

Theology of Nature without Moral Realism: A Response of Jürgen Moltmann

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Moltmann's Perspective: An Overview

From Professor Moltmann's perspective, natural history (i.e., a scientific narrative of the development of human thought and behavior), when informed by a theology of nature, confirms the truth of cooperation as the ethical norm by which humans ought to live. He begins with the proposition that life is (or is characterized by) struggle. Life is not easy. Numerous challenges and problems complicate life, making it difficult. Various lifeforms, in fierce contest with each other and battling against their environment, struggle for survival. Assuming that life is a struggle, he leads us to ask: Which behavior in lifeforms (i.e., creatures like us) is more basic and represents the best strategy for engagement in this struggle? Is it competition? Is it cooperation? Professor Moltmann notes that Darwin and his followers observed but ignored cooperation as the primary act of humankind (p. 2). Professor Moltmann points to the concept of internal motivation attributable to mirror-neurons as an example of the scientific data (facts) that suggest that cooperation is fundamental. How could these facts be overlooked or missed? Professor Moltmann reasons that this oversight or disregard of facts may be due to a deficiency in the natural sciences, the lack of a hermeneutical perspective informed by theology. The type of theology of nature (theological hermeneutics) that will enrich the natural sciences centers upon three principles: (1) the wonder of Being, that is, self-transcendence in living beings; (2) the wonder of Life, the inherent worth of all living beings; and (3) the wonder of the Spirit, the participation of living beings in a cosmic consciousness (pp. 5-7). With these principles, the natural sciences, in constructing a history of human development, will not miss the fundamental ethical norm of cooperation.

Professor Moltmann's presentation raises, for me, four areas of interest. They are: (1) the use of the metaphor of war to interpret life, (2) the neurophysiology thought to underlie morality, (3) the potential of the natural sciences to discover ethical norms (moral facts), and (4) the need of a theology of nature (theological hermeneutics) for a correct (an integrated) perspective for the natural sciences. Because numbers 3 and 4 are closely related, I will combine and comment on these together.

Metaphor of War for an Interpretation of Life

Happenings in existence, especially events that would threaten our being and require concerted effort on our part to overcome, are likened to "war". Is this the way life actually is? That life is a struggle rests upon metaphor.

Metaphor contains within itself an element of self-negation. Metaphor both "is" and "is not" the actual thing that we are describing, which in this case is life. "Life" and "war" are two separate things. To say figuratively that life is struggle implies that war is the principle object and medium by which to understand and organize features of life.

There are moments in life that do conform or fit neatly under the category of struggle. For example, let's say, John woke up this morning, went for a short run, showered, got dressed, and took a cup of coffee before attending the nine o'clock session. Where is struggle? Now, there are moments in life when we do struggle. However, it takes a considerable stretch of imagination in order to interpret all or most events in life in terms of struggle. Whatever life is, it flourishes, if at all, amid the likelihood of non-being.¹ Life, unasserted, succumbs to non-being. Exertion of effort is not tantamount to the sort of activity that takes place during contest or battle.

Life as struggle is a metaphor. As such, it should be treated as a metaphor but with seriousness. As metaphor, it is not a statement of objective fact but rather a way of interpreting, valuating selected observations. The war metaphor structures thought and action.² We need not be committed absolutely to the idea of life as struggle, since this is a figurative expression about life. We are free to explore other metaphors, hopefully ones that are less militaristic.³

Moral Agency and Sociobiology (Evolutionary Psychology)

Professor Moltmann leans in a direction that grants the natural sciences a large role in morality. He does not go so far as to say that the natural sciences establish morality but he does credit the natural sciences with the potential to discover moral facts. The view that humans are predisposed, having innate "hard wiring" in the brain (and genetic makeup of the body), to act in certain ways minimizes moral agency, that is, freedom, choice, and responsibility in human action.

Sociobiology (evolutionary psychology) discloses a lot about human beings. However, it does not stand alone as a reliable or primary source for discourse on morality. Morality, the formation of moral agents, is a complex process. Sociobiological explanations, rooted in materialism, are crude attempts to give scientific respectability to justifications or criticisms of complex human behaviors. Social and cultural factors, that which happens outside of human bodies and which may be examined from other disciplinary perspectives, must be taken into account when explaining human behavior. DNA, genes, neural functions, and natural selection are not the larger or whole story of human life. Materialist (and even some theological) explanations do not deal adequately with the convolutions and indeterminacy of human freedom. Humans are self-aware creatures who, by the capacity of choice, form but also transcend conceptions of self and alter patterns of group organization. These choices made do not always follow the logic of natural selection, cost-benefit analysis, or self-interest.⁴

Use of the Sciences (Natural History), along with Theology, to Establish "Moral Facts"

By the use of the natural sciences (natural history), Professor Moltmann shows that the ethical principle of cooperation may be associated with empirically observable features of the physical world. This is use of and confidence in the natural sciences tends towards moral realism. Moral realism is the view that moral claims (for example, the claims that cooperation is fundamental and obligatory) purport to relate or correspond to facts about the physical world and some of these moral claims are actually true. Moral realism is based on common sense or conventional wisdom. It seems quite convincing not only because of our intuitions that seem to confirm it but also because of our desire to

bestow upon moral claims the certitude and authority enjoyed by established factual claims about the physical world.

There is an “explanatory gap” between natural history and morality. Facts about the world or factual descriptions of human behavior do not mean necessarily that humans should act in a certain way. The content (descriptions) of natural history does not match one-to-one the content (values) espoused in moral discourse. Natural facts are not moral values.⁵ Natural history does not constitute cause or justification of human behavior. Whatever moral values are, they are very unlikely to be facts of the sort established by the natural sciences. Moral claims, rather than being objective facts about the world as it is, are valuations, expressions of what we want to be and how we desire our world to be. Morality is cognitive, conceptual, and social processes for the discernment of appropriate methods and desirable outcomes of human behavior.

Normative Realism (Pragmatist Non-Descriptivism) and Open Dialogue on Morality

The question of what is good, what is the right thing to do, is an open question best answered through the genuine dialogue. The project of moral realism is to establish an “objective” morality that all persons are obliged to regard as authoritative and thus bypass the involved and complicated process of moral formation and negotiation of conflicting social interests. The danger that moral realism poses over against open dialogue is that while human beings are forced (whether by arguments about what is natural or threat of punishment) to comply with a set of norms, they do not become mature moral agents. They become compliant but not moral. Without discussion, debate, and negotiation, persons run the risk of acting without sufficient understanding, explanation or justification. The idea of moral agency presupposes that persons can deliberate and choose responsibly between alternatives. The appeal to science, in order to establish moral convictions as facts or as something supported by natural facts, constitutes a form of authority that legitimates a given set of moral norms but at the expense of nurturing thought and fostering dialogue.⁶ Other ways of establishing authority rest upon fallacies such as *argumentum ad baculum* (appeal to force), *argumentum ad verecundiam* (appeal to authoritative sources), and *argumentum ad populum* (appeal to opinion or passion of the majority).⁷

Christians can speak matter-of-factly about the world and about morality without undertones of moral realism. One aspect and outcome of human consciousness is the construction of worldviews, pictures of the world where human beings image and locate themselves in these pictures.⁸ This picturing of the world involves assertions and claims about human identity and agency. Science and theology both have interest and role in the construction of these pictures. The natural sciences uncover facts about the world, clarifying, sharpening the picture so that it corresponds to empirical realities. Theology, reflection on Christian experience and tradition, further shapes the picture and informs human identity in light of realities deemed ultimate. The choice is not between theology and science (theology or science) but rather a choice of both theology and science. In the conversation on human culture, Christians can be normative realists in the sense that they believe that there are norms that are “fixed”, having enduring worth and significance. Morality is an open question for which Christians offer answers based on witness of encounter with God (or Christ) in the Holy Spirit. It is the unique experience of Christians, as people of faith, rather than natural history that is a sufficient explanation

and warrant for those values that Christians interject in the cultural dialogue about morality.⁹ Professor Moltmann's theology of nature, without apology, has a place in the cultural dialogue but it is a place where theological hermeneutics holds no dominance. In open dialogue, neither theology nor science dominates.¹⁰

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¹ Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press, 1952), p. .

² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. .

³ In Hebrew cosmology, the Earth is situated between the waters above and waters below, within the bubble surrounded by water (Gen. 1: 6-8). Also human life is compared to the grass that grows in the morning which is later cut and withers away (Ps. 37: 2). Each of these ways of depicting life suggests that life is rare, vulnerable, and fragile.

⁴ Even altruistic behavior is not always in the best interest of the individual agent performing the action or results in the greater good for society. There is real loss incurred in care and love for others. For example, a 7-year old girl is hailed as a hero for saving her mother's life. Placing her body between a gunman and her mother, the girl took six gunshot wounds. She lost one of her eyes and has scarring over several places of her body. See Corey Williams, "Healing from Shooting, 'Angel' in Therapy," *Commercial Appeal* (February 21, 2008), p. A2. Similarly, a young man, trying to protect his wife when a tornado struck their home, nearly lost his life. He sustained damage to his spinal cord and other injuries that left him in a coma for several days. He cannot (and may never again) speak or walk and faces months, maybe a year or more, of rehabilitation. See Kate Howard, "Newlywed Watches over Husband Who Saved Her," *The Tennessean* (March 2, 2008), pp. 1A, 12A.

⁵ George Edward Moore, *Principia Ethica*, chapter 1, paragraph 13.

⁶ Other problems complicating moral formation include: locating good in a source other than God (problem of independence) and adhering to moral claims leading to acts that conflict with our basic intuition of right (problem of abhorrent commands). These problems in theological (religiously based) ethics are raised in Plato's *Euthyphro*.

⁷ In Kant's "What is Enlightenment," he described Enlightenment as freedom of thought, a maturation in humanity where persons think independently. Prior to Kant's essay, Blaise Pascal claimed that this promise of the Enlightenment goes unfulfilled. Pascal pointed out that power is used often in place of reason. He asks, "Why do we follow the majority? Is it because they have more reason? No, because they have more power" (Pensee #301). He says also that "as men could not make might obey right, they have made right obey might. As they could not fortify justice they have justified force, so that right and might live together and peace reigns, the sovereign good" (Pensee #81). Being that we cannot convince persons of right, we resort to the use of might. Michel Foucault (1926-1984) adopts a perspective similar to that of Pascal. Foucault critiques Enlightenment for the conception and practices of power that operate in society. According to Foucault, the modern nation-state disguises its control of the individual with the rhetoric of freedom. In various ways, individuals are kept under control.

⁸ Hilary Putnam's concept of internal realism is not anti-realism but realism with a small "r". Putnam recommends that instead of portending to have a metaphysical (God's eye) view of reality, we focus on the views that emerge from the categories that mediate our human perspective of reality. He looks for ideals and methods of justification that are internal (inherent) to our non-philosophical practices, that is, in the language, concepts, and social interactions by which we generally structure and talk about our experiences. See Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* (Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 30-42.

⁹ Adolf von Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, vol. 1, pp. 16, 72. He argues that personal religious experience is fundamental in Christianity, and not doctrine or theology.

¹⁰ Honest, open dialogue is has no fixed rules but does honor certain conventions. Some of these conventions are: (1) mutual respect, (2) the centrality of witness or testimony rather than doctrine/dogma, (3) willingness to abandon or modify one's beliefs, (4) viewing the process of dialogue as an experience of faith, and (5) having optimism in the process of dialogue. The aspects of dialogue are adapted from Panikkar's theory of interreligious dialogue. See Raimon Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, Revised Edition (Paulist Press, 1999), pp. 50, 61-70, 168-169.