

Review: Anthony O'Hear: *Beyond Evolution – Human Nature and the Limits of Evolutionary Explanation*, (Oxford, 1997).

Anthony O'Hear's *Beyond Evolution* proves true the adage that 'an atheist is a person with no invisible means of support', while suggesting the need for just such non-naturalistic 'invisible' support if human nature is to receive an adequate explanation.

O'Hear swims against the popular tide of theorists implausibly attempting to explain away all human capacities in terms of naturalistic evolution. Unfortunately, no alternative or complimentary explanation is offered beyond the assertion that 'once evolved we and our capacities take off in quite un-Darwinian ways' (p214).

The puzzling thing about O'Hear's conclusion is that it is precisely the non-Darwinian nature of many human capacities that undermines any suggestion that evolution alone can adequately account for the existence of such capacities in the first place. As William C. Davis writes, 'Humans have numerous features that are more easily explained by theism than by metaphysical naturalism, if only because metaphysical naturalism currently explains all human capacities in terms of their ability to enhance survival. Among these features are the possession of reliable faculties aimed at truth, the appreciation of beauty, and a sense of humor.' (*Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray, Eerdmans, 1999, p37.)

Beyond Evolution makes an interesting companion to books that argue the theistic case from the above mentioned capacities. Consider C.S.Lewis' *Miracles* and *The Abolition of Man*, or Alvin Plantinga's *Warrant and Proper Function*. For example, O'Hear agrees with Lewis' anti-naturalism argument that 'decisions. . . demand a justification logically independent from anything we might discover in scientific accounts' (p13):

Certainly science has difficulty in accounting for the appearance and nature of . . . self-conscious processes. . . It will be natural for the religious to interpret this emergence of. . . self-consciousness as revelatory of something deep in the universe, something inexplicable by physics, something behind the material face of the world (p27).

(Several philosophers, including Richard Swinburne and J.P.Moreland have argued just so.) O'Hear even goes so far as to admit that: 'It may also be, as Descartes argued, that our claim to have found truth in any area ultimately requires the assumption that our reason is a mirror of the mind of God.' (p29).

With Plantinga, O'Hear admits that 'There is a clear distinction to be drawn between the true and the useful' (p57), such that 'success in the evolutionary struggle considered on its own does not guarantee the truth or adequacy of a creature's beliefs' (p60). But as Plantinga argues, this is a self-defeating claim in that it gives one reason to doubt the naturalistic evolutionary view upon which it is based; and hence some reason to accept a theistic worldview.

O'Hear writes that: 'in experiencing beauty we feel ourselves to be in contact with a deeper reality than the everyday.'(p195), and passes the following observations upon aesthetic experience:

Art can seem revelatory, just as it does seem to answer to objective standards. It can seem to take us to the essence of reality, as if certain sensitivities in us. . . beat in tune with reality. It is as if our. . . appreciation of things external to us. . . are reflecting a deep and pre-conscious harmony between us and the

world from which we spring. If this feeling is not simply an illusion. . . it may say something about the nature of reality itself, as responsive to human desires. . .

But how could we think of an aesthetic justification of experience. . . unless our aesthetic experience was sustained by a divine will revealed in the universe, and particularly in our experience of it as beautiful? It is precisely at this point that many or even most will draw back. Aesthetic experience *seems* to produce the harmony between us and the world that would have to point to a religious resolution were it not to be an illusion (p199 & 201).

So far so good, but then O’Hear himself draws back: ‘But such a resolution is intellectually unsustainable, so aesthetic experience, however powerful, remains subjective and, in its full articulation, illusory. This is a dilemma I cannot solve or tackle head on.’ (p201.) To summarily dismiss the ‘religious resolution’ as ‘intellectually unsustainable’ seems like an uncharitably off-handed failure to follow the evidence.

O’Hear’s rejection of objective beauty seems at odds with his declaration that: ‘I want to insist that in our self-conscious search for the true and the good absolutely speaking, we do have intimations of a realm of absolute value and truth, a realm to which religions do point. . .’ (p29). O’Hear notes that ‘an objectivist account of our aesthetic judgements explains our experience of beauty, ugliness, and other aesthetic properties in a way the subjectivist accounts of Hume and Kant cannot’ (p187), but his low view of theism causes him to reject the objectivity of aesthetic value once its linkage with God is accepted.

What a strange, even absurd universe, in which the aesthetic experiences that seem to give life so much of its meaning are in fact meaningless illusions! Perhaps the universe at large is sane after all, in which case O’Hear’s dismissive attitude towards the divine is a smaller but no less tragic ‘insanity’.

O’Hear’s fascinating chapter on *Beauty and the Theory of Evolution* ends with the thought that we have a sense that we are (to some extent) at home in the world, and that nowhere do we meet this intuition quite so strongly as in aesthetic experience: ‘From my point of view it is above all in aesthetic experience that we gain the fullest and most vividly lived sense that though we are creatures of Darwinian origin, our nature transcends our origin in tantalising ways.’ (p202.) This is only to say that naturalistic evolution is incapable of adequately accounting for our aesthetic faculties. Unfortunately for anyone who thinks that some explanation is called for, O’Hear fails to offer any alternative.

Aesthetic experience, says O’Hear, promises to reconcile our aesthetic experiences ‘to what might be thought of as our striving for some transcendent guarantee and consolation.’ (p214.) For O’Hear, this tantalisation is literal. The aesthetic experience that calls us home is an illusion, a ‘whistling in the dark’ as he puts it (unless God is accepted after all), and this realisation must leave us alone with our alienation. Thus O’Hear finds himself in the same position as the author of *Ecclesiastes* who saw that everything was ‘meaningless . . . under the sun [without reference to God].’

Unwilling to take the ‘religious resolution’ himself, O’Hear concludes that ‘For some, speculation about the origin of our non-Darwinian concerns would take a religious direction’ (p214).

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