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Evolution and Atheism

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Peter Hitchens, younger brother of the late Christopher, says in the notorious London Daily Mail that the implication of evolution “is plainly atheistical, and if its truth could be proved, then the truth of atheism could be proved. I believe that is its purpose, and that it is silly to pretend otherwise.” Pat Robertson claims that “the evolutionists worship atheism.” Richard Dawkins tells us that he lost his faith in God when he learned about evolution, the claim that evolution is intrinsically atheistical is used repeatedly by advocates of creationism, including that bizarre oxymoron, “scientific creationism”, and the Discovery Institute’s Wedge Document describes it as part of a malignant materialism that debunks traditional views of both God and man. Discovery Institute fellows also coached Ann Coulter, who went on to tell us that evolution is itself a discredited religion, related to the mental disorders of liberalism and godlessness.

Yet from the very outset there have been believers who actively welcomed evolution. Asa Gray, the botanist to whom Darwin dedicated his own book *Forms of Flowers*, saw evolution as the natural process through which God worked. Charles Kingsley, the Christian social reformer and historian now best remembered for The Water Babies, wrote appreciatively to Darwin, on previewing *The Origin of Species*, that a Deity who created “primal forms capable of self development” was “a loftier thought” than one who had created each kind separately. In our own time, we have evolution theology and Evolution Sunday. Ken Miller, a committed Catholic, is prominent as molecular biologist, textbook writer, and legal witness on behalf of evolution, while Dennis Venema’s postings on the website of BioLogos, an organization dedicated to the acceptance of science from a Christian perspective, are model expositions of evolutionary science.

Against this background, it may be helpful to look at the religious views of Charles Darwin himself, and also those of Alfred Russel Wallace, the two independent originators of the

concept of evolution as the inevitable outcome of natural selection. Warning: this post will be longer than most. The Victorians do not lend themselves to sound bites.

Darwin's private Autobiographies include a short but revealing chapter on religious belief. This the family regarded as so contentious that it was not made public in full until 1958. Darwin initially contemplated becoming a clergyman. He tells us that he "did not then in the least doubt that strict and electoral truth of every word in the Bible", and was much impressed by Paley's argument from the perfection of individual organisms to the existence of an intelligent creator. He was still quite orthodox while on the Beagle, but in the two years after his return he reconsidered his position, and gradually came to reject orthodox religion on historical, logical, philosophical, and indeed moral grounds. As he later wrote,

"I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished.

And this is a damnable doctrine."

As for the implications of science, Darwin's conclusions are interesting. "The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley ... fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered... Everything in nature is the result of fixed laws." Regarding what he called, despite the deaths of three of his children, "the generally beneficent arrangement of the world", this he explained as itself the result of evolution. In order to survive, creatures must be so constituted that pleasure outweighs pain and suffering, which "if long continued, causes depression and lessens the power of action." As for the opposite argument, "The very old argument from the existence of suffering against the existence of an intelligence as cause seems to be a strong one; whereas... the presence of much suffering agrees well with the view that all organic beings have been developed through variation and natural selection." In short, the argument from the goodness of the world and the counter-argument from suffering both fail, since the capacities to experience pleasure and suffering, and the balance between them, are themselves explained as evolved adaptations.

One argument, however, retained conviction at the time when he was writing *On the Origin of Species*, namely "the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe... as a result of blind chance or necessity." Notice that Darwin makes a clear distinction, which today's "Intelligent Design" advocates systematically blur, between Paley's argument from the design of particular things (rejected, as we saw earlier), and the more powerful argument from the possible presence of design in the universe as a whole. The latter he finds convincing enough to say, at the very time that he was composing *On the Origin of Species*, that "I deserve to be called a Theist".

Later, Darwin wonders, "can the mind of man, which has... been developed from a mind as

low as that possessed by the lowest animal, be trusted when it draws such grand conclusions? ... The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us, and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic.” Our minds evolved to enable us to deal with commonplace reality, and we must doubt whether they are adequate instruments for speculating so far beyond that. “Agnostic” was a term then newly coined by his friend and prominent supporter, Thomas Huxley, and refers, not to a wishy-washy uncertainty, but to the principled conviction that there was no adequate way of deciding the question.

Alfred Russel Wallace is a much more complicated case. He seems to us self-contradictory and changeable, an opponent of the supernatural who nonetheless took Spiritualism seriously. He was also much more wordy than Darwin; his autobiography runs to two thick volumes. I have therefore relied mainly on secondary sources, together with his review of Lyell’s writings on geology, in the April 1869 issue of *The Quarterly Review*, and his 1871 reply to critics

In his teens, Wallace came into contact with the reformist ideas of Robert Owen, and abandoned conventional religion, with its emphasis on original sin, for a belief in human improbability based on the natural sense of justice. Throughout his adult life, he described himself as a Socialist, and wrote a book in favour of the nationalization of land. He seems to believe in a Creator, and indeed advances, as an argument in favour of evolution, that separate design for every creature would reduce that Creator to the level of a second-rate craftsman (compare Charles Kingsley’s comments, above). However, only two years before formulating his own version of the theory of natural selection, he had written of how far, in his view, the beauty and diversity of the forms of living things goes beyond what could, for him, be explained in terms of their requirements.

This last conclusion may help make sense of his 1869 review of Lyell, in which he asserted that there were things about humanity, in particular, that could not be explained by natural selection. Abstract thought, moral sense, and the design of the hand, all as much present in what he called the savage as in civilized man, seemed to him superfluous to the requirements of the savage’s life. This despite having lived among such savages while collecting specimens, and observing the demanding nature of their lifestyles, the skill of their toolmaking, and the subtleties of their social organization. He also makes the linked arguments that evolution cannot explain the development of consciousness and that materialism cannot explain how consciousness could exist at all.

But does this mean that he was willing to embrace the supernatural? Quite the reverse! In his answers to critics, he says very plainly that he does no such thing. What he does do, is reject materialism. There is more in the universe than matter, but nothing that is beyond the scope of natural science.

So what of Peter Hitchens’s (and, for what it’s worth, Pat Robinson’s) claim, given that

neither Darwin nor Wallace could be pigeonholed as atheists, and that Wallace was not even a materialist? Totally false. Grossly insulting to the entire scientific community, portrayed as choosing its key concepts according to an ideological agenda quite outside science. As we said before regarding all evolution denialism, dependent on a conspiracy theory. And a warning to all of us; if this is typical of journalistic comment in the areas that we know about, like science, how should we regard such comment in areas that we cannot so readily examine, like Syria?

There remain some serious questions. Is it possible to accept evolution without being an atheist? Quite obviously, yes, as Darwin, Wallace, and many examples listed here clearly show. But human psychology is notoriously quirky and tolerant of self-contradictions). So, as a matter of logic, is religious belief compatible with the acceptance of the fact of evolution?

The answer, surely, must depend on the kind of religion, and here my sympathies lie entirely with their Evolution Sunday crowd. Evolution demolishes one version of the argument from design, but even when I was a believer I did not find that version convincing. And, for the reasons spelt out over the past 150 years by Kingsley, Darwin, and many others, evolution poses no new problems for religion in general, and indeed may blunt some of the traditional arguments used against it.

What is not consistent, either with present-day scientific knowledge, or with any kind of scientific approach to reality, is a religion dependent on an overriding belief in the literal truth of its sacred text. Such a position renders impossible any sensible discussion of evolution, or of nature in general, or, indeed, of God.