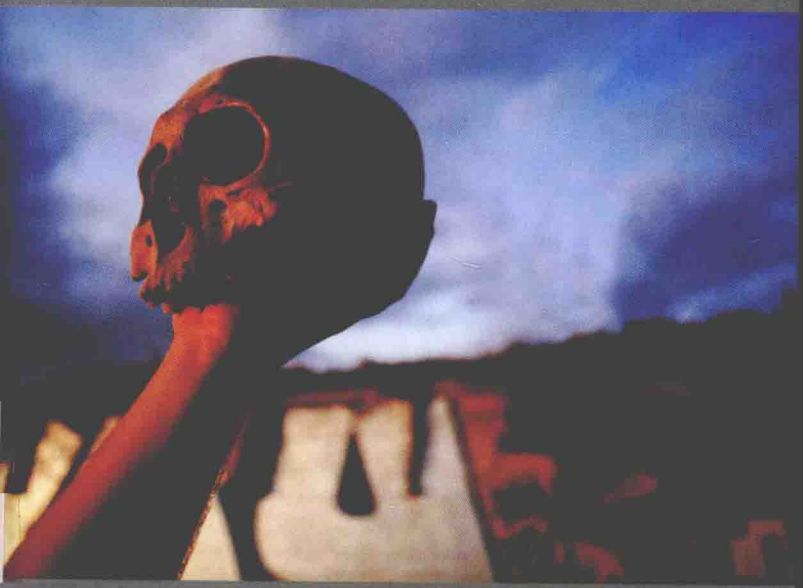
Evolving Hamlet

Seventeenth-Century English Tragedy and the Ethics of Natural Selection

Angus Fletcher



Cognitive Studies in Literature and Performance

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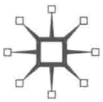

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Evolving Hamlet
Angus Fletcher

What's this war in the heart of nature?
—The Thin Red Line

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Preface

This is an eclectic book with a narrow purpose: to suggest that *Hamlet* and the other tragedies of the English seventeenth century can help address the challenge posed to ethics by the theory of natural selection. Put in such naked terms, this must seem a rather fanciful enterprise—a roundabout solution to a problem that does not really exist. Old plays are not obviously suited to resolving the concerns of modern science, and anyway, Darwin's theory is not regarded as much of a moral menace anymore. Though his contemporaries fretted that it would "sink the human race,"[1] we have survived its existence so capably that even the Catholic Church has grown conciliatory, proposing recently that "biological evolution and creation are by no means mutually exclusive."[2] What has allowed this calming of fears, however, is not the integration of natural selection into ethics. Rather, it is the segregation of each into its own domain. Evolutionary biologists from Darwin to Richard Dawkins have spoken of the need to supplement natural selection with some outside notion of the good,[3] and in general, natural selection has been seen as a scientific theory, not an ethical one. In part, this preference for keeping natural selection out of ethics has been motivated by moral idealism, for Darwin's theory spells an end not only to providence, but to social justice, natural rights, and any other moral absolute. But the separation of Darwinism from ethics is also pragmatic. For having dispensed with idealism, natural selection appears no kinder to practical ethics. Because selection is a nonteleological process in which the criteria for survival are always changing, there is no way to anticipate what forms of life will prove durable in the future. So it is that our own sex cells are set up to randomize the transmission of genetic material, blindly hoping for a lucky strike. Even practices such as maximizing one's offspring are no guarantee, for having fewer (or even no) offspring can be the more effective way to keep

one's genes alive.[4] In short, just as Darwinism denies a fixed hierarchy of species, so too does it preclude a fixed ranking of behaviors. And if this means that we need no longer fear that natural selection will authorize a descent into rape and murder, it also confronts us with the practical difficulty that natural selection does not seem to underwrite any particular actions at all.

Given how little Darwinism contributes to ethics, the decision to keep them apart can seem a sensible one. And yet far from resolving the difficulty raised by natural selection, this segregation only highlights it. For the real problem is not that Darwinism fails to generate a usable theory of ethics; the real problem is that this failure reveals a deep conflict within the nature of life itself. On the one hand, we are led by life to believe that there is a purpose to our existence. Although we may not be inherently moral in the idealistic sense of having a spark of timeless virtue implanted in our souls, we are—as Darwin's heirs in cognitive science have shown—inherently ethical in a more practical sense. Because we inhabit a world that brings us both reward and pain, our brains are hardwired to analyze the connection between our actions and their consequences, seeking a logic that leads to a more pleasurable state. Yet on the other hand, natural selection suggests that this biological drive is a fool's dream. There is no greater logic, only blind motion. Our subtly calculating brains, our hopes, our fears, our values—all of it springs from a process that is dull, insentient, utterly without design. In short, the grim riddle of Darwinism is not that it leaves us without direction. It is that it pits life against itself. Informing us that we are intentional beings in a nonintentional world, it asks us to accept that our nature is alien to the nature that conceived us.

That we have lived so long with this contradiction says something about the brute pragmatism of life. When we are pressed with worldly concerns, scrambling to keep our families sheltered and our tables full, questions about the ultimate purpose of it all recede into the background. We would like to know what it all means, of course, but we can take comfort in the knowledge that the answer will come in time. Whatever the end, we will find out when we get there. Until then, puzzles like the one posed by Darwinism seem like errands for the idle, excuses for those ivory towers that have been thrown high, raised low, and rebuilt a million times, all without offering a view above the clouds. And yet even as the paradox of Darwinism seems an invitation to irrelevance, it has deeply practical consequences. Because our brains relentlessly parse life into hypothetical narratives

of cause-and-effect, we are naturally thrown into a hunt for first origins and ultimate ends. This is where we get our fear of death and it is also where we get our hunger for heaven and other distant utopias. In effect, the same narrative capacity that gives us a practical edge at navigating the problems of this world also burdens us with the anxieties that have encouraged the invention of the other worlds of religion and social idealism. These imaginary places, in turn, have become plot-points in real-world narratives, propelling us into martyrdom and revolution, imperialism and holy war, punishing human bodies in the service of fable. And this is why our ambivalence to Darwinism has proved unfortunate. For though the strict anti-idealism of Darwin's theory could remedy much of the cruelty that we author on ourselves, we have found it impossible to abandon our religious or social Shangri-Las for what amounts to a nonethics. To our story-telling brains, this is a cure that feels worse than the disease. However much we may want peace, we want purpose more, and so rather than embracing Darwinism for its humane potential, we have preferred our violent plots.[5]

It is here, I believe, that *Hamlet* can prove useful. Specifically, I believe that it can help us develop an intentional ethics that accepts the nonintentionality of life, allowing the practical benefits of a Darwinist worldview without placing an impossible demand on our psyches. In light of the situation described above, this confidence in the power of an antique drama might seem peculiar, even perverse. Even if we ignore the fact that *Hamlet* was written long before Darwin proposed his theory, the very form of Shakespeare's play seems inappropriate to the task at hand. After all, if a major part of the problem with ethics is our overattachment to narrative, then why would we turn to more stories for relief? As I hope to show in this book, however, the narrative aspect of *Hamlet* is precisely what makes it useful. To begin with, because *Hamlet* is a story, it speaks to us in a language that we are biologically built to understand. Where Darwin's theory asks us to change our nature, *Hamlet* works in concert with the way we already are. Moreover, *Hamlet* is not just any story—it is a tragedy. Since the time of Oedipus, tragedy has explored the problem of human action in a world driven by an inhuman logic, and as I will explain in the following chapter, there are a number of practical reasons (both physical and historical) for supposing that seventeenth-century English tragedy is a particularly promising resource for engaging with the question of intentional behavior in an unintentional cosmos. Unlike stories of better worlds, this tragedy faces the challenge of living in

a universe that is set up on principles antithetical to our own habits of thought, and it does so not by fueling dreamy speculation, but by encouraging specific behaviors that work with our physical nature. *Hamlet*, in short, offers a practical remedy to a biological problem, one that rubbed against human life long before Darwin described it, and so though it may seem odd to seek a scientific ethics in the corridors of an old story, I hope to show that it is not such a fanciful enterprise after all. Rather, it is an experiment in practical ethics, and in the end, what matters is not its deductive self-evidence, but whether it fails or bears fruit.

That such an unlikely experiment could be launched at all is a reflection of the growing openness to biological approaches to literature. What was until recently unthinkable has become a vibrant subfield, yielding dozens of books and articles in less than a decade. And yet as is perhaps already obvious, this book will be rather different from previous efforts to find a convergence-point between biology and literature. In the main, these previous efforts—which I will refer to as "biological criticism"—have set out to use the tools of science to elucidate the function of literature. Sometimes they have searched for the cognitive capacities that allow the human brain to appreciate literature;[6] sometimes they have looked for the broader contexts of our physical evolution to explain our drive to generate and consume literary works;[7] and sometimes they have sought a scientific method for studying literary form.[8] Almost all of this work, moreover, has been written against the current of contemporary literary studies, treating science as a means to resolve longstanding scholarly disputes or to protect our primitive experience of reading from the killing fields of high theory. In place of the intractable and often unfathomable disagreements that have come to dominate the contemporary study of literature, biological criticism has offered a regularization of method, a validation of our impulse to read the minds of literary characters, and a declaration of the importance of poems, novels, and plays to human life.

I am grateful for the opportunities this work has opened, but because it is the place of a preface to distinguish a book as precisely as possible from other similar labors, I will confess why I have not joined the mainstream of biological criticism myself. Having spent four years working in a neuroscience lab, and having been heavily influenced by Karl Popper and other twentieth-century philosophers of science, I have come to view science not as a source of knowledge, but as a source of practical solutions to human problems. That is, I see science not as metaphysics, but as a handbook

of jimmy-rigged responses to physical concerns. Science is happy, of course, to give us models and hypotheses that sketch out the laws of motion and the mechanisms of life; but what justifies these sketches is not their relationship to truth, but their ability to help us build bridges and devise medicines and predict the weather. To this end, it seems to me that there is something impractical about the interest that many biological critics have in using science to address the problems faced by contemporary literary studies. Literary studies is the way that it is because it has always made large room for the speculations of philosophers and social reformers. Driven by concerns about knowledge and justice, its students have debated the nature of humanity, the possibility of truth, and the way to a better world. In the end, these are not matters that science can give us final certainty about, and so when scholars have tried to use biology to resolve the speculations of literary studies, the results have been disappointing. Attempting to regularize the methods of literary criticism, they have inspired more quarreling; announcing themselves as allies in the old cause, they have been derided as tyrants; and most worrying of all, in trying to introduce literary critics to the wonders of science, they have diminished the vitality of scientific inquiry. For though scientific inquiry does not point us toward any set ideal, its reactive, problem-solving method gives it a progressive function. Like life itself, it may not be going anywhere particular, but it is always growing nonetheless. In contrast, because biological critics have focused on explaining why literature does what it does, their work has a distinctly self-congratulatory tone. It validates the way we already read, the way our brains already are, the way that literature already works.[9] In effect, it is a conservative enterprise, one that seems less matched to the quickness of the living than to the complacence of the doomed.

Instead of treating literature as the end product of evolution, my own preference has therefore been to approach it as a biological tool that has emerged in organic response to the problems of life. As such, it is useful without being an ordained necessity, and as I have been suggesting over the preceding pages, I believe that its particular usefulness lies not in the enrichment of knowledge, but in the practice of ethics. Following the standard view of biologists, I take the core problem of ethics to be the tension between the individual and society.[10] Out of physical necessity, we are more conscious of our own needs than of the needs of others. Since our brains are not materially continuous with the brains of others, our hunger, our

fear, and our other mental states are vivid to us in a way that the mental states of others are not. This egoistic bias, moreover, is often a practical problem, for cooperative societies are usually better than lone individuals at overcoming the physical challenges of existence. There is therefore a biological incentive to address the problem of our isolated awareness, and so it is that many different forms of sentient life—from primates to rodents—have their brains hardwired to include "social" impulses such as generosity and a sense of fairness.[11] In humans, moreover, this social impulse has been lent an added dimension by our capacity for tool-use.[12] To help restrain our egoistic bias and allow room for others, we have developed moral codes, we have developed democracy, and perhaps most importantly, we have developed language.[13] Language is a form of restrained communication, a way to express ourselves without resorting to physical force, a means to articulate subtle differences and negotiate them. As an elaboration of the possibilities of language, literature is therefore at least in part a continuation of its function as an ethical tool,[14] and so whatever other uses literature may have, I am interested in its place in our ethical toolbox, in its value for generating social practices that help us survive the changing tides of life.

Where previous biological critics have focused on science as a means to resolve the problems raised by literature, the following chapters will therefore look to literature to resolve the problems raised by science. And while this is not a road much traveled at present, there are many examples, ancient and modern, of the horizons it can open. Two millennia ago, when the poet Lucretius found himself contemplating the doctrine of atomism, and with it, the possibility that humans were simply bits of matter to be scattered in eternity, he turned to song, writing a consolation that gave shape to the life lived without an immortal soul.[15] More recently, when Alan Shepard was asked why he wanted to be an astronaut, he replied: "Buck Rogers." While earlier generations had shuddered when the Copernican revolution bumped the earth from the center of the universe into a sprawling chaos of innumerable worlds, he found direction in a literary tradition that began when Jules Verne and H. G. Wells transformed the collapse of the old astronomy into the inspiration for a fresh heroism. Although recent scholars have looked at science to address the questions raised by literature, long use thus shows that this relationship can work the other way. Works like *Hamlet* can be more than problems. They can be problem solvers.

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Introduction

The Descent of Ethics

I am aware that some persons maintain that actions performed impulsively... cannot be called moral. They confine this term to actions done deliberately... But it appears scarcely possible to draw any clear line of distinction of this kind.

—Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*

When Darwin sat down to write *The Descent of Man*, his aim was to show creationists that natural selection could explain the "noblest" of human faculties, not simply language and intelligence, but sociability, sympathy, and the other hallmarks of "the moral sense."[1] And yet in tracing moral behavior back to material biology, he found that he had severely constrained the future course of ethics. If our social behavior was to be improved—and certainly, there were indications that it was lacking—then it would seem necessary to change our underlying biology. Social reform must become identical with eugenics.[2] This did not sit well with Darwin, who thought it "evil" for societies to select who should live and who should die.[3] In addition, he felt it naive to suppose that even enlightened societies were capable of infallibly identifying the good. After all, different tendencies were useful in different ways, allowing "some advantage" to behaviors that were not traditionally perceived as moral.[4] Unwilling to sanction an active manipulation of human biology, Darwin therefore chose to strip ethics of its progressive function. Assuming that the existence of humans was evolutionary justification for their current sense of morality, he made it the business of ethics to reinforce the social instincts that people already possessed. Good laws, good teachers, good customs would not carry us away from our nature, but would reflect the way we naturally were.[5]

In its own time, Darwin's cautious naturalism failed to convince many of his followers, but in ours, it has become the accepted norm of the biological sciences. In no small part, this trend has been encouraged by the search for the neural basis of our social instincts, a search that has not only upheld Darwin's hypothesis that our "moral sense" is innate to our biology, but rooted this sense in the more ancient parts of our brains. Physiologists have linked our judgments about the goodness of others to the ventral pallidum and other subcortical structures that are themselves heavily linked to emotion.[6] Behavioral economists have pointed out that people are so passionate about fairness that they will pursue it at the expense of their own rational self-interest.[7] Physical anthropologists have discovered that our commitments to justice, loyalty, and other noble behaviors are shared not just by other primates, but by rodents such as the prairie vole.[8] Neurologists have observed that patients with a diminished capacity for emotion also show a diminished ability to act morally.[9] Although moral philosophers have often assumed that there are two competing volitional centers of the human brain—the calculations of reason and the impulses of emotion—the successors of Darwin have thus shown that the latter are overwhelmingly dominant and possibly exclusive.[10] While the newer and more flexible structures of our cortex have the capacity to invent original moral theories, such theories are only translated into actual behavior if we *feel* that they are right.[11] As Darwin suspected, morality seems less a function of deliberation than of impulse.

At the same time as our moral decisions have become associated with the less plastic regions of our psyches, there has also been a growing recognition of another constraint imposed upon ethics by natural selection. While Darwin was wary of eugenics, he did allow room for progress, supposing that more intelligent people would generally have higher survival rates.[12] Modern evolutionary biologists, however, have questioned whether this confidence in the goodness of the intellect is compatible with natural selection. Given that the engine of life is a "blind, unforesightful, nonteleological, ultimately mechanical process,"[13] the ultimate source of survival cannot be intelligence, or indeed, any other single trait. Rather, the source of survival is quite simply a variation of function, for it is this variation that provides the raw material upon which selection operates. To the extent that intelligence allows for behavioral plasticity,[14] it is thus certainly an aid, but highly intelligent individuals are often inflexible in their behaviors, while dimly intelligent creatures (e.g.,

the cockroach) can be extremely adaptive. Meanwhile, the tradeoffs for intelligence are high. Humans have longer breeding cycles and less flexible genomes than simpler organisms, putting our adaptive brains in conflict with another source of functional variety: genetic diversity. So it is that life has hedged its bets, not progressing toward more and more intelligent forms, but diversifying, treating intelligent life as one possibility among many. From the perspective of natural selection, a more reasoned and mindful way of life is thus not necessarily a better way of life, throwing up a second obstacle to the practice of intentional ethics. While humans have tended to see their own distinctive intelligence as distinctively good, there is nothing in our minds to guide us infallibly through the challenges of life, no innate quality of our mental logic that we can rely on absolutely. Although our minds open up the prospect of intentional decision-making, they are as provisional as everything else in nature. And so even if we could consciously revise our moral attitudes, there seems no way of knowing how we should.

Despite the apparently fatalist consequences of Darwin's theory, however, this book will endeavor to show that natural selection can be developed into an active ethics. This ethics, moreover, does not lead us back toward the absolutism that Darwin found so repulsively fatuous about eugenics, social Darwinism, and other like-minded efforts to translate his theory into deliberate practice. Instead, it is characterized by skepticism, pluralism, and many other qualities typically associated with a progressive politics. As will become clear over the remainder of this chapter, I am not the first person to propose this evolutionary ethics. It has existed from the earliest days of cognitive science, tracing its origins all the way back to William James' suggestion that Darwin's biological approach to the human mind could ground an ethical practice known as "pragmatism." In spite of its distinguished origins, though, this evolutionary ethics has all but disappeared from circulation. The reasons for its vanishing act are complex: in part it has to do with the increasing specialization of academic disciplines, a specialization that has made it much harder than it was in James' day to link together fields like cognitive science and ethics; in part, it has to do with the usurpation of pragmatism by "neo-pragmatism," a school of ethics that includes various speculative theories that are incompatible with experimental science; and in part it has to do with a broad mischaracterization of pragmatism as a circular (even cynical) method of justifying the way things already are. But as I will suggest over the remainder of this chapter, the primary