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## Mark S. McLeod-Harrison, SAVING THE NEANDERTHALS: SIN, SALVATION, AND HARD EVOLUTION

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than a lot of other introductions to the atonement. Third, the book is written with an enjoyable and engaging mix of pure exposition of other views and opinionated engagement with those views. I believe this book would serve well as the main reading for a unit on the atonement in a lower-division undergraduate course, as well as for an upper-division undergraduate course if paired with some more challenging primary sources on the atonement. It would also be the first book I would recommend to an intelligent friend who wants to begin learning about the atonement.

It is worth noting that there are a couple of things absent from *Approaching the Atonement* that one might want in an introduction to the atonement. First, it does not focus on identifying and discussing the biblical support for each atonement doctrine. And second, it does not include much discussion of the work of philosophers of religion. Crisp's book is focused instead on providing an introduction to theological work on the atonement, which it does superbly.

*Saving the Neanderthals: Sin, Salvation, and Hard Evolution*, by Mark S. McLeod-Harrison. Lexington/Fortress Academic, 2020. Pp. ix + 153. \$90.00 (hardcover).

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In *Saving the Neanderthals*, Mark S. McLeod-Harrison attempts to defend a controversial thesis: Christian theology is consistent with "hard evolution." "Hard evolution" is a term of art by which McLeod-Harrison refers to a scientific thesis that he calls a "next-to-worst case scenario" for Christian theology (xi). This is because the only position assumed by many biological evolutionists (*qua* biological evolutionists) that it rejects is metaphysical naturalism, a metaphysics that entails that God doesn't exist (xi). Hard evolution also assumes anti-essentialism, particularly with respect to biological species/kinds: strictly speaking, *there are neither species nor kinds, not in fact, anyway* (xi). The various names of species one might deploy to discuss biological entities merely operate as devices to label the modally accidental arrangements of biological stuff.

Why is it controversial that Christian theology is consistent with hard evolution? McLeod-Harrison thinks that there are potential inconsistencies between (1) how Christians often think about sin and salvation and (2) the deliverances of the biological sciences vis-à-vis biological evolution.



The Christian topics of sin and salvation, relating as they do to “the Fall” and human atonement, seem to assume that humans are specially and specifically distinct from all other biological life, including, for example, their evolutionary cousins the Neanderthals. On hard evolution, though, humans are neither specially nor specifically distinct from Neanderthals (nor any other life form).

Now, I think that McLeod-Harrison has taken on an extremely difficult task. At least one purpose of the monograph is apologetic: it seeks to defend orthodox Christianity as conceptually coherent and consistent with hard evolution. But, I think that McLeod-Harrison’s task actually is impossible, and so I think the book fails to defend its thesis. I’ll say more about why as I summarize quickly the chapters of the book.

Chapter one outlines the so-called “specialness” and “species” problems, namely that humans neither are a distinct species nor ontologically special. These are two propositions that, if true, may undermine Christianity’s claim that *humans* are responsible for sin entering the world and that God the Son’s incarnation as a *human* is soteriologically necessary.

Chapter two explains hard evolution more fully. McLeod-Harrison’s chief aim in this chapter, it seems to me, is to establish that hard evolution needn’t entail metaphysical naturalism, a thesis that presupposes that God does not exist. So, he defends hard evolution from potential counter-arguments, particularly the ones he thinks might come from those who’ve argued against the compatibility of Christian theism with naturalism (e.g., Alvin Plantinga and Robert Koons). Doing so purportedly helps defend the claim that hard evolution, in the end, is compatible with the sort of “mere Christianity” one might think is committed only to, say, the first four ecumenical councils. For reasons I’ll mention anon, I think McLeod-Harrison is wrong about this. But I *do* think that the arguments presented in chapter two provide reasons to think that hard evolution is consistent with the existence of God. But then again, a proposition *P*’s being consistent with the proposition that God exists neither implies nor entails that *P* is consistent with *Christian* theism.

Chapters three and four provide arguments from current biological science to the conclusion that there is nothing ontologically special about human beings, and in fact that there are no such things as humans. This is because, given anti-essentialism, there is no kind “human.” Instead, what there is, if there is anything, is a plurality of differentiated living biological organisms along a spectrum. “Human” is a label one gives to a particular range within a spectrum; but the label maps onto no *thing* (i.e., *nothing*) in particular. McLeod-Harrison presents a number of reasons for thinking that anti-essentialism is true in this regard, two of which are the supposed facts of “inter-species” mating (41–43) and problems associated with vagueness cases (e.g., there seem to be lifeforms that straddle the lines of various species, which would be impossible if the species were essentially distinct (76)). Of course, a worry for the problem of vagueness is that it *presupposes essentialism*. One can’t have vague cases of some species, *S*, if

there aren't clearly delineated cases of S by which to compare the purportedly vague cases. On anti-essentialism, it's incoherent to assert that it's vague as to whether some organism, *o*, is of species S. Again, this is for the very obvious reason that on anti-essentialism, there is nothing it is to be an instance of species S (since there is no such species).

Relatedly, it's not made clear why one should take epistemologically vague cases as an indicator of ontological vagueness. Worse still, if ontological vagueness is inconsistent with essentialism as a metaphysical thesis, then assuming that there are ontologically vague biological particulars is to beg the question against the essentialist. Now, McLeod-Harrison is correct to flag up the tension between essentialism and the sort of "received" view of biological evolution. After all, it proceeds on anti-essentialist metaphysics. This points forward to a larger problem with the metaphysics presumed in the book, about which I will have more to say later. In any case, while chapters 3 and 4 seem to suggest that the essentialist is on the horns of a dilemma, this may be too quick a conclusion. There is literature advancing arguments for their compatibility (e.g., Travis Dumsday, "A New Argument for Intrinsic Biological Essentialism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 62 (2012): 486–504; David Oderberg, *Real Essentialism* (Routledge, 2005), ch. 9).

Chapter five attempts to spell out more clearly why the denial of the specialness of humans and the denial of a human species is a genuine problem for Christian theism, particularly with respect to sin and atonement. For if there's no human species, then Anselm's question "*cur Deus homo?*" becomes particularly vexing. As McLeod-Harrison points out, if hard evolution is true, then Anselm's question is misstated (51). It should not be "why did God become human?" Rather, it should be: "What sort of human (broadly construed, that is including all *Homo* species) did God become and why" (51)?

In chapter six, McLeod-Harrison argues that sin and being sinful are neither specifically human nor essential to humanity. Of all the theses in this monograph, this seems to me the least tendentious. Most Christian theologians suppose that, in the eschaton, humans will be sinless. If so, then "being sinful" cannot be an essential property of humans. How they might remain sinless, and in fact impeccable, is a vexed question. But *that* they will so be is a point of general agreement. Now, what is troubling about this chapter is that, like the others, it deploys *essentialist reasoning*. McLeod-Harrison, on my reading, rightly suggests that it is not essential to human individuals *qua* human that they be sinful. The problem is that, given anti-essentialism, this is trivially true since *nothing* is essential to an individual *qua* human. Given anti-essentialism, there's no such thing as a human essence.

In chapter seven, McLeod-Harrison attempts further to flesh out why "being a sinner" is not an essential property of human beings. Continuing in this vein, he suggests that the property "being a divine image bearer" is not a property of humans but of "biological persons." But this chapter

begins immediately with a mistake that also pervades chapter six. Says McLeod-Harrison: "Being a sinner is not an essential property of humans, but is nevertheless virtually ubiquitous among us" (69). This seems to suggest that the "us" in question is not merely individuals *qua* individuals; rather, it seems that he refers to humans. But, on hard evolution, there are no humans. And since anti-essentialism maintains that nothing is essential to humans, it's utterly unsurprising that "being a sinner" is not an essential property of humans. For this reason, I find confusing his claim that humans *essentially* have the disjunctive property being "either possibly sinners or possibly saints and some cannot be sinners" (75). If anti-essentialism is true, there certainly aren't any essential properties of biological organisms. (Of course, if anti-essentialism is true, there aren't *really* any biological organisms either, since "biological organism" either picks out a kind or it doesn't. On anti-essentialism, it doesn't.)

In chapter eight, McLeod-Harrison further advances his thesis that the *imago Dei* rests on biological persons, where "biological person" is a catch-all term for any biological entity that has developed reason, self-awareness, and the capacity for communication (80). It is these kinds of creatures that are divine image bearers. Here he restates the anti-essentialist position on which the book stands, saying, "there are no biological natural kinds and hence no true species" (83). This allows, he thinks, for both *Homo sapiens sapiens* (modern humans) and Neanderthals to be image bearers since both can be biological persons. This is so, according to McLeod-Harrison's argument, because image bearing consists partly in an individual's uniqueness and individual history (84). But once more, the same objection arises: on anti-essentialism, *there are no Homo sapiens sapiens* and there are no Neanderthals. So, the *imago Dei* is not something that *Homo sapiens sapiens* and Neanderthals are. More than that, since there are no *kinds* of creatures, there are no kinds of creatures that are image bearers.

In addition to this problem, McLeod-Harrison also makes a basic theological and exegetical mistake concerning the notion of divine image bearing. He claims mistakenly that to be an image of God is to be a "copy" (87) of the divine and that (as above) individuality is part and parcel of image bearing (84). But a cursory reading of contemporary biblical theological literature—particularly given the Ancient Near Eastern background of the Hebrew Bible and its understanding of divine image bearers—suggests that image bearers needn't be, and often aren't, anything like a *copy* of the god of whom they bear the image. Nor does image bearing have much (if anything) to do with individuality. Instead, divine image bearers are *representatives* of a god's rule and reign in a particular locale (see, for example, J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image* (Brazos Press, 2005)). I think it would have strengthened the theological and biblical merit of his work if he had interacted in greater detail with this established position in biblical scholarship. But as it stands, he does not cite any historians of the Bible or of the Ancient Near East in this chapter.

While I would never go so far as to say that philosophers shouldn't be involved in the theological task, I think a philosopher should be more careful when attending to biblical-theological topics. While McLeod-Harrison does not at all play fast and loose with the scientific data, I think his work would have been strengthened considerably if he had been similarly careful with respect to historically rooted and exegetically defined concepts. The problem is that the task of the eighth chapter, namely a defense of the importance of thinking about biological persons as image bearers, becomes irrelevant. It assumes a certain understanding of what it means to bear the divine image that, as it turns out, is in fact foreign to biblical theology and thus to Christian theology.

Chapter nine is, to my mind, McLeod-Harrison's strongest chapter. Here he advances a novel and interesting thesis: namely, that biological persons are capable of *agape* love and that this *agape* love—indeed *genuine* love—is antithetical to altruism. According to McLeod-Harrison, this is because love of the genuine sort requires acting entirely out of “share-interest” (96), wherein a human is an “individual-in-communion” (96), and the fundamental nature of things is that they are shareable in a radical sense: no *one* gets her *own* as if one is an individually isolated self. Altruism, on McLeod-Harrison's way of thinking, asks one to put another ahead of oneself. But this just is to act as if a self is not an individual-in-communion. For what's really at issue is seeking beauty, truth, and goodness, things in which all can participate equally (95–97). This, for McLeod-Harrison, is a deeper and richer account of love than altruistic notions. I think his thesis here invites further inquiry.

Chapter ten finishes his main project. Here he attempts to argue that God's becoming a biological person is what's important for atonement, not his becoming incarnate as a *Homo sapiens sapiens*. This is because “biological person” maps onto many hominid species, all of which are capable and guilty of sin. But once more, I think the same counterarguments can be made. Given anti-essentialism, there's no species into which God the Son became incarnate. So, it's false that God the Son became incarnate as a *Homo sapiens sapiens* because, on anti-essentialism, there's no such *thing* as a *Homo sapiens sapiens*. At best, there are things that are arranged or behaving in *Homo sapiens sapiens* sorts of ways.

At this point, too, I would like to register my main theological complaint. McLeod-Harrison suggests that hard evolution is consistent with orthodox Christianity, the sort of Christianity that can affirm the Nicene Creed and the Chalcedonian statement. Nevertheless, I think that his arguments on this score are not successful. Here's why: the Chalcedonian statement, at least, requires that God the Son became *homoousios* with *humans*. But where there is no essence (*ousia*), there is no *homoousia*. For this reason, on anti-essentialism, there is no truth to the claim that God the Son became *homoousios* with humankind. This is why I consider that anti-essentialism renders the Chalcedonian statement false, specifically its

claim that God the Son both is fully human and fully divine. It would not be false because Christ wouldn't be divine, but because Christ wouldn't be human. On anti-essentialism, there aren't any humans. If anti-essentialism were true, then Christ wouldn't be human; thus the Chalcedonian statement would be false.

McLeod-Harrison might reply that the *homoousia* (or consubstantiality) requirement of the Chalcedonian statement needn't require biological essentialism. Perhaps it requires only essentialism of another kind, namely that there are such things that are essentially biological persons. I think there are two ways of responding to this possible counterargument. First, this capitulates to the problem, viz., it denies that Jesus is fully human. On anti-essentialism, there is nothing it is to be fully human (neither are there partial humans, since "human" doesn't mark out a kind). From the point of view of orthodox Christianity, this would constitute a heresy. Second, it seems to affirm that there *is* at least one biological kind: biological person. Either these are *biological* entities or they aren't. If they are, then they're essentially *biological* entities and anti-essentialism about biological lifeforms is false. If they're not, then strictly (and truthfully) speaking, they're not biological (and the designation "biological person" becomes mysterious if it is meant to track with something that exists).

So, it is clear that I am not entirely on board with the project of this book. But, I would like to make clear that my principal philosophical disagreement with the text is in the matter of metaphysics. McLeod-Harrison suggests that he wants to take hard evolution seriously because he thinks that proper biology should be free of metaphysical assumptions (10). But from my point of view, this would be a philosophical mistake. Metaphysics is first philosophy and so more fundamental than biology. Biology comes only after we've first done our best to carve reality at its joints (recognizing that, like biological science, this work never ceases). One reason for thinking this is suggested by the evident difficulty of discussing biology without presupposing *real distinctions* between species, a distinction which in turn presupposes that there are such things as *real species*. McLeod-Harrison suggests that essentialism doesn't help the biologist *as biologist* (76). I admit that I find this difficult to understand. I would say that biology presupposes it, since it marks things out as *living* and *not-living*. But this could only be the case if there's something essentially distinct between living things and non-living ones. And if there is, then biological essentialism is a presupposition of biology. For these reasons, then, I do not find that *Saving the Neanderthals* puts forth a perfectly satisfactory case for hard evolution and its consistency with Christian doctrine. Nevertheless, I am fascinated by McLeod-Harrison's proposal regarding the distinction between *agape* and altruism, which I think merits further investigation.