

LITERATURE REVIEWS

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DARWINIAN MORALITY?

CREATED FROM ANIMALS: THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF DARWINISM. 1990. James Rachels. NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press. 245 p. Cloth, \$19.95.

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This is a closely reasoned, relentlessly logical case for removing humanity from the unique moral position which it has occupied in Western thought. It is not an overstatement to say that this is a frightening book, precisely because Rachels does such a good job at the task he has set for himself.

The book begins with an Introduction in which the author sketches the problem and lays out his thesis: Darwinism undermines and removes all traditional Christian support for the idea of human dignity. “Man” is not special. While this may seem unremarkable to some, it is a hotly debated idea. Its attackers may be Christians (in particular, theistic evolutionists) or non-Christians. Some hold that Darwinism does *not* have moral implications — that it is in a separate realm, the realm of science. Others concede that there are indeed moral implications to the idea that man is a product of evolution from primitive ancestors, but that Rachels is nevertheless wrong, and man *can* occupy a special place in the moral calculus.

Chapter 1 is a historical review of Darwin’s life and the era in which he lived. Chapter 2 examines earlier attempts to relate (or deny relationship between) ethics and evolution. Chapter 3 asks and answers the question: “Must a Darwinian Be Sceptical?” The conclusion is that even if theism can coexist with Darwinism, it will be so different from the traditional view that it no longer supports the doctrine of human dignity. Chapter 4 addresses the question of “How Different are Humans from Other Animals?” and concludes that they are different only in

degree, not in kind. Chapter 5 explores the possibility of “Morality Without the Idea that Humans are Special.” Rachels’ “basic idea is that how an individual may be treated is to be determined, not by considering his group memberships, but by considering his own particular characteristics” (p 173).

Rachels’ replacement for the traditional view of man can be termed “moral individualism.” The characteristics of any individual animal (and only those characteristics relevant to the specific question at hand) determine how that individual will be treated. Mere membership in the human race affords no special treatment. This leads to *apparently* anomalous results. Damaged humans with few apparent future possibilities may be sacrificed for the welfare of non-humans — mainly higher mammals, in Rachels’ view. He makes it plain that, under Darwinism, these results are not anomalous, but are reasonable and to be expected.

Rachels’ biases are revealed here and there throughout his book. In Chapter 2 (p 88) he examines the traditional sanctity of innocent human life. After listing suicide, euthanasia, and infanticide as violations of the principle, he says: “Suicide will serve as a convenient example (although euthanasia or infanticide would do just as well).” I am struck that, perhaps purely by chance(?), he chose as his example the (currently) *least* controversial of his choices, and the only one not involving aggression against another human being. Would the argument that follows be so convincing to his readers if he were defending the acceptability of infanticide? I think not.

Also, with few exceptions, when evaluating the case for man’s privileged position in the animal, Rachels expresses that concept in its extreme form — that *any* of man’s interests take precedence over *all* interests of other forms of life. While he does mention that some Christians see their role on earth as stewards rather than owners, his examples of traditional views all involve the exploiters. While these do make much better stories for Rachels’ purpose, a less-anthropocentric understanding of God’s creation can accomplish many of the good things that he espouses — vegetarianism, anti-vivisection, etc. — without leaving human beings subject to the inhumanity of their peers.

Perhaps a good philosopher can make a convincing case that Rachels is wrong; that Darwinism and a Christian worldview are compatible. But the consequences of widespread acceptance of the doctrine taught in this book frighten me. Rachels is saying that *THERE*

IS NO OUTSIDE STANDARD. We are free (indeed, compelled) to develop our own standards of right and wrong. History is full of examples (slavery, genocide, wife-burning are just a few) of what happens when man abandons God's Law and invents his own. Rachels appears at his most naive when he implicitly assumes that emphasizing the continuity between man and animals will result in bringing our treating animals according to traditional human norms. He does not deal with the probability that some humans will simply begin treating other humans as badly as animals are currently treated. To accept a doctrine whose success depends on a fundamental change in human nature is a recipe for disaster, one that we see looming over us even now in the abortion and euthanasia movements.

This book is a challenge to every Christian who thinks about ethics. Is Rachels correct when he says that the Bible teaches the dignity of man and the sanctity of innocent human life? If so, then a Christian view of the fundamental moral questions will be different than a materialist's view. If our decisions on these issues are essentially similar to the Darwinists', the task is to show that Rachels is incorrect in his arguments about the moral implications of Darwinism. Otherwise we risk being Christian in name only, denying Christ by our actions.