

Darwinism: Science or Philosophy

Darwinism and Theism

Phillip E. Johnson

SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF *Darwin on Trial*, friends have been sending me copies of a newsletter called *BASIS*, mainly because it often has something unfavorable to say about me. *BASIS* is published by an organization calling itself the San Francisco Bay Area Skeptics. As you can imagine, these Skeptics do not encourage people to be skeptical about doctrines of the rationalist faith like atheism, materialism, and Darwinian evolution. A recent issue of *BASIS* reported on a local meeting at which the featured speaker was a woman identified as "a religious person and science teacher at a Catholic school." This science teacher was assuring her audience that despite the religious affiliation of her school, she taught evolution and not creationism in her science classes. A questioner from the audience then put her on the spot by asking, "Do you think that evolution is directed?" The newsletter reports that this question was followed by a "dramatic pause," after which the teacher replied with what it called a "battled 'No'." The reporter for *BASIS* commented. "I would have expected a more rapid answer, but the battle between her curriculum and her beliefs had a few more moments of unrest left to settle." [\[1\]](#)

That conflict symbolizes for me the quandary of all those scientifically literate Christian intellectuals who struggle to reconcile Darwinism and theistic religion. Most of these people would probably call themselves theistic evolutionists. The name implies that they consider evolution to be a process initiated and guided by God, presumably in order to bring about the existence of human beings. My impression is that most theistic evolutionists in their hearts think of evolution as God's chosen means of creation, although in their heads they know that this concept is more a form of "soft creationism" than genuine evolutionism as Darwinist scientists use the term. The tension between head and heart leads to a characteristic vagueness when theistic evolutionists try to explain exactly what God had to do with evolution. From the hesitancy of that teacher's response to the crucial question, I suspect that she probably did not go out of her way at that Catholic school to call the attention of her students, and especially their parents, to the unanimity with which contemporary Darwinist authorities repudiate the idea that evolution is directed by any supernatural intelligence. A representative statement, typical of the official Darwinist attitude, is this one by George Gaylord Simpson:

Although many details remain to be worked out, it is already evident that all the objective phenomena of the history of life can be explained by purely naturalistic or, in a proper sense of the sometimes abused word, materialistic factors. They are readily explicable on the basis of differential reproduction in populations (the main factor in the modern conception of natural selection) and of the mainly random interplay of the known processes of heredity.... Man is the result of a purposeless and natural process that did not have him in mind. {2}

The leading Darwinist authorities are frank about the incompatibility of their theory with any meaningful concept of theism when they are in friendly territory, but for strategic reasons they sometimes choose to blur the message. When social theorist Irving Kristol published a *New York Times* column in 1986 accusing Darwinists of manifesting a doctrinaire antitheism, for example, Stephen Jay Gould responded in *Discover* magazine with a masterpiece of misdirection. {3} Quoting nineteenth century preacher Henry Ward Beecher, Gould proclaimed that "Design by wholesale is grander than design by retail," neglecting to inform his audience that Darwinism repudiates design in either sense. To prove that Darwinism is not hostile to "religion," Gould cited the example of Theodosius Dobzhansky, whom he described as "the greatest evolutionist of our century, and a lifelong Russian Orthodox." As Gould knew very well, Dobzhansky's religion was evolutionary naturalism, which he spiritualized after the manner of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. A eulogy published by Dobzhansky's pupil Francisco Ayala in 1977 described the content of Dobzhansky's religion like this:

Dobzhansky was a religious man, although he apparently rejected fundamental beliefs of traditional religion, such as the existence of a personal God and of life beyond physical death. His religiosity was grounded on the conviction that there is meaning in the universe. He saw that meaning in the fact that evolution has produced the stupendous diversity of the living world and has progressed from primitive forms of life to mankind. Dobzhansky held that, in man, biological evolution has transcended itself into the realm of self-awareness and culture. He believed that somehow mankind would eventually evolve into higher levels of harmony and creativity. {4}

Evolution is thoroughly compatible with religion-when the object of worship is evolution.

I don't mean to pick on Gould, because in being evasive about the implications of Darwinism for religion he was merely following the lead of the prestigious National Academy of Sciences. In an official 1984 statement the Academy's president assured the public that it is "false . . . to think that the theory of evolution represents an irreconcilable conflict between religion and science." Dr. Frank Press explained:

A great many religious leaders accept evolution on scientific grounds without relinquishing their belief in religious principles. As stated in a resolution by the

Council of the National Academy of Sciences in 1981, however, "Religion and science are separate and mutually exclusive realms of human thought whose presentation in the same context leads to misunderstanding of both scientific theory and religious belief." [\[5\]](#)

That statement could have been drafted by one of those White House or Congressional "spin doctors" whose assignment is to mislead the public without telling an outright lie. Dr. Press did not say whether the religious leaders in question were simply overlooking a logical contradiction, or whether the "religious principles" they managed not to relinquish included a creating God who takes an active role in designing or constructing living organisms. He also did not say what the compulsory separation of science and religion implies for those scientists who continually make purportedly scientific statements about the purposelessness of evolution or the absence of a supernatural creator from the history of the cosmos. No wonder the candid scientific materialist William Provine described the National Academy's position as politically understandable but intellectually dishonest. [\[6\]](#)

The present discussion is over whether belief in Darwinism is compatible with a meaningful theism. When most people ask that question, they take the Darwinism for granted and ask whether the theism has to be discarded. I think it is more illuminating to approach the question from the other side. Is there any reason that a person who believes in a real, personal God should believe Darwinist claims that biological creation occurred through a fully naturalistic evolutionary process? The answer is clearly *No*. The sufficiency of any process of chemical evolution to produce life has not been demonstrated, nor has the ability of natural selection to produce new body plans, complex organs or anything else except variation within types that already exist, Papers presented at this symposium explain why Darwinian innovation of this sort is exceedingly unlikely. The fossil record does not evidence any continuous process of gradual change, which is why paleontologists are continually tempted to flirt with the heresy that biological transformations occurred in sudden jumps. If chemical and biological evolution is the only possible source of living organisms, then the shortage of evidence is of little importance; the only question is how naturalistic evolution occurred, not whether it did. If God exists, then naturalistic evolution is not the only alternative, and there is no reason for a theist to believe that God employed it beyond the relatively trivial level where variation has been demonstrated.

From a theistic perspective, Darwinism as a general theory is not empirical at all. It is a child of naturalistic or positivistic philosophy, which defines science as the attempt to explain the world without allowing any role to theological or providential activity. Positivism in this sense requires science to have at least a vague theory about everything really important. To produce the required theory, scientists are allowed, if necessary, to make simplifying assumptions or even to overlook difficult aspects of

the problem. Even a particularly frustrating problem, such as the origin of life on earth, is considered to be solved in principle once scientists think they have some plausible general notion about how the thing might have happened. The spirit of positivistic science is illustrated by James Trefil's summary of the evolution of life in his recent book, *1000 Things Everyone Should Know About Science*:

Evolution of life on earth proceeded in two stages: chemical and biological. Life on earth must have developed from inorganic materials- what else was there for it to come from? The first stage in the development of life, therefore, was the production of a reproducing cell from materials at hand on the early earth. This process is called chemical evolution.... Once a living, reproducing system was present, the process of natural selection took over to produce the wide variety of life that exists today. [\[7\]](#)

That sort of reasoning seems unimpeachable to metaphysical naturalists; fully naturalistic chemical and biological evolution happened because nothing else could have happened. A theist, on the other hand, has no reason to accept the plausibility of either chemical evolution or creative natural selection in the absence of a convincing empirical demonstration.

Because Darwinism has its roots in metaphysical naturalism, it is not consistent to accept Darwinism and then to give it a theistic interpretation. Theistic evolutionists are continually confused on this point because they think that Darwinism is an empirical doctrine-i.e., that it rests fundamentally on observation. If that were the case, it is hard to see how any observations of evolution or natural selection in action could rule out the possibility that Darwinian evolution is God's way of creating. Nothing about the observed variations in the beaks of finches in the Galapagos Islands, or in the increased survival rate of dark melanic moths during periods when the background trees were darkened by industrial smoke, discredits a theistic interpretation of evolution. If one assumes that confidence in the ability of Darwinian selection to create entirely new kinds of animals is based on observations like those, then obviously atheism or metaphysical naturalism is not a necessary implication of Darwinism. This mistaken premise leads theistic evolutionists to the conclusion that they can accept George Gaylord Simpson's "scientific" statement-i.e., that mutation and selection did the work of creation-and reject his "philosophical" conclusion that the universe is purposeless.

The flaw in that logic is that the purportedly scientific statement was inferred from the philosophical conclusion rather than the other way around. The empirical evidence in itself is inadequate to prove the necessary creative power of natural selection without a decisive boost from the philosophical assumption that only unintelligent and purposeless processes operated in nature before the evolution of intelligence. Darwinists know that natural selection created the animal groups that sprang suddenly

to life in the Cambrian rocks (to pick a single example) not because observation supports this conclusion but because naturalistic philosophy permits no alternative. What else was available to do the job? Certainly not God-because the whole point of positivistic science is to explain the history of life without giving God a place in it.

In short, the reason that Darwinism and theism are incompatible is not that God could not have used evolution by natural selection to create. Darwinian evolution might seem unbiblical to some, or an unlikely method for God to use, but it is always possible that God might do something that confounds our expectations. The contradiction between Darwinism and theism is at a deeper level. To know that Darwinism is true (as a general explanation for the history of life), one has to know that no alternative to naturalistic evolution is possible. To know *that is* to know that God does not exist, or at least that God cannot create. To infer that Darwinism is true because there is no creator God, and then to interpret Darwinism as God's method of creating, is to engage in self-contradiction.

I have two concluding points. First, the contradiction between Darwinism and theism is not necessarily evident to people who have only a superficial acquaintance with Darwinism. That explains why 40 percent of the American public believes in a God-guided evolution and thinks, no doubt, that this position satisfactorily reconciles science and religion. The contradiction sinks in when a person assimilates Darwinist ways of thinking and sees how antithetical they are to theism. That is why Darwin in his own time and his successors today have generally felt that theistic evolutionists were missing the point.^[8] Theistic evolutionists protest (correctly) that a creative role for natural selection does not rule out the possibility of God, but they fail to understand that the entire outlook of positivistic science is profoundly incompatible with the existence of a supernatural creator who takes an active role in the natural world.

My second concluding point is that it is risky for Darwinists to be candid about the implications of their theory for theistic religion. I don't mean simply that the anti-theistic bluster put about by people like William Provine and Carl Sagan arouses opposition, although that is an important consideration. I am thinking of an intellectual problem. The all-purpose defense that Darwinists invoke when their theory is under attack is to invoke what I called in my earlier address "Dobzhansky's rules," the rules of positivistic science. That is, they say that "science" is defined as the search for naturalistic explanations for all phenomena and that any other activity is "not science." This position is sustainable only on the assumption that "science" is just one knowledge game among many, and theists suffer no great loss if they have to go and play in another game called "religion." The problem is that the games do not have equivalent status. The science game has government support and control of the public educational establishment. Everybody's children, theists and non-theists alike, are to

be taught that "evolution is a fact." This implies that everything contrary to "evolution," specifically the existence of a God who takes a role in creation, is false. If "evolution" has strong anti-theistic implications, the theists in the political community are entitled to ask whether what Darwinists promulgate as "evolution", is really true. The answer, "That's the way we think in Science," is not an adequate response.

In the famous Arkansas creationism trial, the Darwinist expert witnesses were able to lead the gullible Judge William Overton by the nose and persuade him that theists have no legitimate intellectual objection to the Darwinist world view. As authority for the proposition that belief in a divine creator and acceptance of the scientific theory of evolution (i.e., Darwinism) are compatible, Judge Overton cited none other than Francisco Ayala, author of the previously quoted eulogy of Theodosius Dobzhansky.^[9] The next time this sort of issue comes around I predict that the Darwinists will have to deal with a more sophisticated judicial audience.

NOTES

^[1] "Stockton: Report from the Front Lines of Public School Science Education," Commentary, *BASIS* (December 1991), p. 3.

^[2] George Gaylord Simpson, *The Meaning of Evolution* (rev. ed., 1967), pp. 344-345.

^[3] Stephen Jay Gould, "Darwinism Defined: The Difference Between Fact and Theory," *Discover* (January 1987), pp. 64-70.

^[4] Francisco Ayala, "Nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution," *Journal of Heredity*, vol. 68 (January-February 1977), pp. 3-9.

^[5] The official position paper on creationism of the National Academy of Sciences was published in 1984, with beautiful illustrations, under the title *Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy of Sciences*. The paper was prepared under the direction of a distinguished committee of seven scientists and four lawyers. The quotation in my text is from the introduction to the paper, signed by the Academy's President, Dr. Frank Press.

^[6] William Provine, "Evolution and the Foundation of Ethics," *MBL Science* (publication of the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts), vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 25-29.

[\[7\]](#) Stephen Compton, "From Electricity to Chaos," *San Francisco Chronicle*, Book Review Section (February 23, 1991), p. 7.

[\[8\]](#) See Neal C. Gillespie's account of Darwin's frustration with the theistic evolutionists of his own time in *Charles Darwin and the Problem of Creation* (University of Chicago Press, 1979), especially chapter 5.

[\[9\]](#) Footnote 23 in Judge Overton's opinion states that "The idea that belief in a creator and acceptance of the scientific theory of evolution are mutually exclusive is a false premise and offensive to the religious laws of many Dr. Francisco Ayala, a geneticist of renown and a former Catholic priest who has the equivalent of a Ph.D. in theology, pointed out that many working scientists who subscribe to the theory of evolution are devoutly religious." *McLean v. Arkansas*, 1529 F. Supp. 1255 W. D. Ark. 1982). Reprinted in the collection *But Is It Science ?* (Ruse. ed. 1988), p. 330. It does not seem to have occurred to Judge Overton to wonder why Dr. Ayala is a *former* Catholic priest.