

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND EVOLUTION

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**Lecture Five
“The Challenge of Darwinism”
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Introduction

I believe the first time I ever heard of Richard Dawkins was in a *New Yorker* piece fifteen, twenty years ago. He was introduced as a scourge of religion, traveling through England showing how the success of evolutionary theory meant the demise of Christian faith. (Since then, he has expanded his range.)

I remember that I talked about it in a sermon. I didn't try to argue with him, because, not having been trained for it, I didn't feel I understood the issues well enough to try to take him on. I think I said something like "Sure hope the experts back in the theological research and development department are working on the problem."

What I did feel prepared to say was that his was a bleak, impoverished view of life, so I took the sermon in that direction.

If Darwinism were Christianity, Richard Dawkins would be its Apostle Paul.

What Darwinism is

Darwinism is a blend of science and metaphysics. It combines two scientific theories with two philosophical positions.

The scientific theories are:

1. Darwinian evolution
2. Adaptationism

The philosophical positions are:

3. Metaphysical naturalism
4. Supersessionism

Let's look briefly at what those labels mean.

Darwinian Evolution

This one you know. There are two core ideas to Darwinian Evolution: common ancestry and evolution by natural selection.

In my book, a “Darwinian” is anyone who accepts those two core ideas.

That makes me a Darwinian.

It makes Pope John Paul II a Darwinian as well. In 1996, the Pope publicly acknowledged the scientific merit of evolutionary theory and recognized that it belongs within the theological scope of Catholic teaching.¹

Pope Benedict has said nothing that would indicate he is not a Darwinian also.

You take the point: all drunks are drinkers, but not all drinkers are drunk. All Darwinists are Darwinians, but not all Darwinians are Darwinists by any means.

¹ John Paul II, “Message to Pontifical Academy of Sciences,” October 22, 1996, in Russell, Stoeger and Ayala, *Evolutionary and Molecular Biology*, 2–9.

Adaptationism

In Darwinian theory, an adaptation is a product of natural selection: a trait or behavior that has been “selected for,” meaning that in one way or another it enhanced some creature’s chances of survival, and so was passed on to future generations.

The panda’s thumb was an adaption.

Adaptationism, as the philosopher Elliot Sober explains, is “a thesis about the ‘power’ of natural selection.”² It is the theory that virtually everything in life can be explained as either a product, or a by-product of natural selection, with no need to take other causal factors into account.

In Sober’s judgment, the jury on adaptationism is still out.³ Darwinists are committed to its success and to the extension of the program to explain the appearance of beliefs or practices in ethics or religion.

They are adaptationists with respect to everything from the motor on the rump of the bacterium flagellum to the Sermon on the Mount.

² Sober, *Philosophy of Biology*, 121.

³ *Ibid.*, 136.

Adaptationism is what the theologian John Haught calls “Deep Darwinism,” the belief that “all manifestations of life, including human ethics and religion,” can be accounted for on the basis of reproductive fitness and selection.⁴

This is the position once put forward by Edward O. Wilson and Michael Ruse with startling candor. “Morality,” they have written, “or more strictly, our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends.” Ethics, in other words, “is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate.”⁵

There has been a new wave of books lately extending that idea to include religion.⁶

David Sloan Wilson has led the way with this idea. According to Wilson, moral systems can be a great boon to group fitness. Religious beliefs and practices can be a powerful force for the development and sustenance of moral systems, as well as for inculcating a strong and beneficial sense of group identity. In these ways religions can and often do enhance evolutionary fitness. For,

⁴ Haught, *Deeper than Darwin*, 111.

⁵ Michael Ruse and Edward O. Wilson, “The Evolution of Ethics,” *New Scientist* 108, no. 1478 (October 1985): 51–52, quoted in Rolston, *Genes, Genesis and God*, 250.

⁶ Adaptationists disagree among themselves as to whether religion is itself an adaptation, or rather a by-product of other adaptations.

as Wilson writes: “Around the world and across history, religions have functioned as mighty engines of collective action for the production of benefits that all people want.”⁷

In a rather twisted way, some Darwinists of this particular school of thought have become defenders of religion. Attacking religion, in this view, is like attacking zebras for having stripes.

On the other hand, they are telling those of us who come to church that we are operating under a functional illusion. We think we are here to worship God, but that belief exists only because it has proved to be a useful figment of our imagination.

The final truth is in our genes.

⁷ David Sloan Wilson, *Darwin's Cathedral: Evolution, Religion, and the Nature of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 187.

Metaphysical Naturalism

“The Cosmos is all that is, or ever was, or ever will be.”⁸ Carl Sagan delivered that line with such serene conviction. If Dawkins is Paul, Sagan would be John.

Metaphysical Naturalism is the belief that reality consists of the physical world and nothing but the physical world—so some have called it “Nothing Buttery.”

Darwinism reaches beyond the mere assertion of metaphysical naturalism, to claim that Darwinian evolution has *confirmed* its truth. Ted Peters and Martinez Hewlett write: “Darwinian evolution as a science has been used to justify the philosophical stance of naturalism, or . . . ontological materialism. Since natural processes can explain all of life, then there is no need to postulate anything but the material world itself.”⁹

This is an echo of the famous boast of Pierre La Place who, when asked for his thoughts concerning God, replied “I have no need of that hypothesis.”

⁸ Carl Sagan, “The Shores of the Cosmic Ocean,” an episode in *Cosmos*, the Public Broadcasting television series.

⁹ Peters and Hewlett, *Evolution*, 49–50. Naming Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett as proponents of such a view, Peters and Hewlett add that “it would not be too farfetched to say that their philosophical position argues that the facts of Darwinian evolution prove that God does not exist.”

Beyond the fact that they can do without him as an explanation, Darwinists also use certain facts concerning evolution as evidence against belief in our loving, intelligent Creator. They point to the reality of waste, cruelty and suffering throughout the natural world.

As we have seen, Darwin personally was troubled by this; and, to him, it seemed clearly to count against Christianity. “What a book a Devil’s Chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low and horridly cruel works of nature.”¹⁰

Darwinists today continue to exploit this as a line of theological attack against a Christian concept of God, and as a point of apologetic appeal to the Christian who, like Tennyson’s friend, “trusted God was love indeed and love Creation’s final law,” but whose trust now has been wrecked by misfortune.¹¹

When any of us finds ourselves the victim of a crime, disease, or accident, their books are on the shelves at Barnes and Noble with the message “See, I told you.”

¹⁰ Randall Keynes, *Darwin, His Daughter*, 269–70.

¹¹ Tennyson, *In Memoriam*.

One of the Darwinists most confident and emphatic claims is that Darwin has shown that there is no purpose in creation. In an article in *Harvard Magazine*, Edward O. Wilson explains this to his readers.

He says that evolutionary biology has to do with questions of “why”—why a population of organisms should exhibit a given trait. It answers such questions by explaining how that trait represents or is related to a fitness adaptation at some point in the history of the population’s evolution.

So far, there is nothing objectionable in this from the vantage-point of faith.

But then Wilson moves on to say that all this means that there can be no goal or purpose to evolution, beyond the “why” or final cause of natural selection. To the extent, he says, that the theory of evolution by natural selection is upheld, “we must conclude that life has diversified on earth autonomously without any kind of external guidance. Evolution in a pure Darwinian world has no goal or purpose: the exclusive driving force is random mutations sorted out by natural selection from one generation to the next.”¹²

As I am reading this in *Harvard Magazine*, I am thinking it would take an unusually theologically well-informed Harvard reader not to reach the same conclusion that had pushed some Christians toward Intelligent Design. In a Christian theology of providence, everything does have a purpose

¹² E.O. Wilson, “Intelligent Evolution,” *Harvard Magazine*, November-December, 2005 30.

and a goal. If according to evolutionary theory there is no purpose and goal beyond natural selection, then this is a case of conflict between doctrine and science. Those who will continue to uphold the doctrine, will have to look for a different kind of science.

Wilson agrees. He tells his audience that there is in fact a conflict between “science and religious dogma” at this point, and that “any researcher who can prove the existence of intelligent design within the accepted framework of science will make history and achieve eternal fame” for having proved “that science and religious dogma are compatible.”¹³

For Wilson, the court’s ruling in *Kitzmiller v. Dover* was a great day for science, and a terrible day for Christian faith.

¹³ Ibid., 31.

Supersessionism/Scientism

What is “supersessionism”? Here I stretch a term. In theological circles, supersessionism is the word used for the idea that the place of Israel in the divine plan of salvation has been eclipsed, superceded, by Jesus Christ. The supersessionist element in Darwinism is its claim that religion in general has been supplanted by science in general, and by evolutionary theory in particular, as arbiter of meaning.

We can also call this “scientism.”

“Intelligent life . . . comes of age,” writes Richard Dawkins in the opening sentences of *The Selfish Gene*, “when it first works out the reason for its own existence.”¹⁴ It was Darwin, he tells us, who did this for us. Because of evolutionary theory: “We no longer have to resort to superstition when faced with the deep problems: is there a meaning to life? What are we for? What is man? After posing the last of these questions, the eminent zoologist G.G. Simpson put it thus: ‘the point I want to make now is that all attempts to answer that question before 1859 are worthless and that we will be better off if we ignore them completely.’”¹⁵

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1–2. One point of clarification: in making this claim, Dawkins hastens to add that he is not “advocating a morality based on evolution.” That, indeed, is one kind of Darwinism: the social Darwinism historically associated with Herbert Spencer. This movement has of course been long since out of favor. Dawkins stands in the alternative Darwinist line that rejects the line of

So adaptationism is Darwinism's program to explain religion. Supersessionism is its resolve to replace it.

Edward O. Wilson makes this quite explicit.

According to Wilson, right now the world offers three broadly accepted global "images of the human condition."¹⁶

- God-centered religion
- Scientific humanism
- Atheistic communism

Atheistic communism may have a following in Berkeley, but it still hasn't found its legs in Arkansas, so I'll remove it from the list for our consideration.

reasoning from what *is* the case in nature (e.g., "survival of the fittest,") to what *ought* to be the case in human affairs. Just as all Darwinians are not Darwinists, not all Darwinists are avowed social Darwinists.

¹⁶ E.O. Wilson, "Intelligent Evolution," 29–33.

“God-centered religion,” according to Wilson, is belief that the world is “a creation of God . . . [who] brought us into being and . . . guides us still as father, judge, and friend,” and whose will we may interpret “from sacred scriptures and the wisdom of ecclesiastical authorities.”

Scientific humanism, he says by way of contrast, “considers humanity to be a biological species that evolved over millions of years in a biological world, acquiring unprecedented intelligence yet still guided by complex inherited emotions and biased channels of learning.”

Wilson goes on to say that to understand our biological nature in depth is “to drain the fever swamps of religious . . . dogma. But it also imposes the heavy burden of individual choice that goes with intellectual freedom.”¹⁷ Wilson allows that religions have rendered “special services,” but only by exacting “heavy costs.”¹⁸ He suggests that scientific humanism will be able to deliver the services at less expense.

So, in sum:

Darwinian Theory + Adaptationism + Metaphysical Naturalism + Supersessionism = Darwinism

Charles Darwin was perhaps not quite a Darwinist as I define it; or, if he was, it didn't make him happy. His good friend, T.H. Huxley was more enthusiastic. Huxley's grandson, Julian, who

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

promoted the science but not the metaphysics, knew whereof he spoke in saying that, in the circles in which he moved, he perceived the “lineaments of a new religion.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Peters and Hewlett, *Evolution*, 50.

Responding to the challenges

That, then, is an update on the challenge to Christian faith, and all religious faith, that I first came across in Richard Dawkins all those years ago.

Since that time, I've undergone the training one would need to take the measure of arguments along these lines.

What I learned surprised me: there is less challenge in these arguments than meets the eye, because it turns out that the thinkers who challenge Christianity this way are more than capable as scientists, but amateurish as philosophers.

I can say this because, back when I was a parish priest hoping out loud that there might be a group of experts somewhere working on the problems Dawkins seemed to me to represent, it turns out that there was. I have mentioned a lot of their names through this course: Alister McGrath, Keith Ward and Nancey Murphy, being three of the best.

Through the labors of thinkers such as these, I have come to recognize that the challenge of Darwinism usually consists of a tangle of unwarranted inferences, category mistakes, self-referentially incoherent comments and, overall, wolfish metaphysical propositions dressed up in scientific clothing.

Metaphysics in sheep's clothing

For an example of metaphysics in sheep's clothing, let's stay with Wilson's piece for *Harvard Magazine*.

Wilson joins a biological assertion ("humanity . . . [is] a biological species that evolved over millions of years in a biological world") to a metaphysical interpretation ("Scientific Humanism"), implying that this is the one metaphysics on his list that is consistent with his biology.

That simply isn't true.

This course is giving a very different metaphysical interpretation to the fact that humanity is a biological specie that evolved over millions of years, one that includes belief in God as the creator who guides us still as Father, judge and friend.

The Darwinists might reply then that their metaphysical position, naturalism is, if not the only, then the *best* ultimate explanation for a world described by Darwinian evolutionary theory.

I don't think so, and neither does a strong list of people much more knowledgeable and intelligent than I.

We talked about this last fall. Even with full credit to evolutionary theory, there are many things about the world that are difficult to square with the proposition that the Cosmos is all that is, was, or

ever will be. We now know for example that this universe had a beginning of some sort: $T=0$. Are we to suppose that this beginning, and the given attributes of the world that emerged thereafter, are self-explanatory? What about the anthropic coincidences, those seemingly vastly improbable physical parameters that make this universe hospitable to life?

Some theistic evolutionists, like Arthur Peacocke, are rather reticent with claims that these data demand a theistic explanation.²⁰ Others, such as Francis Collins, are less reticent.²¹ Some, like Holmes Rolston, are open to the extension of anthropic arguments to data from organic evolution.²² Others are not.

But Peacocke speaks for the common denominator, a confident consensus view that, at the very least, the existence and attributes of the world we know are more than consistent with a theory of Creation. Peacocke: “What *can* be said on the basis of the anthropic principle is that our emergence in this universe is at least consonant with the postulate of a creator God who has the purpose of bringing into existence living and eventually self-conscious persons.”²³

²⁰ “I remain inclined not to think the anthropic principle affords a design-type proof for the existence of a Creator God.” Peacocke, *Paths*, 71.

²¹ Collins, *Language of God*, 57–84.

²² “Life is an accident waiting to happen, because it is blueprinted into the chemicals, rather as sodium and chlorine are preset to form salt, only much more startlingly so because of the rich implications for life and because of the openness and information transfer also present in the historical life process. Whatever place dice throwing has in its appearance and maturation, life is something arranged for in the nature of things. The dice are loaded.” Rolston, *Genes, Genesis and God*, 349.

From Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace who gave us the theory of evolution by natural selection, through Ronald Fisher and Theodosius Dobzhansky who saved the theory by synthesizing it with genetics, to Kenneth Miller and Francis Collins who defend it today: for many Darwinians the postulate of metaphysical naturalism still looks like a bad bet, evolution notwithstanding.

²³ Peacocke, *Paths*, 71.

Category Mistake

What about Wilson's claim that science has expelled the notion of divine purpose from our understanding of the universe?

From the perspective of classical theology, he is making a category mistake—the same mistake as Intelligent Design theorists, only turned around. With Wilson, it is as though one could use the fact that Becky Thatcher had a mother and a father to rule out a role for Mark Twain in her creation. Perhaps Becky was an accident from her parent's point of view; it would remain the case that, from the beginning, she had been included in the author's grand design.

Unwarranted inference

What about the challenge of reducing religion to a useful evolutionary adaptation? A simple reply to that is, “So what?” Supposing that it is true that religious beliefs are functional, it does not follow that they are not true. On the African Savannah, it would have been functional to believe in one’s bones that lightening is dangerous. It would also have been true.

After the smoke from the adaptationist explanations has been cleared away, we are still left with the same old, important questions concerning whether a particular religious belief is true.

And those questions bring us back, as they should, to the evaluation of religious belief by rational criteria.

And by these criteria, in comparison with the available metaphysical alternatives, the argument for belief in God is strong.

Self-referential incoherence

There is one more rejoinder to Darwinism on this point that I would like to mention. The point is well made by both Holmes Rolston and Keith Ward.

There is no evidence that sociobiologist like Wilson, or really any Darwinists, truly embrace the implications of their own theory. As scientists, they believe in the disinterested pursuit of truth and the ethical practices that guide us toward that end. They do not value these for their evolutionary function, they value them as ideals and practices that are worthy in their own right.

This phenomenon of scientists' theories working at cross-purposes with their own convictions is an example of what philosophers call "self-referential incoherence."

Or, as we say in church, they don't practice what they preach."

In this case, though their inconsistency diminishes their science, it redounds to their credit as human beings.

From the standpoint of a Christian interpretation of evolutionary science, the disinterested pursuit of truth, and ethic practice, are "emergent values," the good fruit of unfolding evolution.

This is a much more hopeful and compelling understanding of science than Wilson can offer. The Christian interpretation of evolution is the one that truly confirms the high opinion good scientists have of the value of their own work.

Faith, with understanding

Even as a theologian, I am no more an expert in philosophy than some of the Darwinists I have mentioned. Nor are all Darwinists amateurs in this department: Daniel Dennett is a formidable contemporary philosopher who is certainly able to advance a case for Darwinism without falling into these well-known informal fallacies.

The truth is that, in the battle between Christian Faith and Darwinism, there is no philosophical “knock-out punch” from either side. After five, ten, fifteen, twenty rounds . . . both competitors are standing.

For Christians, that this would be the case would be reasonably expected. Like Wilson’s Scientific Humanists, we believe in “individual choice” and “intellectual freedom.” For us to have these, in this world, it seems that God would have to leave room for a certain amount of doubt concerning his existence. (This is an instance of what I’ve called a “conditional,” and “purposeful,” divine constraint.)

Bottom line, the fact remains that Christian faith is a more-than-reasonable metaphysical position, consistent with the science, including Darwinian evolution.

Back in the day when I first heard of Richard Dawkins, I could only trust that this was so. Now I see it.

And that is our goal: “Faith, with understanding.”

Before we leave the subject, I want to take a parting glance at what Darwinism is. Years ago, I was prepared to recognize it as an impoverished understanding of the world.

Today, I think this is still the most important lesson.

I would like to end by calling your attention to the *irony* of Darwinism, its *thinness*, its *color-blindness*, and its *shadow*.

Irony

Karl Barth saw Darwin as the fulfillment on the irony of the Enlightenment. This was a grand movement in human history that gave us, among many other benefits, the blessings of liberty under the United States Constitution. Perhaps an even greater achievement was its cultivation of the scientific revolution—and were it not for that, it seems, Darwin would have lived out the life of an English Country parson.

Darwin, then, was deeply beholden to the rise of a modern, Enlightenment perspective on humanity. The movement began as a celebration of the human and a glorification of its powers.

This is the irony: it was Darwin's science that first began to undermine modern humanity's sense of itself as unique and uniquely valuable among the creatures of the earth.

Jerry Coyne put his finger on the irony in his remark that the English reader was eager to buy a book that told him he was just an “aberrant ape.”²⁴

²⁴ From our perspective, this quip gives neither the ape nor the human full credit for its value.

Thinness

Edward O. Wilson promotes scientific humanism as an alternative to Christian faith in God.

There is no reason for us to doubt the sincerity of the humanism of Darwinists like Wilson.

We have every good reason, though, to doubt its depth.

This is not because we imagine that our humanism runs any deeper, but because, as Christians, we have reason to know how shallow humanism usually is. More typically than not, when confronted with evil it melts, as Peter's faith did on good Friday.

We understand human nature through two doctrines. The first is the *imago dei*, that teaches us that humankind is created in the image of God, with the divine-like ability to think and love. The second is the doctrine of original sin, which alerts us to the ubiquity of evil. These doctrines occur early in the scripture, and they are confirmed in the ministry of Christ and its reception. We see them both in evidence every single day.

We see humankind as possessing both a deeper potential for evil, and a higher capacity for good, than Darwinism does.

Color blindness

When Darwinists look at Christian faith, they see “religion,” they see belief in “God” They may see Jesus as an example of an altruistic teacher and as such an interesting, but not impossible, problem for evolutionary theory.

To be fair to Darwinists, there are Christians who don’t see a whole lot more.

But those are Christians who have a lot to learn and, if they are faithful and teachable, they will.

Christian Faith is more than a story of belief in God in general, or about Jesus as an altruistic teacher. It is as story of the coming of the Son of God to earth, of his goodness and kindness, of his being hemmed in and overwhelmed by evil, of his triumphant resurrection from the dead.

There is evil in this story that runs deeper and beyond the blundering waste and low cruelties in nature that would have occupied Darwin’s imagined Devil’s chaplain. But there is a surpassing goodness in the story too. We will speak more of this next Sunday in our final class.

The Darwinist’s is, again, a thin and sad conception of existence, one that touches neither its heights nor depths. It is as though they live in a world of three, colorful dimensions, but acknowledge only two, and seeing only black and white.

Shadow

Charles Darwin was a fine, honorable, man and—for his time—a humanitarian of the first rank. This, no one can deny.

But this is also true: people very quickly began to use his theory in dehumanizing ways, with terrible effects. The eugenics movement is an obvious example.

I think we can take both those points for granted all the way around.

Movements like eugenics were Darwinism in its first flower—a noxious blend of science and metaphysics.

I do not know to what extent it may be fair to lay blame for the rise of various twentieth century evils at Darwinism's feet—but I do know that the answer isn't "zero." We can leave it at that.

The connection isn't accidental.

For a metaphysical materialist who regards the universe as pointless, it is not a long mental movement from the science of natural selection to an ethic of "let the strong survive," and then from there to the ideology of a master-race.

There are many who haven't followed that path to its end, but there are millions and millions who have.

We would be naïve—foolish, even—to imagine that the popular street Darwinism of today might not turn ugly in a similar way in the future. The idea that “ethics is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes” seems to be a lesson that many are happy to absorb. Where that paradigm would take the world, one shudders to imagine.

There is indeed a challenge to Christian Faith in this.

The challenge is to not stand by, wait, and let it happen. The challenge to the Christian church is to re-assert, and by all means more effectively disseminate, the one true picture of full, genuine humanity: in the image of Christ, to show humanity its true colors, and imagine all the good that can come of that.