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Response to Michael Ruse

Richard Brian Davis

The “most important statement in this essay,” says Michael Ruse, is that “I believe in the existence of evil. I think some people are truly evil human beings” (83). Now I don’t doubt for a moment that Ruse believes these things. It’s just that on “the supreme theory” (92) (i.e., his all-purpose Darwinian Naturalism (DN)) *what* Ruse believes is actually false. There is no such thing as real evil and there are no truly evil human beings. We can see this in the following ways.

First, on Ruse’s view, there is no natural evil. “I don’t believe in it!” (85) he says. There are simply “unpleasant things that happen to us,” (ibid.) and they are “part of the package deal” (98) if you’re a Darwinist. That’s fair enough. But then if evil exists at all, it will have to be *moral evil*—the sort (all too frequently) entertained or perpetrated by conscious, rational agents to deliberately cause or permit significant harm to be done to themselves or others without good reason. Clearly, to commit a moral evil, you must be a *conscious* agent. That’s the bare minimum.

But here I’m at a loss to see how “the supreme theory” delivers. We’re told that natural selection works on “the units of heredity,” (90) accumulates variations, and ultimately produces “new features that are helpful: adaptations like the hand and the eye, the leaf and the flower” (89). No one’s questioning that. The question is whether compounding these *material* parts in this *material* fashion could ever produce consciousness. It is no answer to reply, “By ‘consciousness’ I just mean ‘the material interactions between the brain’s material parts.’ Evolution can explain the origin and operations of these ‘neural machines.’” Certainly, but that’s not what consciousness *is*.

What I’m referring to is “the reflex act by which I know that I think, and that my thought and actions are my own and not another’s” (Clarke and Collins 2011, 90). *That* is accessible only through introspection. And when you carefully attend to *that* datum,

it quickly becomes apparent that consciousness (in this sense) is utterly distinct from the known properties of matter. It's a different kind of thing altogether. Indeed, it is so different that to fancy *unconscious* brain parts could conspire together to produce a *conscious* whole brain is to forget that what you're picturing here is metaphysically impossible: that something can be produced out of nothing.¹ Thus DN commits Ruse to denying a necessary condition for there being moral evil (the only sort he believes in). The "supreme theory" therefore commits him to denying evil itself.

Second, Ruse proposes that "the reality of moral evil . . . implies we have choice. We have free will" (91). He then goes on to say that "in thinking about free will and choice—and then subsequently about evil—we can do it from a Darwinian perspective" (90). If we do that, we can see that Heinrich Himmler was morally evil because he "had a choice and he chose to kill" (84). He wasn't under hypnosis, nor was he a falling rock:

A falling rock has no free will. Nor for that matter does a human who has been hypnotized. We are not rocks and generally we are not under hypnosis. We can choose. (91)

Or again,

Note that evil comes because of free will. However bad the actions of a person hypnotized, they are not morally evil. They could not have done otherwise. Heinrich Himmler was morally evil. He did have a choice about what he was doing. (98)

Why wouldn't the actions of a hypnotized Himmler be morally evil? It's because (in that case) he wouldn't have a choice about what he did, which is just to say he "could not have done otherwise." Putting these ideas together, then, Ruse appears to endorse the following principle of choice. Let "S" be any agent, and let "A" be an action done by S. Then presumably, Ruse will accept,

CHOICE: Necessarily, S had a free choice about whether to do A just in case S could have done other than A.

But once more his "supreme theory" steps in to create problems. Like Helm, Ruse is a compatibilist. He thinks free will is compatible

with causal determinism. He is drawn to this view because (1) he doesn't know "what it would mean to be outside the [physical] nexus" (92). That is to say, he subscribes to the causal closure of the physical. And (2) it allows him to bring human beings and all of their features "beneath the pertinent scientific theories of our day" (ibid.).

But here we strike a problem. If we're all prisoners inside the physical nexus and everything about us is subject to scientific laws, in what sense could Himmler have done otherwise? Surely, in that case, being causally necessitated in everything he did, he *couldn't* have done otherwise; in which case, by CHOICE, he had no choice about his various atrocities. What he did, then, wasn't morally evil. Here Ruse might like to offer an analysis of "could have done otherwise" in terms of acting differently under different causes.² He might assert,

CHOICE*: Necessarily, S had a free choice about whether to do A just in case (if S had been subject to different necessitating causes, S would have done other than A).

And then Ruse could declare that Himmler's evils were free on the grounds that if he had been raised in a different situation under different causes (say, in Great Britain), he would never have conceived and implemented the Final Solution.

Perhaps so, but the difficulty is that (on CHOICE*) both rocks and hypnotized Himmlers are also candidates for making free choices. If this stone could have been thrown (by me) into the water, instead of having rolled down this incline, its action would have been different than it was. But no one thinks it freely moved down the hill. Similarly, if Himmler had praised Churchill under hypnosis, no one thinks he did that freely on the grounds that if he hadn't been under hypnosis, he would have cursed Churchill instead.

The reply of course will be that rocks and hypnotized Himmlers aren't agents. So they aren't covered by CHOICE*. But *why* is that? *Why* aren't they agents? Is it because they don't author or originate their actions? That doesn't seem right; for on DN the action of everything in the causal-physical nexus is caused. Nothing has the power of initiating volitions; in which case either nothing is an agent or everything is. The problem is acute. I leave

it to Ruse to clear this up. As it is, it looks as though (on DN) we either don't have free choice (so that there is no evil), or everything has choice (so that, possibly—and contra Ruse) runaway boulders and hypnotized Himmlers can be just as guilty of moral evil as you and me.

Finally, Ruse declares that “sex with small children is, within the system, absolutely wrong” (99). It is simply painful that Ruse cannot affirm this self-evident truth. I'm afraid his “supreme theory” won't have it. He must do its bidding, come what may. According to the theory, nothing is objectively evil. Of course, we believe some things *are* evil—objectively and absolutely. But this is nothing but “an illusion put in place by our genes to keep us good cooperators” (100). Sadly then, Ruse's first and “most important statement”—that there is evil—isn't factually true. The “supreme theory” knows better. The fact of the matter is,

Darwinian evolution has no fixed, absolute direction. We have evolved one way, to get our particular set of moral beliefs. We could have evolved another way, to have a different set of moral beliefs. Really, one is as good as another. (ibid.)

Ruse says “Sex with children is absolutely wrong.” He's right about that of course—absolutely right. The “supreme theory,” however, won't let him say it. For DN has “no fixed, absolute direction.” We could have evolved in a different way. And if we had, Ruse might well have believed “Sex with children is absolutely right,” and then *that* would have been right. No less than the architect of “the supreme theory”—Darwin himself—lends his support. He writes,

If . . . men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would . . . strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering. . . . The one course ought to have been followed, and the other ought not; the one would have been right and the other wrong. (cited by Ruse, 97)

That either course is objectively right (on Ruse's view) is an illusion. One course “is as good as” the other. But then if “evil” “means something with a value component,” (84) we only “project the sense

(or illusion)” (100) of objectivity onto our belief that Himmler was evil. Factually and objectively speaking, he wasn’t. If that’s what “the supreme theory” demands of us, I say so much the worse for the theory.