Faculty Research Grant
Indiana University South Bend
Final Report

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Description of Grant-Supported Activity

In March of 2010, I received an IUSB Summer Research Grant for my book project, *Bringing Biology to Life: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Biology*. Currently, there is only a handful of philosophy of biology books that cover core issues in the philosophy of biology. Further, few of these efforts are accessible to both experts and interested non-experts within the humanities. Indeed, most of the philosophy of biology books—be they manuscripts or edited collections—are written to promote specific positions within topical debates, rather than providing the reader with an informative overview of the debate within which these positions are advanced. In contrast, *Bringing Biology to Life* offers a philosophically rigorous analysis of key topics in the philosophy of biology that is intellectually engaging and yet does not require extensive background knowledge in biology or philosophy. The book provides an avenue through which scholars and non-scholars can glean a deep understanding of both the historical and philosophical underpinnings of specific debates within the philosophy of biology. Moreover, this project includes chapters on evolutionary psychology, evolution & race, evolution & culture, and intelligent design. By including these less-frequently explored topics in philosophy of biology, this work engages more disciplines within the humanities and beyond. For instance, beyond philosophy and biology, scholars in sociology, anthropology, psychology, and religious studies would surely welcome a dip into the philosophical waters of topics that permeate their respective fields.

Specifically, I received grant-support in order that I could complete chapters 5 & 7 of the manuscript. Chapter 5 explores the debate concerning the nature of biological species, while chapter 7 engages the evolution and ethics literature. The chapters are organized as follows:

Ch. 5, The Species Debate, will not only explain and evaluate some of the central theories of species, but it will do so from the perspective of “the challenge from individualism.” This approach begins by noting that some philosophers and biologists deny that there is any such thing as any specific set of mind-independent entities that can be labeled ‘species’; there are individual dogs out in the world, but there is no dog species or “dogness essence” out in the world (this is known as nominalism). This analysis evaluates the various species concepts with this
nominalist challenge in the back-drop. Additionally, this chapter will include a reply to John Stamos’ recent attempt to salvage the reality of species; that is, his rejection of nominalism. The concluding section will include my own niche-specialization account of species as a reply both to Stamos and the nominalist challenge. The overall strategy, the inclusion of Stamos’ yeoman efforts, and my own positive account of species are novel contributions to the scholarly literature in the species debate.

Chapter 7 will explore the attempt by Darwinians to naturalize ethics. This is a long-standing debate, stretching back to Darwin’s own ruminations on the topic. Granting that humans are social beings—to the extent that we engage in other-regarding behavior—it is reasonable to ask how deeply the “universal acid” of Darwinism penetrates into such behavior. Some Darwinians argue that it penetrates to the core of humans as normative beings, while others (more cautiously) argue that it plays a crucial role at the level of the neurobiology of emotions and/or actions, but no such corresponding role at the level of normative claims. In order to move successfully beyond this cautious approach, evolutionary ethicists will have to contend with the challenge of showing (1) how factual claims can generate normative/value-laden claims (Hume’s challenge) and (2) how to make sense of the supposed irreducibility of non-compulsion-grounded reasons for actions (this objection sometimes called the argument from agency). These two criticisms have proven to be major roadblocks for those who wish to espouse an evolutionary ethic. Upon evaluating some of the prominent attempts to import a Darwinian framework into ethics and determining how successful these accounts are with respect to the two major criticisms, I argue that norm specification will reveal that Darwinism can help make sense of some norms better than others. The upshot of this analysis is that, although not quite the universal acid as some would hope, evolutionary thinking about ethics should not be dismissed out of hand; indeed, there is reason to believe that it can be quite relevant (in some circumstances) in making sense of humans as moral beings.

I. Completion of Project

As a result of the 2010 Summer Research Grant from IUSB, I was able to produce completed drafts of both chapters 5 & 7. Notably, chapter 5 proved to be more daunting than I had thought. There are far more theories of species than I had anticipated, making it rather difficult to produce a core set of theories to explicate and critique. Ultimately, I had to go back and read a few more biology texts in order to locate a reasonable set of
theories to incorporate into the text. All of this had to be balanced with the more general philosophical worries that permeate the entire topic. There is no doubt that the research time I had made it possible not only to come to a better understanding of the species debate, but also to produce a manageable, yet philosophically rigorous chapter.

The main difficulty with chapter 6 was the metaethics (the nature of ethics concerns) discussions. The problem here was that philosophers of biology, who are engaging the evolution and ethics debate, are not necessarily on top of the metaethics debates. The reason for this is that the nuances of the metaethics debates are housed within the discipline of Ethics, which has been the home of a great many years of philosophical analysis on the nature of goodness. So, I had to spend some time exploring the general arguments of these debates in order to incorporate them effectively into ch. 7. Again, the research time I had was indispensable to the production of this chapter.

Importantly, as a result of having completed drafts, I was able to use them in a few of my upper-division philosophy classes. For example, chapter 5 was used in my Philosophy and Evolution course and I was able to offer an Evolution and Ethics course in which major parts of ch. 7 were included. I received valuable feedback from the students in these courses as I moved toward further polishing the chapters. In addition, I presented a portion of ch. 7 as part of my Dean’s Seminar presentation, “Evolution & Ethics: Ruse as a Case Study,” on April 29, 2011. The insightful comments and suggestions from my colleagues allowed me to revise further this chapter. Ultimately, as a result of the Summer 2010 Research Grant, I was able to accomplish my goals of completing these two crucial chapters of *Bringing Biology to Life*.

II. Manuscript Status

Once completed, *Bringing Biology to Life* will be published by Broadview Press. Their marketing team will inform various disciplines in the academy about the project and its corresponding relevance. By way of e-mail notifications, website postings, book reviews, leaflets, and international conference book fairs, Broadview Press will aggressively pursue the dissemination of the manuscript.

With chapters 5 & 7 complete, I have a three remaining chapters to finish: (1) Evolution and Human Psychology, (2) Evolution and Race, and (3) Intelligent Design. I hope to have completed drafts of these final chapters during the upcoming academic year. What this means is that the book could be published some time in 2012.