

Darwin's Theologically Unsettling Ideas

John F. Haught
Georgetown University

Everything in the life-world looks different after Darwin. Descent, diversity, design, death, suffering, sex, intelligence, morality, and religion—all of these now take on a new meaning, one that poses important questions, especially to Christian theologians. The main challenge to theology is whether in Darwin's science human thought has finally arrived at a purely naturalistic understanding of life and all of its expressions. My question here is whether there is any plausible room left after Darwin for a theological understanding of the phenomena just listed?

Take for example the theme of descent. Before Darwin, people in the Western world understood the universe typically as a hierarchical, vertical, static ladder of levels—a Great Chain of Being. At the bottom was the lowly level of matter. Above that lay the realms of plants, animals, humans, angels, and—at the very top—the throne of God. Everything in this hierarchical scheme "descends" from God on high. Each level participates in the life and being of God above, although some levels do so more fully than others. The meaning of human life, accordingly, is to make our way up the ladder of being, by living a good and prayerful life, to God from whom all the various levels of being descend.

The vine of providential theology, like that of purpose, had for centuries wound itself around a hierarchical model of the universe. The classical, pre-Darwinian portrait of the universe was one in which human beings thought of themselves as occupying a relatively high level in the whole scheme of things. Their sense of having an elevated

status gave our ancestors the confidence to believe that they were cared for by divine providence in a special way.

However, the science of evolution seems to have washed out the ancient lines of hierarchical discontinuity, and this is a major reason why so many people even today are deeply troubled by Darwin's portrait of life. To dramatize this point, call to mind the new scientific picture of a 13.7 billion year old universe. Picture the cosmic story as unfolding in thirty volumes, each consisting of 450 pages, and each page representing a million years of natural history. The first twenty-two volumes are essentially lifeless and mindless. The earth story begins in Volume 21, and life comes into existence a billion or so years later in Volume 22. Once life emerges, it consists mostly of single cells and only begins to arrive at heightened levels of complexity near the end of Volume 29. At this point the Cambrian Explosion occurs, and life thenceforth begins to complexify at an accelerating rate. Even so, dinosaurs do not appear until after the middle of Volume 30, and they die out sixty-five pages from the end of the book, making room finally for the age of mammals. Our hominid ancestors appear in the last several pages of the last of our thirty books, and modern humans arrive only near the bottom of the very last page.

Once life comes about, it hands itself over to the well-known Darwinian recipe that consists of three ingredients: accidents, natural selection and an enormous amount of time. For many evolutionists this compact list of components is enough to explain *ultimately* what is going on in life. Accordingly, it would appear that no room remains for a theological understanding of life after Darwin.

Why not? First, the prominent role of accidents in the life story seems to

contradict the belief that a providential God is truly active in the natural world. Accident appears, first of all, in the spontaneous origin of life itself. Then, after life comes about, random events arise plentifully in genetic mutations and recombinations. These random or contingent occurrences provide all the raw material needed for natural selection. Moreover, as the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould has emphasized, accidents show up in the many undirected events in natural history that cause life to unfold in unpredictable and unplanned ways. For example, the asteroid that apparently struck the Yucatan peninsula 65 million years ago may have led to the extinction of the dinosaurs and opened up new niches for the development of mammalian life. What would life have been like if this large object had not crashed accidentally into the earth? Gould insists that life would have turned out quite differently from the way it has if such contingent events had not occurred in the manner they did. The human species, for example, would never have emerged in evolution.

Second, the Darwinian recipe includes the inflexible *law* of natural selection. This blind and impersonal filtering process allows only a relatively few organisms to survive long enough to reproduce. All others are eliminated along the way. Natural selection discards most instances of life in what seems to be a very ruthless and unfair lottery, one that allows only a relatively few “fit” organisms to adapt, survive, and bear offspring. To the evolutionary naturalist, therefore, there is no need for special creation of species by God. Nature is enough.

Third, Darwin’s recipe requires an enormous amount of *time* to cook up the large variety of organisms that have lived upon the earth. Evolution takes the first two ingredients--accidents and natural selection--and stirs them into the bowl of deep

cosmic time, the roughly four billion years of experimental opportunities that have been available to bring into existence all the diversity of life. For many Darwinians today, this three-part recipe seems sufficient to account for every feature of life. Nothing else is necessary.

Room for Theology?

Is there room, therefore, for a theological understanding of life after Darwin? It is the conviction of many scientists today, especially those familiar with biology, that the Darwinian understanding of evolution has made the idea of God completely superfluous, and hence unbelievable. The very features of life that previously led religious believers to attribute a sacramental meaning to the created world now seem to be fully explainable in Darwinian terms. Descent, diversity, design, death, suffering, sex, intelligence, morality, and religion—all of these now seem to admit of a purely natural explanation. Can we expect scientifically educated people to believe that these features of life may still have a religious meaning in a post-Darwinian world?

Life seems fully intelligible to evolutionary naturalists without their having to refer to God or divine creation and providence. Richard Dawkins is not alone in holding this position. Recently Jerry Coyne, an evolutionist who teaches at the University of Chicago, and who has just written a readable introduction to evolutionary biology entitled *Why Evolution Is True*, declares that “if organisms were designed by a beneficent Creator” there should be no design flaws in nature. A perfect God, he maintains, would have created a perfectly engineered world. But evolutionists have observed that design flaws are abundant throughout the history of life. So it follows, at

least for Coyne, that God cannot possibly exist. Darwin's science has eliminated any illuminating place for a theological understanding of life. For Coyne this means that religious and scientific understanding will always and forever remain incompatible.¹

Likewise, David Barash, an evolutionary scientist at the University of Washington, declares that religious believers are obliged to attribute the intricate design in living organisms directly to an intelligent designer, since "only a designer could generate such complex, perfect wonders." However, Barash goes on to say: "In fact, the living world is shot through with imperfection." All adaptations, in other words, have "design flaws." To this he adds that "unless one wants to attribute either incompetence or sheer malevolence to . . . a designer, this imperfection—the manifold design flaws of life—points incontrovertibly to a natural, rather than a divine process, one in which living things were not created *de novo*, but evolved." After Darwin, he concludes, life requires no theological support or understanding. A Darwinian explanation is sufficient.²

Finally, the evolutionary philosopher Philip Kitcher, to cite one of many other critics of theology, also agrees that Darwin has destroyed any plausible notion of God. "A history of life dominated by natural selection," he assumes, "is extremely hard to understand in providentialist terms. There is nothing kindly or providential about any of this, and it seems breathtakingly wasteful and inefficient. Indeed if we imagine a human observer presiding over a miniaturized version of the whole show, peering down on his

¹ Jerry A. Coyne, *Why Evolution Is True* (New York: Viking, 2009).

² David Barash, "Does God Have Back Problems Too?" *Los Angeles Times*, June 27, 2005.

creation, it is extremely hard to equip the face with a kindly expression.”³ Like most other evolutionary naturalists, Kitcher concludes that the design flaws in nature are evidence of the nonexistence of God.

“Evolutionary naturalism” is the name I give to the belief that Darwin’s science provides the ultimate explanation of living phenomena and that there is no room any longer for theological explanations of life and its diverse manifestations. My recent book *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life* (WJK Press, 2010) offers a critique of evolutionary naturalism and presents a theological way toward understanding Darwin’s “unsettling ideas.” I shall provide a very brief summary of this theological approach in my remarks at the conference.

³ Philip Kitcher, *Living with Darwin: Evolution, Design, and the Future of Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press), 124.