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Between Cooperation and Conflict: An Orthodox Ethical-Theological Analysis of the Evolutionary Perspective¹

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between cooperation and conflict from an interdisciplinary perspective that brings evolutionary theory, behavioral economics, and Orthodox theology into dialogue. Starting from the paradox of cooperation—the fact that individuals may act against their immediate self-interest in order to benefit others—the article analyzes the principal explanatory mechanisms proposed by evolutionary biology, such as kin selection and reciprocity, as well as the contributions of behavioral economics regarding the role of norms, moral emotions, and social sanctions.

The analysis shows that, although these theoretical frameworks offer important explanations for the emergence and stability of cooperation, they cannot exhaust the normative dimension or the deeper meaning of human behavior. In this context, Orthodox theology offers a personalist interpretation in which cooperation is understood as an expression of the human vocation to communion, while conflict is seen as a distortion of relationship, generated by egoism and by the rupture of communion with God. The article argues that ethics cannot be grounded exclusively in evolutionary foundations, since the distinction between “is” and “ought” remains irreducible. A dialogue between science and theology is therefore necessary in order to integrate biological explanations into a broader horizon of meaning. In conclusion, the study argues that the human person is not destined for conflict, but remains capable of authentic cooperation grounded in relationship, responsibility, and communion.

Keywords

cooperation; conflict; evolutionary theory; Orthodox theology; altruism

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I. Introduction

In recent decades, the problem of cooperation and conflict has become one of the major themes of contemporary reflection, extending beyond the boundaries of biology and the social sciences and entering more clearly into the spheres of ethics, philosophy, and theology. This is not merely a theoretical issue reserved for specialists, but a reality reflected daily in the concrete lives of individuals and communities. The contemporary world is characterized, paradoxically, by an unprecedented degree of interdependence and, at the same time, by profound tensions that seem to undermine that very interdependence. People communicate more easily than ever before, economies are increasingly interconnected, information circulates rapidly, and collective destinies are more closely linked than at any previous moment. Yet, amid this global proximity, forms of division are also intensifying: armed conflicts, ideological polarization, aggressive economic competition, social distrust, and identity crises affect both individuals and societies as a whole².

In such a context, the fundamental question is no longer simply, “Why do human beings cooperate?” but also, “How is cooperation still possible in a world so visibly marked by conflict?” This question matters because it concerns not only the organization of social life, but also the way human nature itself is understood. If the human being is defined primarily by self-interest, competition, and self-protection, then cooperation appears fragile, provisional, and dependent solely on advantage. If, on the contrary, the human person retains within his or her deepest structure an orientation toward relationship, communion, and solidarity, then conflict can no longer be regarded as an original condition, but rather as a deformation of an authentic mode of existence. Ultimately, the discussion of cooperation and conflict is also a discussion about the human being: about what the person is, what he or she may become, and how relationships with others are constituted.

From an evolutionary perspective, this problem takes the form of a classic yet still relevant paradox. The logic of natural selection seems

² Anthony GIDDENS, *Runaway World: How Globalisation is Reshaping Our Lives*, Profile Books, London, 1999; Zygmunt BAUMAN, *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2000; Samuel P. HUNTINGTON, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996; Ulrich BECK, *World at Risk*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2009.

to favor behaviors oriented toward individual advantage, survival, and reproductive success. At first sight, egoism appears easier to explain than altruism, and competition seems more “natural” than cooperation. Yet empirical reality compels research to move beyond this simplified picture. Human beings cooperate frequently, including in situations where the immediate benefit is not obvious or where cooperation entails a personal cost. They help, share, show solidarity, punish injustice, and uphold common norms even when a strictly individual calculation would suggest a different course of action. Precisely this tension between self-interest and the willingness to cooperate has become one of the most fruitful lines of inquiry in evolutionary biology, behavioral economics, and moral psychology.

Recent studies have further complicated the classical image of the human being as a rational agent concerned exclusively with personal gain. Research conducted by David Rand, Joshua Greene, and Martin Nowak suggests that, in many contexts, intuitive reactions tend to favor cooperation, whereas careful deliberation and explicit calculation more often lead to selfish behavior³. This finding is remarkable because it indicates that the inclination toward cooperation is not merely an external product of education or social constraint. Cooperation does not arise only when individuals are compelled by rules or motivated by rewards, but also when they react spontaneously, almost reflexively, in relation to others. This observation does not eliminate the reality of egoism or competition, but it does show that human nature is more complex than many simplified models have assumed.

At the same time, the fact that human beings are capable of cooperation does not mean that they naturally live in a state of continuous harmony. The existence of conflict, rivalry, and competition shows that the tendency toward cooperation coexists with opposing inclinations, some of them very powerful. Human beings may be supportive and generous, but they

³ David G. RAND, Joshua D. GREENE and Martin A. NOWAK, “Spontaneous Giving and Calculated Greed”, in: *Nature* 489 (2012), pp. 427–430. See also Martin A. NOWAK, “Five Rules for the Evolution of Cooperation”, in: *Science* 314 (2006), pp. 1560–1563; Joshua D. GREENE, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them* (New York: Penguin, 2013), pp. 23–45.

may also become aggressive, possessive, or domineering. They may build relationships of trust, yet they may also destroy them through suspicion, self-interest, or violence. It is precisely this ambivalence that makes the problem of cooperation and conflict so important. We are not dealing with two completely separate realities, but with two possibilities that traverse the same human existence and often meet within the same person, the same community, and the same history⁴.

From a theological perspective, this ambivalence acquires a different and deeper meaning. Orthodox theology neither ignores the reality of conflict nor naively idealizes human nature. It acknowledges that the human being lives in a state of inner and relational tension, marked by egoism, rupture, and the difficulty of remaining in authentic communion. Even so, conflict is not interpreted as an original condition or as a fatality inscribed in human nature itself. Rather, it is understood as a distortion of relationship, a deformation of the human vocation toward communion. In this perspective, the human being is called not first of all to competition, but to relationship; not to the isolated assertion of the self, but to openness toward the other and toward God. For this reason, the analysis of cooperation and conflict is not only a scientific or sociological issue, but also an anthropological and spiritual one, since it concerns the very truth of the human person⁵.

In light of this vision, cooperation appears as more than a useful mechanism for survival or for the stability of groups. It becomes the expression of a deeper structure of human existence. Conflict, in turn, is

⁴ Michael TOMASELLO, *A Natural History of Human Morality*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2016; Frans de WAAL, *The Age of Empathy: Nature's Lessons for a Kinder Society*, Harmony Books, New York, 2009; Jonathan HAIDT, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Pantheon, New York, 2012.

⁵ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, pp. 250–260, 301–310; Vladimir LOSSKY, *Teologia mistică a Bisericii de Răsărit*, Anastasia, București, 1992, pp. 120–130; Christos YANNARAS, *Persoană și eros*, Anastasia București, 2000, pp. 70–85. For the interpretation of conflict as the closure of the person within oneself, see also Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Orthodoxia*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1996, pp. 89–95.

no longer viewed merely as an effect of competition for resources, but also as a symptom of an inner and relational rupture. At this point, the possibility of a genuine dialogue between science and theology emerges. Evolutionary theory can describe the mechanisms through which certain forms of cooperation and conflict arise and become stable, but theology can question the deeper meaning of these behaviors and provide a broader framework for understanding them. This does not mean rejecting scientific explanation, but integrating it into a wider reflection on the human person, freedom, the good, and communion.

The present study seeks to explore precisely this intersection between evolutionary theory and theology in a field that remains highly relevant and sensitive. It aims to analyze the extent to which cooperation and conflict can be understood, on the one hand, as biological and social mechanisms and, on the other hand, as expressions of a deeper reality of the human person. More specifically, the study is based on the hypothesis that the evolutionary perspective offers important tools for explaining the emergence and functioning of cooperation, but cannot by itself exhaust the meaning of these phenomena or fully ground their moral value. For this reason, an Orthodox ethical-theological reading becomes necessary, not in order to compete with scientific explanations, but to move beyond their limits and place them within a broader horizon of understanding. In an age in which conflict often appears more visible than communion, such a reflection may contribute to rediscovering that the human being is not condemned to rivalry, but remains capable of relationship, responsibility, and authentic communion.

I. State of Research: Between Biology, Economics, and Theology

The analysis of cooperation and conflict has generated, over the past decades, a complex dialogue between disciplines that, although methodologically distinct, converge in their concern to understand human behavior. Evolutionary biology, behavioral economics, and theology each propose distinct interpretive frameworks, yet all attempt to answer the same fundamental question: why and under what conditions do human beings

choose to cooperate or, conversely, to engage in conflict? While biology offers explanations for the emergence of these behaviors, economics examines their manifestation within concrete social contexts, and theology seeks to interpret their deeper meaning in relation to human nature and vocation. A proper understanding of the current state of research therefore requires an integrative perspective that takes all three directions into account.

I.1. The Evolutionary Perspective on Cooperation

Within evolutionary theory, cooperation is classically defined as a behavior in which an individual incurs a cost in order to provide a benefit to another. This seemingly simple definition conceals a major theoretical difficulty. If natural selection favors those behaviors that increase an individual's chances of survival and reproduction, how can it account for actions that appear to disadvantage the individual while benefiting others? The problem of cooperation thus becomes one of the most challenging questions in evolutionary biology, since it seems to contradict the basic logic of self-interest.

A systematic response to this problem has been proposed by Martin Nowak, who identified five fundamental mechanisms through which cooperation can emerge and be sustained: kin selection, direct reciprocity, indirect reciprocity, network reciprocity, and group selection. These mechanisms offer complementary explanations for the stability of cooperative behavior. Kin selection explains cooperation among genetically related individuals, while direct reciprocity accounts for cooperation in repeated interactions in which benefits can be returned in the future. Indirect reciprocity emphasizes the role of reputation, and group selection highlights the advantage of cooperative groups over less cooperative ones⁶.

These models have significantly reshaped the understanding of cooperation by demonstrating that it is not an anomaly, but a phenomenon that can arise under specific conditions and be maintained over time.

⁶ Martin A. NOWAK, "Five Rules for the Evolution of Cooperation", in: *Science* 314 (2006), pp. 1560–1563.

Cooperation thus appears as an adaptive strategy, particularly in environments characterized by repeated interactions, social memory, and mechanisms for sanctioning selfish behavior. However, these explanations do not eliminate the inherent tension between cooperation and egoism. In any social system, there remains the risk of free riders, that is, individuals who benefit from cooperation without contributing to it.

The existence of such behaviors shows that cooperation is always fragile and contingent. It depends on a delicate balance between trust and enforcement, between individual interest and social norms. For this reason, even within evolutionary theory, cooperation does not appear as a permanently stable state, but as a dynamic phenomenon that must be constantly supported and protected. This observation raises the question of whether evolutionary explanations are sufficient to account fully for the nature of cooperation or whether a broader interpretive framework is required.

I.2. Behavioral Economics and Cooperation

If evolutionary biology has focused primarily on explaining the emergence of cooperation, behavioral economics has investigated how cooperation manifests itself in concrete social contexts. It has made a crucial contribution by challenging the classical model of the perfectly rational individual who seeks only to maximize personal utility. Empirical research has instead revealed a much more complex picture of human behavior, in which emotions, social norms, and cultural contexts play a decisive role.

Cross-cultural studies led by Joseph Henrich have shown that individuals frequently display fairness and cooperative behavior even in the absence of direct personal gain. In experimental settings across diverse societies, participants consistently demonstrated a tendency to share resources relatively equitably and to reject offers perceived as unfair, even when accepting them would have been materially advantageous. These findings suggest that human behavior is not governed solely by utility maximization, but also by a sense of justice and reciprocity⁷.

⁷ Joseph HENRICH et al., "Economic Man in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Behavioral

Moreover, the variation observed across cultures indicates that human behavior is not determined exclusively by biological factors, but is also shaped by social institutions, traditions, and shared values. Cooperation thus emerges not only as an individual strategy, but also as a product of cultural and institutional frameworks.

Another important contribution of behavioral economics is the identification of altruistic punishment, analyzed by Ernst Fehr and Simon Gächter. Their research demonstrates that individuals are willing to punish selfish behavior even at a personal cost and without direct benefit. This tendency plays a crucial role in sustaining cooperation, as it discourages opportunistic behavior and reinforces social norms⁸.

The willingness to sanction injustice at personal cost suggests motivations that go beyond self-interest. At this point, purely economic and evolutionary explanations begin to encounter limitations, since the behavior in question is no longer reducible to efficiency or adaptation, but involves values experienced as intrinsically binding. Behavioral economics thus confirms the complexity of cooperation while also raising the question of whether this complexity can be fully explained within an adaptive framework.

I.3. The Orthodox Theological Perspective

In Orthodox theology, the problem of cooperation is approached from a fundamentally different standpoint. It is not framed primarily in biological or economic terms, but in anthropological and ontological ones. The human being is not understood merely as an individual defined by interests and survival strategies, but as a person, and the person exists through relationship. This shift in perspective is decisive, as it transforms the very meaning of cooperation and conflict.

Dumitru Stăniloae emphasizes that the human being cannot be defined

Experiments in 15 Small-Scale Societies”, in: *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28, nr. 6 (2005), pp. 795–815; see also Joseph HENRICH et al., *Foundations of Human Sociality: Economic Experiments and Ethnographic Evidence from Fifteen Small-Scale Societies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004.

⁸ Ernst FEHR and Simon GÄCHTER, “Altruistic Punishment in Humans”, in: *Nature* 415 (2002), pp. 137–140; Ernst FEHR and Urs FISCHBACHER, “The Nature of Human Altruism”, in: *Nature* 425 (2003), pp. 785–791.

by isolated individuality, but by the capacity for communion. In this vision, relationship is not an external addition to human existence, but its deepest structure. The human person does not become truly human in isolation, but in relation to others and ultimately in relation to God. Consequently, cooperation is not an accidental behavior or a useful strategy, but an expression of authentic human nature⁹.

At the same time, conflict is not interpreted as an inherent necessity of existence, but as a consequence of a rupture in relationship. Egoism is not an original state, but a distortion of human nature, a closure of the person within oneself that transforms relationships into instruments of interest and competition. In this perspective, conflict is not merely a clash of interests, but the manifestation of a deeper disruption affecting the relational structure of human existence.

Vladimir Lossky¹⁰ complements this view by affirming that even in the fallen state, the human being retains an orientation toward the good, as a reflection of the divine image. This affirmation is significant because it suggests that the capacity for cooperation and goodness is not entirely erased, even if it is wounded and distorted. The human person remains capable of relationship, communion, and of overcoming conflict, even though these capacities are often fragile.

Thus, the Orthodox theological perspective provides a distinct interpretive framework in which cooperation and conflict are understood not merely as biological or social phenomena, but as expressions of a deeper spiritual reality. Cooperation appears as the manifestation of the human vocation toward communion, while conflict is seen as a distortion of that vocation. Theology does not deny scientific explanations¹¹, but

⁹ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, pp. 250–260; 272–280.

¹⁰ Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1976, pp. 111–120.

¹¹ For recent approaches to the integration of scientific and theological perspectives on cooperation and conflict, see Celia DEANE-DRUMMOND, *Theology and Evolutionary Anthropology: Dialogues in Wisdom, Humility and Grace*, Routledge, London, 2021; Joshua MAULDIN, *Barth, Bonhoeffer, and Modern Politics*, Oxford University Press Oxford, 2022, for reflections on conflict and community in a contemporary theological context; as well as Dominic D. P. JOHNSON and Monica DUFFY TOFT (eds.), *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, W. W. Norton, New York, updated ed., 2023, on the role of religion in the dynamics of cooperation and conflict at the

transcends their limits by integrating them into a broader understanding of the human person and the meaning of existence.

II. The Dynamics of Conflict and the Problem of Altruism

II.1. Conflict in the Evolutionary Perspective: Necessity or Limit?

If, in the case of cooperation, evolutionary theory has been confronted with an apparent paradox, namely, behaviors that seem to contradict individual self-interest, in the case of conflict the situation appears, at first glance, much easier to explain. Competition for resources, status, or reproductive opportunities has traditionally been regarded as one of the fundamental drivers of natural selection. From this perspective, conflict does not emerge as an exception or anomaly, but as a direct consequence of the way life itself operates. It appears embedded in the dynamics of evolution and accompanies the process of selection in an almost inevitable manner.

The classical model of natural selection, formulated by Charles Darwin¹², presupposes the existence of a struggle for existence, in which individuals or groups compete for limited resources. This competition should not necessarily be understood as overt violence or direct confrontation, but rather as a constant tension between organisms striving to survive and reproduce in a constrained environment. Even when not visibly expressed, competition leads to differentiation, selection, and ultimately exclusion. Some individuals succeed, others are eliminated, and this dynamic contributes to the shaping of species over time.

Building upon this framework, the theory of the selfish gene, proposed by Richard Dawkins¹³, further emphasized that selection operates at the genetic level, favoring behaviors that maximize gene propagation. In this view, conflict is no longer merely an interaction between individuals, but the expression of divergent strategies at the level of genetic interests. Each

global level.

¹² Charles DARWIN, *On the Origin of Species*, John Murray, London, 1859, esp. chap. 3 (“Struggle for Existence”).

¹³ Richard DAWKINS, *The Selfish Gene*, 2nd ed., Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006.

organism becomes, in a sense, a vehicle for genes whose primary “goal” is replication, and competition emerges as a consequence of these underlying processes.

However, even within this paradigm, conflict cannot be absolutized. Both theoretical models and empirical research demonstrate that conflict constantly coexists with mechanisms of cooperation and that the stability of social systems depends on a delicate balance between the two. A system dominated exclusively by conflict risks becoming unstable and ultimately collapsing, as the absence of cooperation undermines the very conditions necessary for collective survival¹⁴. In this sense, conflict is not only inevitable, but also internally limited by the necessity of cooperation.

This observation introduces an important nuance into the evolutionary understanding of conflict. Conflict is not only a driver of selection, but also a potentially destabilizing force. While competition may generate advantages and stimulate adaptation in the short term, excessive conflict can, in the long run, destroy the very conditions that make survival possible. Thus, conflict appears both necessary and problematic, functioning simultaneously as a source of order and disorder.

II.2. Altruism: Between Biology and Morality

In contrast to the apparent self-evidence of conflict, the problem of altruism remains one of the most fascinating and challenging issues for evolutionary theory. If natural selection favors behaviors that enhance an individual’s chances of survival, how can it explain the fact that human beings often sacrifice resources, time, or even their lives for the benefit of others? Altruism seems to contradict adaptive logic and introduces a dimension that transcends mere biological utility.

The classical response to this problem is provided by the theory of kin selection, developed by William D. Hamilton. According to this theory, individuals may behave altruistically toward relatives because they share a significant portion of genetic material. From this perspective, helping a

¹⁴ David Sloan WILSON and Edward O. WILSON, *The Social Conquest of Earth*, Liveright, New York 2012; and, for a recent synthesis, Jonathan BIRCH, *The Philosophy of Social Evolution*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017.

relative is not a true loss, but an indirect way of promoting one's own genes. Altruism thus becomes intelligible within an extended genetic logic¹⁵.

Subsequently, theories of reciprocity, particularly those developed by Robert Trivers, expanded this explanation by showing that altruism can also arise among non-related individuals under conditions of repeated interaction. If individuals encounter each other multiple times and have the opportunity to reciprocate, altruistic behavior can become advantageous in the long term. In this sense, altruism is reinterpreted as a sophisticated form of cooperation based on anticipated return¹⁶.

Yet empirical research has shown that human behavior often exceeds these explanations. People frequently display forms of altruism that cannot be reduced to kinship or reciprocity. They help strangers, give without expecting anything in return, and cooperate even in situations where no future benefit is foreseeable. Such behaviors suggest that altruism cannot be fully explained by evolutionary mechanisms alone, even if these mechanisms account for an important part of the phenomenon.

At this point, a crucial tension emerges. If altruism cannot be reduced to self-interest, then it implies a moral dimension that transcends adaptive logic. Human beings do not act only because it is advantageous to do so, but also because they perceive certain actions as good, just, or necessary, even in the absence of personal benefit. This dimension opens the space for ethical reflection, which can no longer be derived exclusively from biology.

II.3. Moral Emotions and the Foundation of Cooperation

A central role in sustaining cooperation is played by moral emotions, which function as mechanisms regulating social behavior. Research indicates that reactions such as indignation, guilt, shame, and empathy contribute decisively to the stability of social norms. These emotions are

¹⁵ William D. HAMILTON, "The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour," in: *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7 (1964), pp. 1–16, 17–52.

¹⁶ For the development of reciprocity theory as an extension of evolutionary explanations of altruism, see Robert TRIVERS, "The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism," in: *Quarterly Review of Biology* 46 (1971), pp. 35–57; see also Robert AXELROD, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, Basic Books, New York, 1984, for the role of repeated interaction and strategic reciprocity in sustaining cooperative behavior among non-related individuals.

not merely individual responses, but expressions of internalized values and collective expectations.

For instance, indignation toward injustice or the willingness to punish selfish behavior, even at personal cost, points to the existence of a sense of justice that cannot be explained solely by self-interest. Individuals do not react only to protect their own advantages, but also to defend norms they perceive as valuable in themselves. This tendency is essential for maintaining cooperation, as it discourages opportunistic behavior and reinforces trust within communities¹⁷.

Findings from neuroscience and moral psychology suggest that these mechanisms have a biological basis and that human beings are, in a certain sense, predisposed toward cooperation. Empathy, the capacity to recognize the emotions of others, and the tendency to respond to unfairness are supported by specific neural processes. This observation strengthens the idea that cooperation is not merely a cultural construct, but also has a natural foundation¹⁸.

However, these mechanisms are not infallible. They can be distorted, manipulated, or directed toward destructive ends. Moral emotions can be mobilized to justify exclusion, aggression, or intergroup conflict. For example, moral indignation can fuel polarization, while group solidarity can generate hostility toward those perceived as outsiders. In this sense, the same mechanisms that support cooperation can also contribute to conflict, confirming the profound ambivalence of human nature.

¹⁷ For the role of moral emotions in regulating social behavior and sustaining cooperation, see Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Pantheon, New York, 2012; Ernst Fehr and Simon Gächter, "Altruistic Punishment in Humans,"; and Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*, Penguin, New York, 2013, for the connection between moral emotions, norm enforcement, and cooperative stability.

¹⁸ For neuroscientific and psychological evidence regarding the biological basis of empathy and cooperative behavior, see Tania Singer and Claus Lamm, "The Social Neuroscience of Empathy," in: *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1156 (2009), pp. 81–96; Jean Decety and Philip L. Jackson, "The Functional Architecture of Human Empathy," in: *Behavioral and Cognitive Neuroscience Reviews* 3, no. 2 (2004), pp. 71–100; and Joshua Greene, *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*, Penguin, New York, 2013, pp. 55–82, for the neural and psychological grounding of moral responses related to fairness and cooperation.

II.4. Ethical-Theological Interpretation: Conflict as Distortion

From a theological perspective, this ambivalence receives a different interpretation. Conflict is not viewed as an ontological necessity, that is, it does not belong to the original structure of human existence, but as the consequence of a relational rupture. In Orthodox tradition, this rupture is described as a fall from communion into a state of individualism and egoism, in which relationship is replaced by interest and openness by self-enclosure.

Dumitru Stăniloae argues that egoism arises when the human being closes himself within himself, losing the capacity for self-giving and authentic relationship with others. In this condition, the other is no longer perceived as a person, but as a means or obstacle, and relationships become instrumentalized. Conflict is thus no longer merely a competition for resources, but a degradation of the mode of existence, a loss of communion that defines the human person at its deepest level.

At the same time, Orthodox theology does not consider this condition to be definitive. The human being is not condemned to conflict, because he retains the capacity to overcome this distortion through the restoration of relationship. This possibility is grounded in the enduring orientation of the human person toward the good and toward communion¹⁹.

Paul Evdokimov emphasizes that true freedom does not consist in the egoistic assertion of the self, but in the capacity to love and to enter into

¹⁹ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, pp. 301–310. For recent Orthodox theological approaches to cooperation, conflict, and the restoration of communion in contemporary contexts, see Pantelis KALAITZIDIS, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, WCC Publications, Geneva, 2012; Aristotle PAPANIKOLAOU, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 2012; Cyril HOVORUN, *Political Orthodoxies: The Unorthodoxies of the Church Coerced*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2018; Regina ELSNER, “Orthodoxy and War: The Religious Dimension of Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” in: *Religion, State & Society* 50, no. 4–5 (2022), pp. 421–436; see also Kristina STOECKL, “The Russian Orthodox Church and Human Rights”, in: *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 12, no. 2 (2014), pp. 63–73, Ciprian Iulian TOROCZKAI, “Georges Florovsky on human rights? An Orthodox theological perspective”, in: *European Journal of Science and Theology* 15 (2019), nr. 2, pp. 135–148, for the broader theological and political framework of conflict, authority, and moral responsibility in contemporary Orthodoxy.

relationship with others. From this perspective, overcoming conflict is not achieved through the elimination of competition or the imposition of external rules, but through the inner transformation of the person. Love is not merely a moral virtue, but a force that reconfigures relationships and transcends the logic of self-interest²⁰.

This interpretation offers a distinct framework for understanding conflict. It is no longer seen as an unavoidable given, but as a condition that can be transformed. While the evolutionary perspective describes the mechanisms through which conflict arises and is regulated, the theological perspective points toward its possible overcoming through the restoration of communion. In this sense, conflict is not only explained, but also critically interrogated in relation to the ultimate meaning and purpose of human existence.

III. Evolutionary Ethics and Its Limits

III.1. Between Explanation and Normativity

One of the most significant challenges of the evolutionary perspective emerges when it is extended beyond the descriptive level and used as a foundation for ethics. If altruism, cooperation, and moral sanctioning can be explained as outcomes of natural selection, an unavoidable question arises: can these explanations also serve as a basis for what is morally right? In other words, if we understand how certain behaviors emerge, does this allow us to conclude that they ought to be followed?

The classical answer to this question is negative. Numerous philosophers have emphasized the fundamental distinction between explaining a

²⁰ For the understanding of love as a transformative and ontological force that reconfigures human relationships and overcomes egoism, see Paul EVDOKIMOV, *Orthodoxia*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române București, 1996; Paul EVDOKIMOV, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1985. For a contemporary Orthodox development of love as ontological communion and eschatological vocation, see Ciprian Iulian TOROCZKAI, "Love as Ontological and Eschatological Principle in Vladimir Solovyov's Thought: A Philosophico-Theological Analysis of *The Meaning of Love*", in: *Teologia* 103, no. 3 (2025), pp. 68–91, esp. 72–75

behavior and justifying it. The fact that human beings cooperate does not necessarily imply that they should cooperate, just as the fact that certain behaviors are adaptive does not automatically confer moral value upon them. Explanation belongs to the domain of science, whereas justification belongs to the domain of ethics. Confusing these two levels leads to reductionism and undermines the normative force of morality.

This limitation is well known in moral philosophy through the distinction between “is” and “ought”, articulated most famously by David Hume. Evolutionary theory describes what is, how humans behave and the mechanisms underlying their actions, but it cannot, by itself, determine what ought to be. For this reason, any attempt to ground ethics exclusively in evolutionary principles risks reducing morality to a mere extension of biological adaptation, thereby neglecting its binding and normative character.

Despite this limitation, certain strands of evolutionary ethics attempt to derive moral norms from evolutionary processes. For example, some theorists argue that moral systems have evolved because they enhance group cohesion and increase the chances of collective survival. In this view, morality is understood as an adaptive function, facilitating cooperation and reducing conflict within groups.

While such explanations are valuable for understanding the origin and function of moral norms, they remain insufficient for explaining their obligatory character. Human beings do not experience moral norms merely as useful, but as binding. They do not act justly only because justice is advantageous, but because they perceive it as intrinsically right. This experience of moral obligation points to a dimension that cannot be fully reduced to adaptation or collective utility. At this point, evolutionary ethics reveals its limits and calls for a broader interpretive framework²¹.

²¹ For the classical distinction between explanation and justification in ethics, see David HUME, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000, pp. 302–303 (Book III, Part I, Section I); G. E. MOORE, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1903, pp. 58–65; and Thomas NAGEL, *The Last Word*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997, pp. 135–152, for critiques of reducing normativity to naturalistic explanations.

III.2. The Risk of Reductionism

A major danger in extending evolutionary explanations into the ethical domain is the risk of reductionism. If moral values are interpreted solely as byproducts of evolutionary processes, they may lose their objective and normative significance. In such a framework, concepts such as justice, altruism, or responsibility risk being reduced to strategies for survival rather than recognized as genuine moral realities²².

This reductionist tendency has profound consequences. If morality is nothing more than an adaptive illusion, then its authority becomes fragile and contingent. Norms can be justified only insofar as they are useful, and when they cease to be advantageous, they can be abandoned. Such a perspective undermines the very possibility of a stable ethical framework, as it deprives moral values of any transcendent or intrinsic grounding.

Moreover, reductionism fails to account for the depth of moral experience. Human beings do not merely calculate benefits when making moral decisions; they often act against their own interests out of a sense of duty, responsibility, or love. These experiences cannot be adequately explained in terms of evolutionary advantage alone. They point to a dimension of human existence that transcends purely biological or functional explanations.

Philosophers such as Thomas Nagel have argued that moral reasoning involves a perspective that goes beyond subjective interest, aiming at a form of objectivity that cannot be reduced to naturalistic explanations. Similarly, the persistence of moral disagreement and reflection suggests that morality cannot be fully captured by descriptive accounts of behavior.

Thus, while evolutionary theory provides valuable insights into the origins of moral behavior, it cannot replace ethical reflection. It can explain why certain tendencies exist, but not whether they are justified. The

²² For critical discussions on the reduction of morality to evolutionary processes and the associated risk of reductionism, see Michael RUSE, *Taking Darwin Seriously: A Naturalistic Approach to Philosophy*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986; Sharon STREET, "A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value," in: *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (2006), pp. 109–166; and Alasdair MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed., University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 2007, pp. 51–78.

reduction of ethics to evolution risks impoverishing the moral dimension of human life and obscuring its deeper significance²³.

III.3. The Orthodox Theological Response

Orthodox theology²⁴ offers a fundamentally different approach to the grounding of ethics, one that avoids both reductionism and dualism. Rather than deriving moral norms from biological processes, it situates ethics within an ontological and relational framework centered on the human person.

In the theological vision articulated by Dumitru Stăniloae, morality is not primarily a system of rules, but an expression of the human vocation to communion. The good is not defined in terms of utility or adaptation, but in terms of participation in the life of God, who is understood as communion of persons. In this context, ethical behavior is not imposed externally, but arises from the transformation of the person and the restoration of authentic relationships.

This perspective allows for a reinterpretation of cooperation and conflict. Cooperation is not merely a strategy for survival, but an expression of the relational nature of the person. Conflict, on the other hand, is not an inevitable feature of existence, but a distortion of this relational vocation. Ethics thus becomes inseparable from anthropology and ontology: to act

²³ For arguments concerning the irreducibility of moral reasoning to naturalistic explanations, see Thomas NAGEL, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1986), pp. 136–165; Derek PARFIT, *On What Matters*, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, pp. 301–350; and David ENOCH, *Taking Morality Seriously: A Defense of Robust Realism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011, pp. 11–45.

²⁴ For the grounding of ethics in an ontological and relational framework within Orthodox theology, see Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, MA, 1998, pp. 221–260; Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1997, pp. 133–150; John ZIZIOULAS, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1985, pp. 15–60; Christos YANNARAS, *Person and Eros*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, Brookline, MA, 2007, pp. 45–90; Andrew LOUTH, *Introducing Eastern Orthodox Theology*, IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL, 2013, pp. 103–125; and Aristotle PAPANIKOLAOU, *The Mystical as Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy*, pp. 67–110.

morally is to exist in accordance with one's true nature as a relational being.

Vladimir Lossky further emphasizes that the human being retains the imprint of the divine image even in a fallen state. This means that the capacity for moral action is not entirely lost, but remains present, albeit weakened and distorted. Ethical life is therefore not simply a matter of conforming to norms, but of rediscovering and actualizing this deeper orientation toward the good.

In this framework, moral obligation is not grounded in external authority or evolutionary necessity, but in the very structure of human existence. The call to love, to cooperate, and to overcome conflict is not arbitrary, but corresponds to what the human person truly is. Ethics thus acquires a deeper foundation, one that integrates freedom, responsibility, and relationality.

III.4. Toward an Integrative Perspective

The limitations of evolutionary ethics do not imply that evolutionary insights should be rejected. On the contrary, they remain indispensable for understanding the biological and social conditions of human behavior. However, these insights must be integrated into a broader framework that can account for the normative and existential dimensions of human life.

An integrative perspective recognizes that human beings are both biological organisms and relational persons. Evolutionary processes shape certain tendencies, but they do not determine the full meaning of human existence. Ethical reflection must therefore take into account both the natural foundations of behavior and the transcendent orientation of the human person.

In this sense, the dialogue between science and theology is not only possible, but necessary. Science provides explanations, while theology offers meaning. Science describes mechanisms, while theology interprets their significance. Together, they allow for a more complete understanding of cooperation, conflict, and moral life.

Such an approach avoids both reductionism and irrationalism. It acknowledges the validity of scientific knowledge without allowing it to exhaust the meaning of human existence. At the same time, it affirms the

depth of moral experience without denying its natural foundations. The result is a more nuanced and comprehensive account of the human condition.

IV. Personhood, Communion, and the Overcoming of Conflict

IV.1. The Theological Foundation of Cooperation

In contrast to biological reductionism, Orthodox theology proposes a personalist vision of the human being that fundamentally reshapes the understanding of cooperation. The human being is not merely an individual defined by interests and survival strategies, but a person, and the person exists through relationship. This affirmation is not simply theoretical; it expresses the very structure of human existence as understood in the Orthodox tradition.

As emphasized by Dumitru Stăniloae, the human person is created in the image of a God who is Himself communion of persons. Consequently, relationality is not an external addition to human existence, but its ontological foundation. The human being becomes fully himself not in isolation, but in openness toward others and toward God. Cooperation, therefore, is not merely a useful behavior or a social strategy, but an expression of authentic human existence²⁵.

This perspective has important implications. If the human being is fundamentally relational, then cooperation must be understood not only as a response to external conditions, but as the manifestation of an inner vocation toward communion. It is not simply possible; it is natural in a deeper, ontological sense, even if this nature is often distorted.

Christos Yannaras further develops this idea by arguing that authentic freedom does not consist in absolute autonomy or self-assertion, but in the capacity for relationship. Freedom is not separation, but communion. The human being does not become more free by isolating himself, but by entering into meaningful and loving relationships with others.

Within this framework, altruism is no longer interpreted as a strategic behavior or an exception to evolutionary logic, but as a mode of existence.

²⁵ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 251–270.

The human person does not become more “efficient” by loving, but more “real.” Love is not simply one behavior among others; it is the fulfillment of the person’s true nature. Thus, cooperation acquires a deeper meaning, transcending adaptive explanations and becoming an expression of ontological vocation²⁶.

IV.2. Conflict and Its Transcendence

If the evolutionary perspective tends to interpret conflict as an inevitable consequence of competition, Orthodox theology approaches it as a distortion of relational existence. Conflict is not an ontological necessity, but the result of a rupture in the way the person exists.

This rupture occurs when relationship is replaced by self-interest and when the other is reduced from person to object. In such a condition, the other is no longer encountered as a subject, but as a means or obstacle. Conflict thus becomes more than a competition for resources; it becomes a degradation of relational existence, a loss of communion that lies at the heart of authentic human life.

Vladimir Lossky highlights that sin is not merely a moral error, but an ontological rupture that affects the human relationship with God and with others. This rupture manifests concretely in egoism, isolation, and the inability to sustain authentic communion. In this sense, conflict is not only a social phenomenon, but the expression of a deeper disorder within the human condition.

However, Orthodox theology does not consider this condition to be definitive. The human being is not condemned to conflict, because the possibility of restoring relationship remains open. This restoration does not occur primarily through external regulation, but through inner transformation²⁷.

Paul Evdokimov emphasizes that love is not merely a moral virtue, but a transformative force that reconfigures human relationships and transcends

²⁶ Christos YANNARAS, *Person and Eros*, pp. 70–110. See also John ZIZIOULAS, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, pp. 27–65; and Vladimir LOSSKY, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Crestwood, NY, 1985, pp. 101–120.

²⁷ Vladimir LOSSKY, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, pp. 133–160.

the logic of conflict. In this perspective, conflict is not simply managed or reduced; it is transfigured. It is not merely limited, but overcome through a change in the mode of existence of the person²⁸.

This vision introduces a decisive shift. While evolutionary approaches focus on regulating conflict through mechanisms such as reciprocity, sanction, or institutional control, theology points toward its deeper overcoming through the restoration of communion. Conflict is thus not only explained, but also evaluated and ultimately transcended.

V. Interdisciplinary Synthesis and Contemporary Implications

V.1. An Integrative Synthesis

The dialogue between evolutionary theory and theology should not be understood as a confrontation, but as a form of complementarity. The two perspectives operate at different levels and address different questions, yet they can converge toward a more comprehensive understanding of the human person.

Evolutionary theory provides explanations regarding the emergence and functioning of behaviors. It shows how cooperation can be stabilized through mechanisms such as reciprocity, social norms, and punishment, and how conflict arises in contexts of competition. It offers a descriptive and analytical framework that is indispensable for understanding human behavior.

Theology, on the other hand, does not limit itself to explanation, but seeks to interpret the meaning of these behaviors. It affirms that cooperation is not merely possible, but constitutive of human nature, and that conflict is not inevitable, but ultimately surmountable. In this sense, theology does

²⁸ For the understanding of love as a transformative force that reconfigures human existence and transcends conflict, see Paul EVDOKIMOV, *The Sacrament of Love: The Nuptial Mystery in the Light of the Orthodox Tradition*, pp. 17–60; Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *The Experience of God: Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 2, Holy Cross Orthodox Press Brookline, MA, 2000, pp. 121–150; and Olivier CLÉMENT, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era*, New City Press, London, 1993, pp. 289–305.

not contradict science, but extends its horizon by situating human behavior within a broader anthropological and ontological framework.

This complementarity allows us to avoid reductive interpretations. The human being is neither reducible to biological processes nor understandable apart from them. An integrative perspective acknowledges both the natural foundations of behavior and the transcendent orientation of the human person, articulating them within a unified vision.

V.2. Ethical and Contemporary Relevance

In the contemporary context, marked by polarization, competition, and instability, such an integrative approach acquires particular relevance. Understanding the mechanisms of cooperation can contribute to the development of more stable and cohesive societies, in which trust and collaboration are institutionally and culturally supported.

At the same time, the theological perspective provides a critical criterion for evaluating these mechanisms. Not every form of cooperation is morally valid, just as not every conflict is unjustified. There are forms of cooperation based on exclusion or self-interest, and there are conflicts that may carry a dimension of justice or defense. Therefore, ethical analysis cannot be reduced to efficiency or adaptation alone.

Ethics implies an orientation toward the good that transcends utility. It requires discernment, responsibility, and the capacity to evaluate actions not only in terms of their consequences, but also in terms of their intrinsic value. In this respect, the dialogue between science and theology becomes essential for articulating an ethical framework capable of responding to contemporary challenges.

VI. Conclusions

The analysis of cooperation and conflict from both evolutionary and theological perspectives reveals the profound complexity of human nature and the limitations of any reductive approach. Evolutionary theory demonstrates that human beings are simultaneously capable of cooperation

and conflict, and that these behaviors are supported by identifiable biological and social mechanisms. However, while necessary, this perspective is not sufficient to account for the full meaning and value of human actions.

Orthodox theology complements this analysis by offering a vision of the human being as a person called to communion. Within this framework, cooperation is not merely a product of natural selection, but an expression of human vocation, while conflict is not a fatal condition, but a distortion that can be overcome through the restoration of relationship.

The dialogue between science and theology is therefore not optional, but essential. It allows for the overcoming of simplistic interpretations and opens the possibility of an integrative understanding of the human person.

Ultimately, the human being is not condemned to conflict, even if marked by it; he is defined not by competition, but by the capacity for communion. In this sense, cooperation is not merely a strategy of survival, but a sign of the deeper truth of human existence, while the overcoming of conflict becomes not only a social necessity, but also a spiritual vocation.