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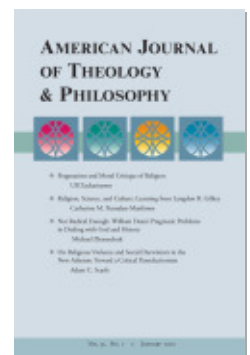
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On Religious Violence and Social Darwinism in the New Atheism: Toward a Critical Panselectionism

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I. Introduction

This paper uncovers a logical lacuna in the New Atheists' arguments against religion and responds to it from a process philosophical perspective. A major premise in the arguments of the New Atheists is that there is a causal connection between adherence to religion and the propensity for a person to carry out violent acts. In their books, the New Atheists propose to study religion as a *natural phenomenon*, namely, as a function of biological processes. From this perspective, religion can be construed as a byproduct of the controversial evolutionary mechanism of group selection. In their analysis, religion has traditionally played a positive role in the evolution of the human species, having been a tool of social cohesion. But they suggest that in light of the contemporary task of building a global civilization, it no longer has a constructive purpose. For the New Atheists, religion creates divisions among people. It breeds terrorism and violence, and it threatens to extinguish civilization as we know it, rather than promoting the peace and harmony it so generally espouses. However, while the New Atheists study religion as a function of biological processes, the phenomenon of religious violence is curiously omitted from their "scientific" analysis, and it is treated as being somehow separate from biological processes.

In order to truly be consistent with the methodological reduction of phenomena to biological processes and the neo-Darwinist value program that they defend, the New Atheists would need to study religious violence as a function of natural selection and of the struggle for existence, rather than to set religious violence apart from biotic violence in general. Furthermore, an analysis of this type cannot legitimate moral judgments against either religion or religious violence. As a response to this problematic argument waged on the part of the New Atheists, I take up process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead's treatment of violence in evolutionary processes, and his stances on neo-Darwinism and Social Darwinism respectively. I further outline some of the main premises of an evolutionary ethic which I term, *critical panselectionism*.

II. The New Atheism and Religious Violence

The New Atheists, a group of thinkers comprised of Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris, provide a critique of both the influence that religious fundamentalism has had in the American public square in recent years, as well as the alleged role that religion has in breeding violence, martyrdom, terrorism, and terrorism branded as “holy martyrdom” on the global stage. They claim that religion threatens to extinguish civilization as we know it. A main premise in their arguments against religion is that it is intrinsically a source of violence. Drawing on recent horrific events, such as 9/11, the New Atheists postulate that there is an implicit causal connection between religion and a person’s or a group’s propensity to commit violent acts, the former responsible for dividing people from one another, for riling up emotions and passions in an explosive manner, and for perpetuating cycles of violence and retribution, all in the name of “divine justice.” To be sure, Hitchens reveals his anxiety that “people of faith are in their different ways planning our and my destruction, and the destruction of [our] . . . hard-won human attainments.”¹ Similarly, according to Dennett, today, religionists are actively seeking to bring “celestial justice to those they consider sinners.”² For Harris, “religious violence is . . . with us because our religions are intrinsically hostile to one another,”³ and technological advances “in the art of war have finally rendered our religious differences—and hence our religious beliefs—antithetical to our survival.”⁴ Religion, for Harris, is an impediment to global civilization because “competing religious doctrines have shattered our world into separate moral communities, and these divisions have become a continual source of human conflict.”⁵ Lastly, Dawkins asks us to “imagine a world without religion [in which there are] no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, . . . no Crusades, no witch-hunts, . . . no Israeli / Palestinian wars, . . . no persecution of Jews as ‘Christ-killers’.”⁶ According to Dawkins, religion and the struggle between religions is at the root of most, if not all, of such violent acts and conflicts on the global stage.

1. Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007), 13.

2. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 338.

3. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 224.

4. *Ibid.*, 13–14.

5. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), 79.

6. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 1.

For the New Atheists, even religious moderation and tolerance of religion are to be countered strongly. Harris characterizes religious moderates as relativists who have “learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others,”⁷ coinciding with his charge that “moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed.”⁸ Precisely, for Harris, religious moderation “offers no bulwark against religious extremism and religious violence . . . [since it] does not permit anything very critical to be said about religious literalism.”⁹ Harris goes so far as to endorse the use of force, or its threat, in order to counter violent religious extremism and terrorism. He writes that “violence (or its threat) is often an ethical necessity,” whereas the pacifism of religious moderates promotes “a willingness to die, and to let others die, at the pleasure of the world’s thugs.”¹⁰ In other words, Harris holds that violence and the threat of violence should be used in order to keep religious fanatics from carrying out their mass-destructive plans. Because they emphasize that there is a causal connection between religion and the propensity for violence, the New Atheists share “a belief that religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises.”¹¹ Together, the New Atheists argue for a fundamental shift toward a secular humanistic society which is led by reason and by science, rather than by religious faith, the former allegedly promoting peace, while the latter allegedly promoting violence.

To a certain extent, process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead may be said to agree with the New Atheists’ critique of religious fundamentalism. In *Religion in the Making*, he writes that “religion is by no means necessarily good . . . it may be very evil [and that] in considering religion, we should not be obsessed by the idea of its necessary goodness. This is a dangerous delusion.”¹² And, he notes that “in view of the horrors produced by [religious] bigotry [and intolerance], it is natural for sensitive thinkers to minimize religious dogmas.”¹³ Furthermore, he criticizes religion’s inability to adapt

7. Harris, *The End of Faith*, 14.

8. *Ibid.*, 45.

9. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

10. *Ibid.*, 199.

11. Simon Hooper, “The Rise of the New Atheists,” CNN, Nov. 9, 2006, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/11/08/atheism.feature/index.html>.

12. Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making*, 2nd rev.ed. (1926; repr., New York: Fordham University Press, 1996), 17–18.

13. *Ibid.*, 76.

to new scientific discoveries. However, he challenges the offering of narrow, reductionistic oversimplifications of religion and argues against the complete critical destruction of religious truths at the hands of science. The aim of religion, according to Whitehead, is at the “attainment of value in the temporal world.”¹⁴ In other words, for him, the purpose of religion is to provide a meaning to life that transcends our mere finite experience, something that science is deficient in procuring.

III. The Problem Concerning the New Atheists’ Study of Religion, and Not Religious Violence, as a Natural Phenomenon

In making their overall case against religious belief, the New Atheists propose to study religion as a *natural phenomenon*, namely, to analyze it from a biological perspective. Through this interpretive lens, they characterize religion as a traditional tool of social cohesion, which, in more primitive societies, played a positive role in terms of the evolution of the human species. Harris explains that, “as a biological phenomenon, religion is the product of cognitive processes that have deep roots in our evolutionary past. Some researchers have speculated that religion itself may have played an important role in getting large groups of prehistoric humans to socially cohere. If this is true, we can say that religion has served an important purpose. This does not suggest, however, that it serves an important purpose *now*. . . . That religion may have served some necessary function for us in the past does not preclude the possibility that it is now the greatest impediment to our building a global civilization.”¹⁵ And in *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Dennett quotes evolutionary theorist David Sloan Wilson to the effect that “religion is a social phenomenon designed (by evolution) to improve cooperation within (not *among*) human groups.”¹⁶ From this perspective, religion is understood as a byproduct of the controversial hypothesis of group selection, an evolutionary mechanism that is subordinate to natural selection. As one commentator defines it, group selection is “a process of natural selection that occurs between groups. Darwin usually writes in terms of selection at the level of the community, rather than the group. Modern biologists are divided on how to understand what group selection is, and on whether it is an important evolutionary process.”¹⁷ A related,

14. Ibid., 100.

15. Harris, *Letter*, 90.

16. Dennett, *Breaking*, 106.

17. Tim Lewens, *Darwin* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 265.

yet alternative, interpretation of the concept of group selection involves the placing into question of what, ultimately, is the unit of biological selection. Advocates of the alternative notion of group selection blur the distinctions between the concepts of group, kin, and social selection, emphasizing that the unit upon which natural selection acts is a society or a collective of organisms operating as a single whole, rather than an individual organism itself.

Like many biological theorists, Dawkins downplays group selection as still an embattled factor that may not be evolutionary significant.¹⁸ But, for Dennett, religion, understood as a byproduct of group selection, may be interpreted as “cooperation-enhancer,”¹⁹ enabling human beings to garner solidarity with others through common values, purposes, and meanings. Dennett adds that religion contributes to a common currency of behavioral and social norms as well as to a common selection of memes, requisite for group solidarity. He writes that, among members of a group, religion provides common selective “filters and biases . . . to screen the passing show for things worth hanging on to,”²⁰ in contrast to those things which are rejected or designated as taboo. According to Dennett, religious ideas which “encourage people to act together in groups . . . will spread more effectively as a result of this groupishness than ideas that do a less effective job of uniting their hosts into armies.”²¹ As such, for Dennett, religion is both a tool and a constructed product of “human groupishness . . . a mixture of blind and foresighted processes, including intermediate selection processes of every flavor of knowingness.”²² Through religion, human lives become intertwined through a common spirituality and dedication to a divine authority, as well as through a common conception of the meaning of life and death. From a biological standpoint, there is “power in numbers”: larger groups of human beings, operating gregariously, are more apt to be successful in warding off threats, acquiring resources, hunting, gathering, warfare, transforming their environments, confronting environmental challenges, and attaining peaceful social living. Religion provides a banner—a normative code that may or may not be rational—under which human beings may be united in light of common purposes and in the face of common threats. As such, for the New Atheists, religion provides a context for social cohesion, assisting in the provision of a stable social organization. For example, it provides much of the

18. See Dawkins, *God*, 162–72.

19. Dennett, *Breaking*, 106.

20. *Ibid.*, 119.

21. *Ibid.*, 185.

22. *Ibid.*

criteria for determining what is right and what is wrong, standards that are used in determining who is to be included in the group and who is to be excluded. In addition, religious rites, such as marriage rites, provide a context and rules for the stability of the family unit, thereby heightening the potentialities for reproductive success and for the survival of children. But, according to the New Atheists, socio- and religio-centric groups that seek to divide themselves radically from nongroup members in terms of identity, thereby excluding them, are more dangerous, and are prone to carry out violent acts.

Overall, while the imminent criticism of Dennett's analysis of religion as a natural phenomenon forcibly reduces religion to its empirical and instrumental dimensions, for Dennett, religion has, in the evolutionary past, constituted a Baldwinian "Good Trick."²³ Those persons subscribing to the behaviors emphasized by a shared religiosity are enabled to be more successful in reproducing and passing on their genes. However, while providing an account to support the notion that religion has traditionally been a useful tool in the evolutionary history of the human species, especially where there have existed relatively small pockets of human beings separated by vast expanses of wilderness, the New Atheists suggest that it has effectively outlived its usefulness in a global civilization. They suggest that it no longer has a constructive or relevant purpose, or even a positive evolutionary function, in light of the contemporary global situation. Instead, they make the case that religion promotes exclusion and now only has the effect of dividing people from one another. The New Atheists claim that while the belief that one is a member of God's favored or chosen people, to the exclusion of other human beings, has in the past, promoted cooperation, a collective self-identity, fundamental joint purposes, and a motivation toward the common good, such exclusionism today is detrimental and it breeds violent destruction. The New Atheists cite that contemporary warfare is no longer a limited skirmish of conventional forces, and today it has the potential to become mass destructive, and global. In pointing to recent world events, such as the terrorist actions of Islamic fundamentalists and other religionists and those who seek biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons in order to promote their version of "holy justice" across the globe, they argue that it should be challenged critically in all its forms and even eliminated.

As has been demonstrated, a chief thread in the arguments of the New Atheists against religion is that religiosity is a function of group selection, and that with religious belief comes an implicit propensity toward violence. However, the move, on the part of the New Atheists, to study religion as a natural phenomenon, namely, as a function of biological processes, while at the same

23. Ibid., 109.

time omitting religious violence from the biological point of view, presents a lacuna in their arguments. The omission of religious violence from the set of biological phenomena to be analyzed is inconsistent with studying religion and all its manifestations, both scientifically and objectively. It is my contention that if the arguments of the New Atheists are to be logically consistent with the neo-Darwinist value program that they espouse, the notion of violence in general should be interpreted via the terminology of evolutionary theory. From this perspective, all forms of violence: domestic, gang, religious, ideological, etc. . . . ought to be considered forms of biotic violence—byproducts of the competition between organisms in the struggle for existence. That is to say, religious violence ought to be considered a function of natural selection and of the struggle for existence, rather than somehow distinct from biotic violence in general. But this would force the New Atheists to bracket, or to suspend, moral judgments concerning religious violence. It would also force them to confront the ethical questions that arise in respect to the principle of natural selection, to the fact of organic selectivity, and to biotic violence in general, as well as to reflect on their neo-Darwinist assumptions. In any event, as they stand, the New Atheists' moral judgments against religious violence are simply inconsistent with studying religion as a natural phenomenon.

In the mainstream of biology, biotic violence is interpreted as a function of evolutionary progress, at least as it relates to nonhuman animals. For example, prominent geneticist Francisco Ayala iterates that “the ‘cruelties’ of biological nature are only metaphoric ‘cruelties’ when applied to the outcomes of natural selection. Examples of ‘cruelty’ involve not only the familiar predators . . . tearing apart their prey . . . , or parasites destroying the functional organs of their hosts.”²⁴ But there is deep silence from the biological community when the issue of violence is raised in relation to the human realm. Critics of neo-Darwinism might ask whether the violent cruelties perpetuated by human beings on their fellow human beings are merely to be treated as “metaphoric” in light of the prospective evolutionary progress that may be gained. Thus, we might ask why religious violence is singled out by the New Atheists for scrutiny as an *ought not*, while other forms are left largely unscrutinized in their writings. Furthermore, in large part, power in modern societies is wielded by way of operations of selectivity, discrimination, and exclusion, notions which may be subsumed under the rubric of natural selection. The New Atheists are either unconscious of these matters or are simply silent about the implicit Social Darwinism that

24. Francisco Ayala, “From Paley to Darwin: Design to Natural Selection,” in *Back to Darwin: A Richer Account of Evolution*, ed. John B. Cobb (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 65–66.

lingers in them. The New Atheist critique of religious moderates, and of those tolerant of religion, for not challenging religious extremism, could be applied here equally to their anemic response to the realities of Social Darwinism. It is my contention that the truly global civilization that the New Atheists propose is only possible once the importance of critical ethical reflection on our own selective activities and operations in general has been recognized.

On the whole, the New Atheists are simply anemic in terms of their treatment of the biotic violence as implied by the principle of natural selection—the efficient cause of evolutionary processes—by which it is held that for evolutionary progress to occur, “unfit” organisms, namely, those which are unsuccessful in competing against other organisms in the struggle for life, in adapting to their environment, and in reproducing themselves, are eliminated. To be sure, while Dennett, in *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, is critical of Herbert Spencer, of 19th Century sociobiology, and of Social Darwinism, and while he provides an admirable discussion of these themes, he sheds little in the way of new light on the ethical concerns surrounding the principle of natural selection. He simply provides no comprehensive evolutionary ethic in his writings. Dennett merely invokes the naturalistic fallacy, simply branding the derivation of an *ought* from an *is*, a “skyhook.” Yet at the same time, in relation to religious violence he draws an *ought not* from an *is*. In *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins boils ethics down to reproductive life strategy in the “game” that is evolution, namely, to the view that one heightens one’s chance of losing in the biological struggle for existence if one’s life-strategy is one of aggressive force. He holds that ethics may be viewed as nothing but being moderately cooperative with others, but aggressive when confronted by a pattern of aggressiveness on the part of another, as in Robert Axelrod’s “tit-only-for-tat-tat” evolutionary strategy. According to Dawkins, such strategies promote group cooperation as well as reduce the threat of revenge, which in turn, heighten the chances of reproductive success. But one may ask: how do these conclusions differ for religious groupishness in the biotic struggle for existence? The poverty of the New Atheists’ considerations of morality is exemplified in *The God Delusion*. While citing the notion that morality has its basis in altruism and compassion toward kin and while discussing contemporary deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics, ultimately Dawkins suggests a “ten atheistic commandments” approach, derived from sources he found on the internet.²⁵ While the New Atheists hold

25. See Daniel Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), 393–97, 461, 463–66, 477, 547; Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 66–87, 166–88, 202–33; Dawkins, *God*, 263–64.

that violence in general will be diminished from the widespread acceptance of the more naturalistic, nonanthropocentric view of the human condition that emerges from a Darwinian standpoint, from these considerations, the work of the New Atheists is certainly lacking in reconciling morality with the realities of natural selection. Unless the New Atheists advance a substantial evolutionary ethic in their writings, their overall arguments against religion on the basis of their moral judgments against religious violence are marred by this lacuna. As an alternative to the neo-Darwinist value program of the New Atheists, and in order to address the problems raised by their analyses of religion, I turn now to outline Alfred North Whitehead's process-relational stance on evolutionary theory and on evolutionary ethics. Whitehead's views on evolutionary theory have been cited by prominent philosophers and theologians such as John Cobb, John Haught, Arthur Peacocke, and others, as being relevant to contemporary debates surrounding evolution.

IV. A Whiteheadian Response to the Neo-Darwinism of the New Atheists

In *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead attempts to sum up the distinction between his philosophy of organism and neo-Darwinist evolutionary theory. He states, "The doctrine [of evolution] . . . cries aloud for a conception of organism as fundamental for nature. It also requires an underlying activity—a substantial activity—expressing itself in individual embodiments, and evolving in achievements of organism. The organism is a unit of emergent value, a real fusion of the characters of eternal objects, emerging for its own sake. Thus in the process of analyzing the character of nature in itself, we find that *the emergence of organisms depends on a selective activity* which is akin to purpose."²⁶ At the end of the passage, Whitehead's emphasis on the notion of a *selective activity* is a

26. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (1925; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1967), 107, my emphasis. It is clear that Whitehead does not accept chief components of the standard formulation of Darwinian evolution and its materialism, since he suggests in Lucien Price, *Dialogues of Alfred North Whitehead* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1954), that Darwin and "Huxley had grasped the principle of evolution in material life, but it never occurred to them to ask how evolution in material life could result in a man like, let us say, Newton . . . Darwin's dismissal of the transmission of acquired characteristics is another lapse. Who knows where our bodies begin or end, or how characteristics may be transmitted otherwise than by heredity? There may be a thousand predispositions in a child due to the occupations of his immediate forebears. *A certain type of activity may have been going on in the family for generations and the child is predisposed to it. Is that 'environment' or is it heredity?*" (284, my emphasis). While this quote is highly suggestive of Lamarckism, it does not logically omit a Baldwinian interpretation. Also see the first chapter of Whitehead, *The Function of Reason* (1969; repr., Boston: Beacon Press, 1929) for Whitehead's challenge to neo-Darwinism.

definite referral to natural selection, but it also points to the selective activities of organisms, which, for him, in turn, affect evolutionary processes. For Whitehead, organisms are agents in the evolutionary process, and they participate in the process of selecting and eliminating other organisms. Their selective activities may be cognitive or noncognitive, and are exhibited as theyprehend their environment and mutually prehend one another, either positively or negatively. For example, organisms select their own behavior, their food sources, their ways of life, their associations with other organisms (as in the embattled hypotheses of group and kin selection), their mates (as in Darwin's sexual selection), as well as (specifically in relation to human organisms) methods for breeding their stock (as in artificial selection) and eliminating other organisms. Especially, as Whitehead notes, when organisms band together, such selective activities enable them to "create their own environment."²⁷ As one side of a logical contrast or synthetic point of view, Whitehead calls this selective and creative activity, in which organisms exhibit their agency in evolutionary processes, "the neglected side" of the evolutionary "machinery involved in the development of nature,"²⁸ alongside the privileged materialist focus in neo-Darwinist biological research on the adaptation of organisms to their environment in the struggle for existence.²⁹

In relation to the meaning of natural selection, in *The Concept of Nature*, Whitehead defines "nature" as a felt "complex of related entities [wherein] the 'complex' is fact as an entity for thought to whose bare individuality is ascribed the property of embracing in its complexity the natural entities."³⁰ This statement is suggestive that organisms are not only *in* nature but they are

27. Whitehead, *Science*, 111–12.

28. *Ibid.*, 111.

29. In *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead writes that there are "two sides to the machinery involved in the development of nature. On one side, there is a given environment with organisms adapting themselves to it. The scientific materialism of the epoch in question emphasized this aspect. From this point of view, there is a given amount of material, and only a limited number of organisms can take advantage of it. The givenness of the environment dominates everything. Accordingly, the last words of science appeared to be the Struggle for Existence, and Natural Selection. Darwin's own writings are for all time a model of refusal to go beyond the direct evidence, and of careful retention of every possible hypothesis. But those virtues were not so conspicuous in his followers, and still less in his camp-followers. . . . The other side of the evolutionary machinery, the neglected side, is expressed by the word creativeness. The organisms can create their own environment. For this purpose, the single organism is almost helpless. The adequate forces require societies of coöperating organisms. But with such coöperation and in proportion to the effort put forward, the environment has a plasticity which alters the whole ethical aspect of evolution" (*Ibid.*, 111–12).

30. Alfred North Whitehead, *The Concept of Nature* (1920; repr., New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 13.

compositional of it, each individual creature belonging to the total complex of many organisms comprising nature, although not identical with it. To be sure, elsewhere, Whitehead describes nature as an “organic extensive community”³¹ which is thoroughly *in process* and composed of living organisms, or what he calls “actual entities” or “actual occasions.” Actual entities are finite “creatures which become,”³² each of which is engaged in a creative life process of its own, and each partly constituted by its various relations with other actual entities. As such, in the process-relational cosmology, each individual organism, including each individual human being, is held to be a *part* of nature.³³

From the Whiteheadian perspective, not only are organisms selective agents, but they are themselves agents of natural selection. Through their selectivity, to lesser or greater extents, all organisms exert a causal impact on the process by which other organisms are positively selected and/or are eliminated via the principle of natural selection. Each individual organism is both subject to, and plays a participating role in the eliminations of organisms that belong to the meaning of natural selection. Hence, the process philosophical theory will emphasize that biotic violence in general is a function of organic selectivity,³⁴ namely, of the neglected side of evolutionary theory. One might call the notion that all organisms are selective and participate in the total meaning of natural selection, “panselectionism,” although this term should not be conflated with the same term employed in molecular biology, nor with its usage in respect to Weismann’s and Wallace’s views of the “all-sufficiency” of selection.³⁵

31. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: an Essay in Cosmology: Corrected Edition*, ed. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (1929; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1978), 289.

32. *Ibid.*, 35.

33. However, at the same time, each individual organism cannot be said to be identical to the total complex of entities that is Nature. In “Mathematics and the Good,” in *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (1941; repr., New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1951), 678, Whitehead states that while “no entity can be considered in abstraction from the universe [...] . . . no entity can be divested of its own [distinct] individuality” (my addition), again pointing to the notion that the individual organism cannot be regarded as synonymous with (those of) the total complex of organisms that, together, compose nature. From this outlook, neither the individual organism, nor a finite multiplicity of organisms is itself nature.

34. Whitehead’s notion of prehensive selectivity corresponds well with the notion of organic selection that was established in the late 1890s by James Mark Baldwin, C. Lloyd Morgan, and Henry Fairfield Osborne. See James Mark Baldwin, “A New Factor in Evolution,” *American Naturalist* 30 (June 1896): 441–51, 536–53.

35. See Stephen Jay Gould, *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 198–203, 505. While biologists have traditionally contemplated the

V. Toward a Nonreductionistic Critical Panselectionism

As opposed to the neo-Darwinist standpoint of the New Atheists, many religious believers hold that Darwin's theory of natural selection, as an explanation of evolutionary processes, is only a theory and can be, on that account, dismissed as not being representative of what *is*. From their vantage point, natural selection implies that evolutionary advances are the product of eliminatory "cruelties,"³⁶ which arise as a result of biotic competition and which manifest themselves either consciously or unconsciously, and either overtly or covertly. As a result, many Christians hold that the theory of natural selection diminishes the notion of God, since it implies that any would-be deity presiding over nature could be said to be responsible for a holocaust of organisms. Furthermore, some religious believers claim that Darwin's theory of natural selection, defined as the efficient cause of evolutionary processes, is not only materialistic and mechanistic, but Godless and purposeless, leading inevitably to the bleak view that the only aim in life is to engage in a biotic struggle for resources toward reproductive success, thereby converting the theory into an imperative to exterminate the "less fit." Whitehead's own standpoint on evolution and violence, which places a certain degree of responsibility for the (potentially violent) eliminations belonging to the principle of natural selection partly in the hands of organisms themselves, initially may be said to amplify this problem. Upon further inspection, however, it is clear that he develops a concrete way to mitigate it.

Whitehead is quite aware of the violent realities embedded in evolutionary processes, as well as of the selective processes that are embedded in human society. Whitehead does not take issue with the realities that "in the struggle for existence the fittest to survive eliminate the less fit." He states that "the fact is obvious and stares us in the face."³⁷ For Whitehead, "It is folly to look at the universe through rose-tinted spectacles. We must admit the struggle [for existence]. The question is, who is to be eliminated. In so far as we are educators, we have to have clear ideas upon that point; for it settles the type to be produced and the practical ethics to be inculcated."³⁸ Here, Whitehead is clearly

"what?" question regarding selection—hypothesizing that the "units" or subjects of selection are one or more of a range from micro- to macro- levels, gene to cell, to organism, to group or clade, to local populations of a species (demes), and to species—here we are contemplating the "who?" question.

36. Francisco Ayala, *Darwin's Gift to Science and Religion* (Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press, 2007), 158.

37. Whitehead, *Function*, 4.

38. Whitehead, *Science*, 205.

alluding to the fact that even educational evaluation of students by teachers is based in a process of selection, which has some relation to natural selection. Grading, for example, involves a selective evaluation of students, which may partly determine their future social and economic lot in life. While human society appears to be insulated from nature, the truth is that modern societies are guided by selective processes which are analogous to those involved in the principle of natural selection, or which may be subsumed under it.

In reference only to its negative or eliminative aspect, Whitehead holds that “in unthinking Nature ‘natural selection’ is a synonym for ‘waste.’”³⁹ However, he charges that natural selection, construed only in terms of the competition between organisms and the eliminations of organisms, in contrast to the co-operations between organisms and the preservation of organisms, could not produce any evolutionary progress. Rather, for Whitehead, both sides of this contrast are requisite for evolutionary progress to occur. He writes that in relation to the “watchwords of . . . struggle for existence, competition, class warfare, commercial antagonism between nations, military warfare, . . . the struggle for existence has been construed into the gospel of hate. [However] the full conclusion to be drawn from a philosophy of [organism] . . . is fortunately of a more balanced character.”⁴⁰ Whitehead emphasizes that in evolutionary processes, “species which specialize[] in methods of violence, or even in defensive armor” have rarely been successful, and he hypothesizes that “there is something in the ready use of force which defeats its own object. Its main defect is that it bars cooperation. Every organism requires an environment of friends, partly to shield it from violent changes, and partly to supply it with its wants. The Gospel of Force is incompatible with a social life. By *force*, I mean *antagonism* in its most general sense.”⁴¹ Biotic violence, it would seem, only goes so far in the evolutionary advance of species. Social cooperation is also requisite. This is a point that is consistent with, but not reducible to the claims of the New Atheists concerning religion. At the same time, Whitehead warns against “the Gospel of Uniformity,” which holds that “the differences between the nations and races of mankind are required to preserve the conditions under which higher development is possible.”⁴² This comment can be interpreted in light of the dangerous homogenization of group identities, religions, and cultures in light of globalization, which is a problem that is unmentioned by the New

39. Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (1933; repr., New York: The Free Press, 1967), 159.

40. Whitehead, *Science*, 205.

41. *Ibid.*, 206.

42. *Ibid.*

Atheists in their critique of religion as it relates to the project of building a truly global society. Today, religious violence is, to some extent, being perpetuated as a protest against economic and cultural imperialism, and against the selective pressures and forces which would have them be assimilated to Western culture and to the value program of the global marketplace.

In his writings, Whitehead holds to a balanced position in respect to the opposition between science and religion. On the one hand, Whitehead takes issue with the religious impulse of his time that stubbornly resisted adaptation or adjustment to the established facts of science. On the other hand, Whitehead criticizes the biological sciences, which, adopting the conclusions of Malthus, held that

the destruction of individuals was the very means by which advance was made to higher types of species. [While] this was [Darwin's] famous doctrine of Natural Selection . . . the exclusive reliance upon Natural Selection was not characteristic of Darwin's own theory. For him, it was one agency among many others. But, in the form in which the doctrine reigned in thought from that day to this, Natural Selection was the sole factor to be seriously considered. As applied to human society this theory is a challenge to the whole humanitarian movement. The contrast between the dominant theories of Lamarck and Darwin made all the difference. Instead of dwelling on the brotherhood of man, we are now directed to procure the extermination of the unfit. Again the modern doctrines of heredity, gained partly from the experience of breeders of stock, partly from practical horticulturalists, partly from the statistical researches of Francis Galton, Karl Pearson, and their school, partly from the laws of heredity discovered by Mendel . . .—these doctrines have all weakened the Stoic-Christian ideal of democratic brotherhood. . . .

Religion by itself has always wavered between that conception and the despot-slaves conception of God and his creatures. But the democratic liberalism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was the triumph of the Stoic-Christian strain of thought. In Hume's criticism of the doctrine of the soul, in the breakdown of pure unmitigated competitive individualism as a practical working system, in the Malthusian doctrine of the pressure of population on the means of subsistence, in the scientific doctrine of the elimination of the unfit as the engine of progress, in the Galtonian and Mendelian doctrines of heredity, in the rejection of the Lamarckian doctrine that usage can raise the standards of fitness,—in the concurrence of all these strands of thought the liberalism of the early nineteenth century lost its security of intellectual justification.⁴³

43. Whitehead, *Adventures*, 35–36.

Here, Whitehead is pointing out the general frame of the perennial debate concerning Social Darwinism that has arisen ever since Darwin's *Origin of Species* was first published. Precisely, by proclaiming that the truth of the biological world is "nothing but" the principle of natural selection as synthesized with modern genetics, namely, as an exact representation of what *is*, Whitehead is pointing out the danger of taking this to mean that we *ought* to maximize biotic competition among human beings and to purposefully carry out the instrumental selective elimination of "the less fit."⁴⁴

These claims are nothing new. Even Darwin had "justly argued that nature cannot provide the source of morality,"⁴⁵ and the resulting debate, pitting "selectionists," namely, those who defend Darwin's theory of natural selection as an explanation of biological evolution against "antiselectionists," or those who do not, was further defined by figures such as Thomas Henry Huxley and Herbert Spencer. The question is: where does the theory of natural selection leave considerations of morality? Again, Whitehead's own position may be said, initially, to amplify this debate. For it recognizes that, in part, by their own selectivity, the many organisms that help to compose nature are partially responsible for the eliminations which are implied by the notion of natural selection. Here, such organic selection includes artificial selection, sexual selection, social selection, etc . . . yet is to be categorized as an appendage of natural selection.

Typically, religiously-motivated "antiselectionists" deny the theory of natural selection as an *is*, in order to prevent it from being carried out as an *ought*. For the most part, they prefer an account of nature based in Intelligent Design, Creationism, and/or Natural Law. Moreover, for them, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is held as the ultimate sacrifice against such eliminatory selectionism. But the debate is not so simple as to be a simple contention between merely two sides. Logically, one can conceive of various positions, distinguishing between "weak" and "strong" versions of "selectionism" and "antiselectionism," forcing us to think of the various positions of the debate across a continuum. On the one hand, "strong selectionism" holds that natural selection *is* true of the biological world, and that we *ought* to carry out the elimination of "the less fit" for the good of our species. It thereby recommends the engagement in an unbridled struggle for existence and competition permeating all areas of life.⁴⁶

44. This is, quite obviously, a restatement of Hume's *is / ought* fallacy and/or G. E. Moore's "naturalistic fallacy," in relation to evolution.

45. Gould, *Structure*, 121.

46. "Strong selectionism" essentially involves the tendency to see the struggle for existence in the human realm beginning at the age of a small child, who must, for example, compete in the global marketplace. Here I am alluding to the fact that modern culture emphasizes

However, the position of “weak selectionism” holds that natural selection *is* true of the biological world, but that the realm of humanity is, to a certain extent, separate from the natural world and we *ought not* carry out the elimination of “the less fit.” The New Atheists are seemingly “agnostic” between weak and strong forms of “selectionism,” and without a comprehensive evolutionary ethic they seem not to present a significant challenge to “strong selectionism.” On the other hand, “weak antiselectionism” is the view that natural selection *is not* true of biological reality, yet it does not consider, on moral grounds, the connection between our own selective activities, either conscious or unconscious, and their capacity to enhance or diminish the lives of other organisms and/or to eliminate them. “Strong antiselectionism” is generally the rejection of natural selection on the basis usually of a sheer subjective preference for Intelligent Design and Creationism, which, in turn, is assumed to offset the notion that it is imperative to eliminate “the unfit.”

Another position concerning these distinctions emerges from Whiteheadian process-relational thought in which all organisms are held to be a compositional part of nature, although not identical to it. This position emphasizes that the notion that all organisms, by their selective activities, play a role in the eliminations that belong to the principle of natural selection. Let us call this position, “nonreductionistic critical panselectionism” which holds that natural selection and modern genetics are adequate explanatory mechanisms of the biological sciences which are based in a materialist understanding of the world, but which cannot be said to be true in the “nothing-but” sense, especially when they omit reference to the selective activities of organisms as a function of natural selection. Recognizing the vast complexity of causal factors which have contributed to the evolution of life, as well as alternative vantage points on evolution, such as Emergence and Baldwinian perspectives, “nonreductionistic critical panselectionism” is “nonreductionistic” in that it does not accept a static reduction of the origins of life to natural selection *only*. Nor does it seek to explain away the meaning of religion by way of recourse to the notions of group, social, or kin selection, natural selection, or by way of genetics.

“Nonreductionistic critical panselectionism” further involves the recognition of the important role of the selective activities, the habits, the behaviors,

selectivity of every form. In the global marketplace, commercial selection pits business against business, employee against employee in an all-out war to eliminate the competition. Employment hiring and firing decisions go on everyday and are manifestations of selectivity in which some persons are able to live well, while others, by the selection of others, are relegated to mere subsistence. At the extreme, racism, sexism, gender discrimination, eugenics, genocide, and abortion via pre-natal screening may be said to be conscious manifestations of human selectivity. “Strong selectionism” is ethical egoism pure and simple.

and the purposes of organisms in the charting the evolutionary destiny of life on the planet. Reflecting deeply on the notion that each organism's selective activities, both cognitive and noncognitive, play a role in the eliminations that are subsumed under Darwin's principle of natural selection, "critical panselectionism" is a striving to maintain and enhance one's awareness of the impact of one's own selective activities: one's choices, judgments, decisions, divisions, and discriminations on fellow human beings and on other organisms. At the same time, "panselectionism" involves the notion that all organisms are engaged in selective activities, as exemplified in Whitehead's theory of prehensions, that experience as an organism in general requires such selectivity, and that there is no creativity or purpose whatsoever which has arisen that is devoid of selectivity. From the standpoint of "critical panselectionism," there is neither creativity, nor freedom without selective operations, but this fact implies the need for a high degree of ethical scrutiny of, and responsibility for, our selective activities.

"Nonreductionistic critical panselectionism" emphasizes those forms of selectivity which are "positive," such as the ability to think critically,⁴⁷ and the authentic desire to reduce the negative impacts of our selections, divisions, discriminations, and decisions (in the word's root sense of a "cutting-off") on fellow organisms. As "critical," this Whiteheadian outlook calls for a continuous inquiry into the ethics of selectivity in general so as to engage in nonaggressive and nonviolent *praxis*. This position involves the attempt to diminish those selective operations that are destructive to organisms, such as by way of violence, warfare, eugenics, discrimination, unbridled marketplace competition, excessive consumerism, as well as the limitless employment of instrumental reason on the part of human beings, as for example, made manifest in genetic selection, selective cloning, and biotechnology.⁴⁸ In short, "critical panselectionism" is a general acceptance of the biological reality of the principle of natural selection (although not in the reductionist sense), yet it stands for both

47. As John Dewey suggests in *Construction and Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), critical thinking involves "judgment engaged in discrimination among values. It is taking thought as to why the better is better and why the worse is worse" (12), as well as discriminating between true and false statements, and sound and unsound arguments. And within the deliberation process that is characteristic of critical thinking, by which we arrive at our values, "there is the problem of selection, of choice, of discrimination" (24).

48. As stated by Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb in *Evolution in Four Dimensions: Genetic, Epigenetic, Behavioral, and Symbolic in the History of Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006), "without doubt, humans are the major selective agents on our planet, and have carried out the most dramatic reconstruction (usually destruction) of environments. Today, in addition to changing plants and animals by artificial selection, humans can alter the genetic, epigenetic, and behavioral state of organisms by direct genetic, physiological, and behavioral manipulation" (241).

a conscious recognition of our own roles as organisms—selective agents who participate in the eliminatory processes and in the biotic violence which are at the root of natural selection—and a continual, reflective, and proactive critical scrutiny of our own selective operations. In any event, from these distinctions, the evolutionary ethic embedded in Whitehead's speculative philosophy can be branded a "nonreductionistic critical panselectionism."

VI. Conclusion

The preceding critical analysis has addressed significant problems in the writings of the New Atheists concerning the omission of the study of religious violence as a natural phenomenon, namely, as biotic violence, in their project to study religion as a natural phenomenon, as well as their lack of development of a comprehensive evolutionary ethic. As a response to these lacunae, from the perspective of Whitehead's philosophy of organism, it has alluded to the notion that *organic selectivity*, as a function of natural selection, is at the root of biotic violence in general. It has further argued for an ethical stance that is based on the concept of "nonreductionistic critical panselectionism," standing for the notion that selectivity is part of the very fabric of the experience of organisms in general, but which holds that if humanity wishes to build a harmonious, peaceful, global civilization, every human being must engage in a continuous critical reflection on their own selective activities and on their impacts on other organisms.