

# EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY: SEXUAL ETHICS AND OUR EMBODIED NATURE

SHERWOOD O. COLE  
*Rosemead School of Psychology  
Biola University*

As a supplement to Van Leeuwen's excellent article on evolutionary psychology, the present article expands upon the importance of our embodied nature (i.e., biological processes) to a consideration of the ethics of human gender relations. An attempt is made to demonstrate that biological processes are important to the interpretation, formulation, and behavioral implementation of any ethical system of human sexual relations based upon Biblical teachings. Two examples of the importance of biology to implementing behavioral ethics (homosexuality and heterosexual offenses) are briefly discussed. Finally, it is suggested that we need to accept the importance of our biological nature without accepting the assumptions of evolutionary psychology and that only a "holistic" view adequately reflects our created nature.

In her article on evolutionary psychology, Van Leeuwen (2002) has done a stellar job of not only demonstrating the incompatibility of such a view with the Christian worldview but also the ultimate failure of its claims to explain human gender relations. The "selfish-gene" hypothesis (Dawkins, 1989) of gender relations, on which evolutionary psychology is based, is a savage, ruthless, mechanistic proposal of how genes survive and reproduce through the process of adaptation. Supposedly, the process of natural selection favors genes that lead to behaviors (and mental strategies) that are successful in the further struggle for survival. However, as Van Leeuwen points out, not only does the concept of natural selection fail to explain common genetic legacies underlying general sexual relations (male *and* female), but fails most miserably in its proposal of "sexual" (male *or* female) selection. Nowhere is

this more apparent than in the attempt (hardcore version) to explain male-initiated rape as merely a reproductive strategy. This "gene made me do it" explanation of rape is the ultimate insult to women and our God-image nature as human beings. Indeed, as Van Leeuwen indicates, it is difficult, if not impossible, to get ethics out of the mechanistic, reductionistic proposals of evolutionary psychology and we must look elsewhere.

While I also agree that Scriptures (with its teachings on being created in the image of God, human dignity, and pair-bonding) and the community of faith provide us with a foundation for developing an ethics of human sexuality, this issue needs to be addressed more fully in the context of our embodied (biological) nature. Although Van Leeuwen recognizes our physical (biological) nature and the degree to which it has been compromised by sin, her endorsement of Browning's statement that we "should use the discipline of biology last, not first" (p. 22) in a consideration of the ethics of human sexuality, leaves the reader with conflicting messages. Exactly, what role does our biological nature play in such a consideration, if any?

First of all, it is quite apparent to the present author that Christian discourse on most topics (not only sexual relations) tends to minimize or marginalize the importance of our embodied state and biological functions to human experience (Cole, 2002). This tendency may very well have its roots in the attempt of the Church to defend itself against both modernistic (scientific) and post-modernistic (relativistic) influences. However, Scripture clearly recognizes that we are physical as well as psychological/spiritual beings and this needs to be given proper consideration in any discussion of human behavior from a Christian perspective.

Secondly, our bodies and biological processes did not escape the impact of the fall (Cole, 2000;

Correspondence concerning this article may be sent to Sherwood O. Cole, PhD, Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Ave., La Mirada, CA 90639.

Hamer, 1997) and the implications of this assumption to a consideration of the ethics of human sexual relations cannot be overlooked. While Van Leeuwen also recognizes that sin has compromised our biological nature, the importance of this recognition to any system of ethics also needs to be expanded. For example, our compromised biological nature (with its neurochemical and neurohormonal processes) will impact our ethics at several different levels—the perception, interpretation, and formulation of such a system as well as the obvious behavioral implementation of such a system. Thus, while one might indicate that our ethics of sexual relations should begin with the Scriptures and the community of faith, our embodied nature is an integral part of how we react to, process, and implement such a source of information. To suggest that we do so at a psychological/spiritual level only (which also has been compromised by sin) is naïve and fails the test of Scriptural teachings.

God has established the physical processes of our brain/mind (biochemical actions) as a vehicle for our experiences. All mental events, including those related to ethical ideation, judgment, and the exercising of one's will, are represented by something real going on in the nervous system. Furthermore, the neurochemical processes underlying such events can easily be measured by the sophisticated instruments available today (e.g., PET scan). Not only are these correlates of consciousness mediated by neuro-chemical processes but so are the specific emotions associated with these experiences (Edwards, 1993). These neurochemical processes play the important role of anchoring our conscious activity and emotional experiences (including those related to ethics) to the physical brain and the real world (Cole, 1996). Such an assumption may shock some Christians who have become entrenched in the psychological/spiritual mode of discourse, but nevertheless, it should be a proper reminder that we are embodied beings. The belief that Christian thought is somehow above or beyond what goes on in the nervous system may have a pleasant spiritual ring in the ears of some believers, but such a view is a bogus one (Cole, 1996). It is also obvious that, since these neurochemical processes have been compromised by sin, they may not function as God had initially intended them to function in His original creation. Accordingly, one should not be surprised if such processes contribute to humankind's inability to process and formulate any system of ethics (even when it has

its basis in Scripture) in a manner that is totally acceptable to God. If our neurochemical processes did not escape the impact of sin, then the manner in which they function in our experiences also did not escape the impact of sin.

It is also quite obvious that our embodied nature and biological processes play an extremely important role in the implementation (behavioral expression) of any ethical system and may indeed underlie our bodily inclination to sin. Such a view is clearly supported by scriptural passages that refer to our body as the body of sin (Rom. 6:6), strife related to sin of the flesh (Rom. 7:15-25), the need to keep our body under subjection (1 Cor. 9:27), and our vile or lowly bodies (Phil. 3:21). Nowhere would our inclination to sin appear to be more relevant than in the context of implementing an ethical system related to sexual relations. Two specific areas of great contemporary concern within the Christian community would appear to serve as appropriate examples of the impact of sin-compromised, biological inclinations to the implementation of ethical standards—homosexuality and heterosexual sex practices.

In spite of the attempts of revisionists to discredit the teachings of Scripture on homosexuality (Boswell, 1980; Helminiak, 1994; Scroggs, 1983), such teachings are clear and unequivocal. Both the Old (Lev. 18:22; 20:13) and New Testament (Rom. 1:26-27; 1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10) condemn and prohibit the practice of such behavior. Parenthetically, it is quite ironic that respected biblical scholars can have such different interpretations of Scriptural teachings on homosexuality, a fact that only further reinforces the previously mentioned assumption that sin has impacted the functioning of our mental processes and altered our interpretation of ethical teachings. However, the present focus is on the impact of our embodied nature (with its biological processes) on the behavioral implementation of Scriptural teachings on homosexuality.

Some evidence for biological influences (i.e., genetic and/or neurochemical predispositions) on homosexual orientation and practices is available (Cole, 1995; Looy, 1995; Schmidt, 1995), even though the authors disagree somewhat as to the extent of such influences. While these influences may have an impact on an individual's ability to comply with Scriptural teachings on homosexuality, they do not, in the present author's opinion, provide a proper excuse for non-compliance. This conclusion

is based upon the fact that they are *not* deterministic or immutable, but rather subject to further modification by psychosocial experiences. However, the value of biological influences to the homosexual cause has not been missed by some advocates of that lifestyle, and the "I was born that way and can't help it" slogan has become the standard battle cry for many such individuals, including some Christians (White, 1994). Even for those individuals who have a sincere desire to conform with Biblical teachings on homosexuality, such biological influences may make it difficult or seemingly impossible to do so. Undoubtedly, this struggle is real and a change in homosexual orientation or lifestyle is accomplished with great difficulty if at all (Yarhouse, 1998) and only through the power of God's Holy Spirit in the individual's life.<sup>1</sup> While the goal of such change has characteristically been the establishment of a heterosexual marital relationship, Beck (1997) also suggests that we need to revisit the practice of celibacy as a viable alternative to such a goal. In any event, it is quite apparent from the previous discussion that the embodied and biologically sin-compromised nature of individuals has had a significant impact on the ability of some to comply with the ethical standards of Biblical teachings on homosexuality.

In a manner similar to that of homosexuality, many individuals experience a crisis in behavioral conformity to Scriptural teachings on heterosexual conduct, with biological influences undoubtedly contributing to this crisis. Again, Scriptural teachings on this issue are clear and prohibit sexual relations outside of marriage (Prov. 6:20-35; Matt. 5:27-28; 1 Cor. 6:18; Col. 3:5; Heb. 13:4). This would appear to cover pre-marital sexual conduct as well as all forms of deviant sexual activity.

In like manner, there is some evidence that biological influences contribute to sexual behavior, particularly that of males (Carter, 1992). Evidence of such biological influences on the sexual behavior of females appears to be more subtle and less clearly defined (Beatty, 1995). Although the most important male sex hormone (testosterone) does not appear to be critical to the expression of sexual performance per se, it does play a key role in modulating such

behavior and enhancing sexual motivation (Carter, 1992). Other hormones may also play a role in additional aspects of male sexual activity (Murphy et al., 1990). While biological influences on human sexual behavior are present, it is important for us to recognize that we are much less subject to such influences than are animals (Kalat, 1995).

Furthermore, elevated levels of testosterone (Berlin & Meinecke, 1981) or other stress-related hormones (Lang et al., 1990) have also been observed in male sex offenders. The fact that elevated levels of testosterone may contribute to such offenses is suggested by evidence that a blocking of its action by the antiandrogenic agent Depo-Provera facilitates self-control (Berlin & Meincke, 1981). Depo-Provera appears to reduce the intensity of deviant sexual urges and the frequency of accompanying erotic fantasies. A recent review of the literature (Stanley, 1998) also suggests that neural anomalies (which contribute to intellectual and cognitive deficits) as well as hormonal changes may be associated with paraphilia and other sex offenses by males.

Again, biological influences (neurohormonal in this case) may have an impact on the ability of some individuals to comply with the clear ethical teachings of Scripture on sexual relationships outside of marriage.<sup>2</sup> The breakdown of marriages and increase in divorce rate among Christians in recent years suggests that as a community of believers, we are not doing a particularly good job at such compliance. Again, the difficulty or failure of meeting Scriptural teachings on heterosexual relations should not be accepted as an excuse for non-compliance to such standards. Interestingly, society in general, and even the Christian community to some degree, appears to accept this argument more readily in the case of heterosexual relations than in the case of homosexual relations. That is to say, whether we are able to meet the ethical standards of Scripture or not, there appears to be less controversy about the Biblical teachings on heterosexual relations than on homosexual relations.

Both homosexuality and heterosexual sex practices, then, represent areas of human experience where a system of ethics is clearly outlined in Scrip-

<sup>1</sup>The distinction between homosexual orientation and lifestyle (i.e., behavior) has both practical and theoretical importance. Although both concepts have clear moral implications, Scripture addresses only homosexual practices, not orientation. A change in homosexual practices may occur without a cessation of same-sex attraction.

<sup>2</sup>In contrast to biblical teachings on homosexuality, biblical teachings on heterosexual sex conduct address orientation as well as behavioral practices. For example, in Matt. 5:28, we are told that to lust after a woman is equated with adultery. This would clearly suggest that orientation is not morally neutral.

tural teachings. Nevertheless, the manner in which we process and/or interpret such teachings as well as implement them in our daily experience cannot be properly understood without a clear recognition of our fallen embodied nature.

What, then, can we conclude about our embodied (biological) nature and its relationship to evolutionary psychology—the focus of Van Leeuwen's article? First and foremost, it is important that we recognize that they are not one and the same in spite of their common physical emphasis. To recognize the importance of our embodied nature to an ethics of sexual relations is not the same as endorsing evolutionary psychology's explanation of such relations. As Jones (1995) has pointed out, Christians should rightfully reject the assumptions of evolutionary psychology without automatically rejecting important information about our biological nature. We should desire a deeper understanding of what it means to be biological in God's sight. Furthermore, the difference in these views is not simply a matter of semantics, but one that has tremendous moral and ethical implications. Evolutionary psychology sees us as a product of environmentally-modified genetic heritage and leaves no room for moral decision making. By contrast, a recognition of our embodied nature is totally consistent with Scriptural teachings and requires that we deal with its sin-compromised nature in the context of God's holiness.

Second, and equally important, is the fact that, even though we are embodied (biological), we are not *merely* biological. Scripture reminds us that we are body, soul, and spirit (1 Thes. 5:23). Each of these dimensions of human nature is equally important and only a truly "holistic" view of who we are in God's sight will suffice. While the word "holistic" may have acquired an unsavory reputation in the context of New Age interests (Cole, 2002), it is used here to merely emphasize the importance of the whole and the interdependence of its parts. We should not marginalize the importance of our embodied (biological) nature to a consideration of the ethics of sexual relations; by the same token, we should give equal consideration to the importance of our spiritual/psychological nature to a consideration of such an issue. While our embodied nature is part of our created state, we are created for much more—an intimate relationship with our Creator and a loving relationship with family and brothers and sisters in Christ

(Jones, 1995). Scripture reminds us that the Holy Spirit of God indwells us as believers (1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16) and that we are to love one another (John 15:12, 17). It is quite apparent that, while a Biblical perspective on our nature allows us and indeed requires us to accept such a "holistic" view, evolutionary psychology totally excludes such a view.

Again, it needs to be pointed out that the present author believes Van Leeuwen has done an outstanding job in demonstrating the failure of evolutionary psychology in explaining gender relations. This article is not designed to be a criticism of her basic thesis, but rather, an expanded discussion of an important issue raised in her paper—our biological nature and sexual relations. I trust that it will be viewed in that light and accepted as an appropriate supplement to her work.

## REFERENCES

- Beatty, J. (1995). *Principles of behavioral neuroscience*. Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark.
- Beck, J. R. (1997). Evangelicals, homosexuals, and social science. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 40, 83-97.
- Berlin, F. S., & Meinecke, C. F. (1981). Treatment of sex offenders with anti-androgenic medication: Conceptualization, review of treatment modalities, and preliminary findings. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 138, 601-607.
- Boswell, J. (1980). *Christianity, social tolerance, and homosexuality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carter, C. S. (1992). Hormonal influences on human sexual behavior. In J. B. Becker, S. M. Breedlove, & D. Crews (Eds.), *Behavioral endocrinology* (pp. 131-142). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Cole, S. O. (1995). The biological basis of homosexuality: A Christian assessment. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 23, 89-100.
- Cole, S. O. (1996). Reflections on integration by a biopsychologist. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 24, 292-300.
- Cole, S. O. (2000). Biology, homosexuality, and the biblical doctrine of sin. *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 157, 348-361.
- Cole, S. O. (2002). Don't disembody me just yet! A Christian perspective on our biological nature. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, in press.
- Dawkins, R. (1989). *The selfish gene*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Edwards, K. J. (1993). The nature of human mental life. In J. P. Moreland & D. M. Ciochi (Eds.), *Christian perspectives on being human* (pp. 175-197). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Hamer, I. (1997). Pastor, the gene made me do it. *Concordia Journal*, 23, 18-26.
- Helminiak, D. A. (1994). *What the Bible really says about homosexuality*. San Francisco: Alamo Square Press.

- Jones, S. L. (1995). My genes made me do it. *Christianity Today*, 39 (5), 14-18.
- Kalat, J. W. (1995). *Biological psychology* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Lang, R. A., Flor-Henry, P., & Frenzel, R. R. (1990). Sex hormone profiles in pedophilic and incestuous men. *Annals of Sex Research*, 3, 59-74.
- Looy, H. (1995). Born gay? A critical review of biological research on homosexuality. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 14, 197-214.
- Murphy, M. R., Checkley, S. A., Seckl, J. R., & Lightman, S. L. (1990). Naloxone inhibits oxytocin release at orgasm in man. *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology and Metabolism*, 71, 1056-1058.
- Schmidt, T. E. (1995). *Straight & narrow*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Scroggs, R. (1983). *The New Testament and homosexuality*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.
- Stanley, S. L. (1998). A review of contemporary hypotheses regarding the etiology, assessment, and treatment of paraphilias and nonparaphilic behaviors. Unpublished doctoral paper, Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University.
- Van Leeuwen, M. S. (2002). Of hoggamus and hogwash: Evolutionary psychology and gender relations. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 30 (2), 102-112.
- White, M. (1994). *Stranger at the gate*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Yarhouse, M. A. (1998) Group therapies for homosexuals seeking change. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 26, 247-258

#### AUTHOR

COLE, SHERWOOD O. *Address:* Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola University, 13800 Biola Ave., La Mirada, CA 90639; *Title:* Professor of Psychology, Rosemead School of Psychology; Professor Emeritus, Rutgers University. *Degrees:* M.A., Psychology, UCLA; Ph.D. Psychology, Claremont Graduate School. *Specialization:* Biological basis of behavior, psychopharmacology (forensic specialization), effects of drugs on learning and memory.