, a scientific controversy as such. It is basically a metaphysical, or religious, controversy.

I propose a naturalistic theism that moves beyond this impasse. The resolution of the controversy requires that religious people refrain from supernaturalism, at least insofar as observable phenomena are concerned, and that scientists refrain from metaphysics, at least in their role as scientists. In my view it is saying too much to claim that God is the Intelligent Designer. Nonetheless, it is possible to claim, though not empirically to verify, that God exercises some influence in the evolutionary process. Consistent with the tenets of basic science, however, that evolutionary process is nonetheless to be understood as governed by regularities of relationship (e.g., cause and effect) that are not subject to arbitrary intervention, disruption, or re-direction. Evolutionary theory can and must be taught as science, but not as metaphysics.

ID proponents are concerned about upholding the theological claim that God is Creator, but I suspect they are even more concerned about the challenge that evolutionary theory raises to their views of the place of humankind in the created order. If we human beings are descended from monkeys, then what makes us so special? Virtually the whole of Christian soteriology, the theology of salvation, focuses on the plight of humankind and God's singularly gracious and

sacrificial act in securing our salvation. From the Doctrine of the Fall to the Theology of the Cross, Christian theology is all about us, how we brought divine judgment upon ourselves, and how we may become reconciled to God through the atoning work of Christ. But this whole scheme for interpreting human life and destiny—in virtually all of its traditional permutations—is rendered suspect if human beings are “rising beasts” rather than once-perfect creatures fallen from a pristine state.

Moreover, to the extent that we share the same gene pool as the chimpanzee, to the extent that our consciousness and intelligence and capacities for affection, sympathy, and grief are shared by other animals, what sense does it make to regard divine salvation or eternal life as an exclusively human prospect? My guess is that “irreducible complexity” plays such a prominent role in the thinking of ID proponents precisely because they have need to distinguish as sharply as possible the presumed discontinuity that must exist between human and other animal life in order to justify the claims of human uniqueness that seem central to orthodox Christian doctrine. Surely human beings exemplify more than any other creatures this irreducible complexity. Surely we exist only by virtue of God’s special creative work.² And we are the culmination of that creative work, not simply current state of the art, and not to be superceded by yet more superior beings as evolution continues.

Needless to say, because it is at root a critique of anthropocentrism, the theocentric perspective of my book is subversive of conventionally orthodox Christian theology at this point. I do not regard human beings as the end or culmination of God’s creative work. I find the myth of the Fall to be an impediment in coming to terms with our relationship as human beings to the natural order. I take exception to any narrowly construed understanding of divine salvation as God’s special provision for human beings. As I see it, evolutionary theory implicitly shares theocentrism’s radical critique of anthropocentric modes of thinking. For the ID movement, as for its predecessor movement, scientific creationism, the primary threat posed by evolution is not the threat to biblical literalism, or the threat to theistic belief, but the threat to an anthropocentric conception of the universe and its theological corollary, the anthropocentric understanding of human life and destiny enshrined in orthodox Christian soteriology. This is not a threat that any form of public education can readily ameliorate. It is nonetheless a threat that must be broadly addressed across the educational curriculum, much as androcentrism, ethnocentrism, and other provincialisms have had to be addressed. At the same time, one may hope that monotheistic religious traditions and communities might begin to recognize the parochialism of anthropocentric theological formulations, and begin the long and difficult task of reclaiming their theocentric identities.

Turning now to the issue of same-sex unions, my naturalistic approach begins with an empirically-based understanding of the nature of human sexuality. Moreover, the theocentric approach calls for an understanding that is not radically discontinuous from what can be

²The majority view of Americans; according to a CBS poll in 2004, 55% agree that “God created humans in present form,” 27% say that “Humans evolved, God guided the process,” and 13% say “Humans evolved, God did not guide the process.” See <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/11/22/opinion/polls/main657083.shtml>

discovered about animal sexuality in general. That is to say, any attempt to discover what is natural, or normal, regarding human sexuality must take into account what can be known about sexuality more generally, and especially within the mammalian world. Empirical study reveals an enormous diversity of sexual behavior and expression among mammals, including among human beings. This is hardly to suggest that all evident forms of sexual behavior are morally acceptable, or that we may resort to subjective criteria for identifying what passes as sexually permissible! It is only to observe that we must be very cautious about claims regarding what is or is not natural. For example, the claim that only monogamous, heterosexual, genital-to-genital contact is morally acceptable, because it alone is natural, normal, or most prevalent among human beings, is a highly specious claim. There have been and continue to be many viable human cultures where human sexual behavior cannot be adequately characterized by some one or more of these forms.

Moreover, mounting empirical evidence suggests that homosexuality is not the expression of an individual preference, freely chosen, but a biologically determined predilection, or orientation, that most homosexual individuals come to discover about themselves, often with much consternation. In short, homosexuality as an orientation is not volitional, even if homosexual behavior is so. Insofar as one may speak about the natural, therefore, doing what comes naturally may entail opposite-sex relations among heterosexuals, but it entails same-sex relations among homosexuals. It is apparently primarily the existence of social and cultural norms proscribing homosexual relations that compromises the seeming naturalness of such relations.

Of course, the widespread existence of social and cultural norms proscribing homosexual relations is also part of the empirical reality that must be taken into account in ethical reflection. Are there good reasons for such proscriptions? Are there moral reasons for constraining homosexual behavior? Briefly, and somewhat speculatively, I would argue that taboos against homosexual activity derive primarily from the sense among the majority of the members of most societies, who happen to be heterosexual, that there is something unnatural about homosexual behavior. Secondly, it is incontrovertible that one of the functions of heterosexual union is biological reproduction, an activity that is essential to the survival of the species. I suspect that knowledge of the essential biological role of heterosexual union contributes to the widespread acceptance of heterosexual activity as natural. After all, to the sexually uninitiated heterosexual, the idea of heterosexual union may elicit as much sense of unnaturalness and disgust as does the idea of homosexual behavior. That sense of unnaturalness and disgust is typically overcome, not simply by the pleasurable nature of sexual union, but also by the awareness that human beings are biologically equipped for, and dependent for their survival on, such unions.

The empirical evidence seems to indicate, most basically and simply, that most societies that proscribe homosexual behavior do so because it seems unnatural if not disgusting (and therefore a perversion) to the majority heterosexual population. This sense of its unnaturalness is easily sustained, moreover, because there is no evident biologically necessary function for homosexual behavior, so far as the society as a whole is concerned. Furthermore, the raising of children, not just their biological production, is an essential function and purpose of society, and this is a task for which the biological parents are typically judged to be best suited. Societies have every reason

to sanction heterosexual unions that 1) address the biological needs of most members, 2) provide for biological reproduction, and 3) insure the raising of the next generation. At first blush, these reasons seem to be largely lacking with respect to homosexual unions.

On what basis, then, might a society wish to sanction homosexual unions? Let me assume that we would eschew a society so repressive that it could successfully outlaw and penalize all homosexual activity. Given the prevalence and tolerance of some degree of homosexual behavior, there are then some negative reasons for favoring homosexual unions, namely reasons having to do with the reduction of those forms of homosexual activity regarded as dangerous, unhealthy, promiscuous, or socially disruptive. Just as the apostle Paul counseled heterosexuals to marry rather than burn with passion and fall prey to illicit sexual behavior,³ we might regard homosexual unions as constructive concessions to homosexual desire.

This Pauline approach, however, is at odds with my theocentric, naturalistic perspective, which does not regard human sexual desire as inherently morally problematic. To be sure, there are many destructive forms of human sexual behavior, both heterosexual and homosexual. But I would emphasize thinking in terms of channeling and guiding human sexual desire, rather than trying to contain it. I would also argue that, with the exception of biological reproduction, homosexual unions can fulfill every good purpose that we identify with heterosexual unions. Thus, homosexual unions are responsive to the biological needs of homosexuals who, though they may be in the minority, should not thereby be denied what is granted to others, namely a socially sanctioned means of meeting those needs. Further, homosexual unions may serve as well as heterosexual unions for the purposes of raising children. We may be unable to say whether, generally speaking, homosexual couples are as suitable as heterosexual couples for raising children. It is hard to imagine a satisfactory empirical answer to that value-laden question. But it would not be hard to identify homosexual couples who have done a more than satisfactory job of raising children. This should be sufficient to make homosexual individuals eligible to adopt the children of their partners, and homosexual couples eligible to adopt non-biologically-related children, on the same general bases as other adults are deemed eligible for adopting.

Moreover, it is not just for biological reasons, or for the raising of children, that committed sexual relationships have been and should be valorized. Such relationships have profound relational, economic, emotional, and spiritual dimensions that would seem to commend them, quite irrespective of whether the union is heterosexual or homosexual. I cannot elaborate here on the full range of benefits that committed human sexual unions may provide, but in some Christian perspectives these benefits are regarded as primary to the purposes of sexual union, whereas human reproduction is regarded as secondary. Thus, an ethic of human sexuality that is based primarily on human biological function, and for that reason proscribes homosexual behavior, is to be rejected.

My own view is that human reproduction remains the most basic and essential purpose of human

³1 Corinthians 7

sexuality, at least with existing technology and despite the possibilities for artificial insemination, but that this is an insufficient basis for any particular sexual ethic. Rape, sexual slavery, or polygamy might serve just as well as consensual, monogamous, heterosexual relations for purposes of biological reproduction. Moreover, while biological reproduction is essential to human beings as a species, it must not be seen as essential to every individual sexual union. There are various circumstances that persuade us that the moral goodness of particular human sexual unions need not depend on the potential for biological reproduction. These include infertility, genetic inheritance, and economic and health limitations. It is not clear why homosexuality should not be seen as a similar life circumstance.

It is only by taking into account the full range of purposes, or benefits, that may attend to human sexual union that one begins to discern the reasons for granting social and legal sanction to monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Perhaps some of the benefits of human sexual union can be fully enjoyed without formal sanction, but others of those benefits—e.g., some of the legally-based relational, economic, and social benefits—can be had only by granting formal legal status to such unions. Approaching the issue in this way, it becomes obvious that virtually all of the benefits of heterosexual unions may also accrue to homosexual unions. Whether or not committed same-sex unions should be called marriages is a matter I will not attempt to address here. That such same-sex unions should be judged morally good and in all legal respects enjoy the same rights and privileges as heterosexual marriages is the point I wish to make.