

The New York Review of Books

VOLUME 48, NUMBER 19 · [NOVEMBER 29, 2001](#)

Exchange

'Saving Us from Darwin': An Exchange

By [Alvin Plantinga](#), [Benjamin Kissin](#), [Charles Gross](#), [Roger Shattuck](#), Reply by [Frederick C. Crews](#)

In response to [Saving Us from Darwin](#) (OCTOBER 4, 2001)

To the Editors:

Frederick Crews's "Saving Us from Darwin" [NYR, October 4] leaves a lot to be desired. According to Crews, "If Darwin was right, revealed truth of every kind must be unsanctioned." But how could an empirical science like evolutionary biology show that there is no such person as God, or that if there is, he could not have revealed truths to us (or that if he could, those truths would be "unsanctioned")? Crews commits the common sin of failing to distinguish empirical evolutionary science from a philosophical or religious patina added by those who embrace metaphysical naturalism.

According to Crews, Daniel Dennett "has trenchantly shown that the Darwinian outlook is potentially a 'universal acid' penetrating 'all the way down' to the origin of life on Earth, and 'all the way up' to a satisfyingly materialistic reduction of mind and soul." Well, satisfaction is in the eye of the beholder; but in any event there is less here than meets the eye. Perhaps a "Darwinian outlook," whatever precisely that is, may be thus corrosive; evolutionary science itself is certainly not. It doesn't imply that there is no God, or that God has not created human beings in his image, or that the second person of the Trinity did not become incarnate, or that there aren't any souls, or that if there are, they are in fact material processes or events of some sort, or anything else of the kind. It is only evolutionary science *combined with metaphysical naturalism* that implies these things. Since metaphysical naturalism all by itself has these implications, it is no surprise that when you put it together with science (or as far as that goes, anything else—ancient Greek history, the Farmer's Almanac, the Apostle's Creed) the combination also implies them.

Biological science isn't corrosive, but the metaphysical naturalism and materialism Crews tries to infer from it certainly is—along a dimension he fails to notice. He quotes "Darwin's Doubt": "With me [says Darwin] the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind...?" Crews applies this doubt to "revealed truth." But of course it applies much further—not just to religious ideas, but to *all* the convictions of man's mind, including, of course, metaphysical naturalism and science itself. No doubt that's why Darwin found it a "*horrid*" doubt.

Ironically, in another piece in the same issue, Stephen Jay Gould glimpses the problem: "How can we escape this recursive paradox that our brains, as biological

devices constrained by the history of their origin, must be enlisted to analyze history itself?" Right. Darwinian naturalism (the combination of metaphysical naturalism with Darwinian evolution) implies that the whole point and function of our minds is to enhance reproductive fitness; it is not to enable us to acquire true beliefs. But then won't the Darwinian naturalist have excellent reason to mistrust the beliefs those minds produce, including Darwinism naturalism itself?

Alvin Plantinga
Professor, Department of Philosophy
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana

To the Editors:

In his review of various books by scientists attempting to reconcile science and religion [NYR, October 18], Frederick Crews effectively refutes all their arguments, drawing the inevitable inference that such reconciliation is probably impossible. Crews refers to biology, logic, philosophy, and sometimes just common sense to make his very convincing case but somehow overlooks the influences of personal psychology, which play a very large role indeed. Consequently, even though his conclusions are correct, the entire review is somewhat slanted.

For example, given the fact that science and religion are almost certainly irreconcilable, Crews does not ask why some 40 percent of scientists believe in a personal God. Yet part of the answer lies in his own review. Crews charges Robert Pollack, a respected microbiologist, with "failure of nerve" when Pollack writes that a Darwinian understanding of the natural world "is simply too terrifying and depressing to me to be borne without the emotional buffer of my own religion." Pollack does follow his admission with some inadequate ideas about the nature of God but at least he makes it clear why it is so necessary for him to attempt some reconciliation between science and religion. If, to his need to find meaning in life, we add the needs for certainty, for spiritual experience, for a comprehensive philosophy of life, and further add the influences of early religious training and personal experience, we can begin to understand why so many scientists believe in a personal God.

There is a somewhat cavalier attitude toward religious scientists in Crews's review which creates the impression that he personally does not see much need for religion. This comes out especially in his review of Stephen Jay Gould's *Rocks of Ages* in which Gould, himself like Crews an avowed agnostic, attempts to reduce the tensions between the camps of science and religion by separating the two disciplines on the basis of the NOMA (non-overlapping magisteria) principle. Gould argues that science and religion need not be in conflict with one another since they occupy entirely different domains of human experience. Consequently, he concludes that even though they are not reconcilable, they are not incompatible. Gould allocates exploration of the external world to science and of the internal world to religion and outlines the prerogatives of both. Crews rightly criticizes Gould for his overly generous disposition of all moral questions to religion, but he further chides him for trying to mollify religionists by providing them with a domain of their own.

Given the inability to philosophically reconcile science and religion, I believe that Gould's solution, modified in some respects, is the only one that will begin to resolve the conflict between science and religion. If the religious will be willing to confine themselves solely to their personal belief in God and its associated religious practices—and certainly only the most sophisticated will be willing to do that—everything else would fall under the aegis of science. Then, particularly in the religious

scientist, there would be no conflict between his personal religion and his trust in science. The practice of science would satisfy the needs of his objective intellectual self, that of religion the needs of his subjective intellectual self.

It is not enough to imply, as Crews seems to, that any reconciliation between science and religion is not only impossible but even more, unnecessary. Science and religion are two of the most powerful personal and social forces in the world today and neither one will be denied. If philosophic reconciliation between the two is impossible, as seems to be the case, then some other form of mutual accommodation is essential.

Benjamin Kissin
Professor Emeritus in Psychiatry
State University of New York
Health Sciences Center at Brooklyn

To the Editors:

In his fine two-part essay "Saving Us from Darwin," Frederick Crews builds up a striking antithesis between research-based evolutionism and the faith-based "intelligent design" school. I'm impelled to point out that Crews omits some historic episodes that open up an important intermediate position.

Darwin's most loyal and effective champion in England, T.H. Huxley, became annoyed at people's insistence that he accept a philosophical label—preferably "atheist" if he would not be Christian. Ten years after *The Origin of Species*, Huxley finally reacted. "So I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of 'agnostic.' ...To my great satisfaction the term took." Several years earlier he had expressed his agnosticism to Charles Kingsley, chaplain to Queen Victoria. "I neither deny nor affirm the immortality of men. I see no reason for believing it, but, on the other hand, I have no means of disproving it." Huxley continued to affirm that final questions lie beyond our present knowledge and perhaps beyond our powers to know.

The history of "agnostic" does not end with Huxley. In 1870 the sixty-one-year-old Darwin, on the verge of publishing *The Descent of Man*, wrote as follows: "My theology is a simple muddle; I cannot look at the universe as the result of blind chance, yet I can see no evidence of beneficent design, or indeed of design of any kind, in the details." Six years later, after a passage discussing miracles, revelation, and design, Darwin embraced Huxley's term as his own. "I cannot pretend to throw the least light on such abstruse problems. The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic."

Darwin and Huxley were not seeking to console or to conciliate anyone. They insisted on finding an accurate way to express their uneasy convictions on religious matters and their doubts about the range of human knowledge. A Manichaean antithesis did not serve.

I give a full account of these events, with references, in *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (Harvest, 1997), pp. 35–41.

Roger Shattuck
Lincoln, Vermont

To the Editors:

Charles Darwin remains the central figure in every branch of biology from molecular biology to ecology and neuroscience. One measure of this is that he is continually cited in the leading scientific journals such as *Science*, *Nature*, and *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. Many of these citations are not just historical, but reflect some rediscovery or new influence of Darwin's insights.^[1] Thus, as a scientist and teacher, it is particularly disturbing to read Frederick Crews's account of attacks on Darwin [*NYR*, October 18] from both the right and left. I would like to add that independent of religious or political agendas, even those who profess to be Darwinians have great difficulty in understanding Darwin's central premise of the origin of species by natural selection of *random* variations. In a recent survey of Princeton undergraduates, including those who had studied biology and described themselves as favorable to Darwinism, about 40 percent saw "variation as non-random, occurring in the direction that would be more beneficial to the organism," that is, they took a non-Darwinian or Lamarckian view of evolution.^[2] As Richard Dawkins teased, "It is almost as if the human brain were specifically designed to misunderstand Darwinism...."^[3] It does seem difficult for most people to grasp that, as far as science is concerned, our presence on earth is the result of a series of accidents. This difficulty underlies the importance of adequate teaching of evolution in the schools (and apparently the universities).

Charles Gross
Professor, Program in Neuroscience
Princeton University
Princeton, New Jersey

Frederick Crews replies:

1. With the air of correcting an errant schoolboy, Alvin Plantinga instructs me that evolutionary biology doesn't require us to believe "that there is no such person as God." Quite right; I made the same point myself. But I went on to pose the following question: "What *kind* of God is consistent with evolutionary theory? Theistic evolutionism would seem to demote the shaper of the universe to a *deus absconditus* who long ago set some processes in motion and then withdrew from the scene. And...even this faint whiff of divinity is more than the theory of natural selection strictly requires." Is Plantinga really as untroubled by the Darwinian menace to orthodoxy as he now pretends to be?

One might infer from Professor Plantinga's letter that he accepts evolutionary findings, objecting only to a "patina" of "metaphysical naturalism" that gets superimposed on those findings by militant secularists. In fact, however, Plantinga is an influential creationist who hopes to replace theologically uncongenial theories, including Darwinism, with a concoction he has named "Augustinian science."^[4] This "science" takes as its starting point what Plantinga calls "our knowledge of God"—a knowledge, he adds, that has been granted to us through both general intuitive revelation and "God's *special* revelation, in the Scriptures and through his church, of his plan for dealing with our fall into sin."

For Plantinga, evolution is a mere "story" or "myth" that attempts to account for the apparent connections among life forms. A better story, he suggests, would be Saint Augustine's own: God implanted "seeds, potentialities of various kinds in the world, so that the various kinds of creatures would later arise, although not by way of genealogical interrelatedness." Well, then: if Plantinga, as he implies in his letter, finds Darwinian theory perfectly compatible with the triune, historically active,

miracle-working, salvation-dispensing deity whom he worships, why has he felt the need to spurn evolution in this patently medieval fashion?

Modern creationists do their best to discredit the convergent evidence favoring natural selection, but they sense that this is a losing game. Their ultimate, desperate stratagem is to call science itself unscientific because it leaves God out of account. As my first article explained, however, one scientist can't convince others that a given fact bespeaks the work of a supernatural agent, since that same agent would, by definition, be capable of bringing about every imaginable state of nature. Any science worthy of the name—and "Augustinian science" doesn't come close to making the grade—must be *methodologically* naturalistic, however pious the individual researcher may happen to be.

Methodological naturalism doesn't logically require its user to embrace metaphysical naturalism, or disbelief in the existence of divine power. But the explanatory success of Darwinism has exerted just such an effect, and Plantinga knows it. "As science explains more and more," he has written, "the scope for God's activity is less and less; it is in danger of being squeezed out of the world altogether, thus making more and more tenuous one's reasons (on this way of thinking) for believing that there is such a person as God at all." That is why Plantinga has warned his fellow Christians against even trying to look for evidence of God in natural processes; the risk of discouragement is simply too great.

Finally, Professor Plantinga thinks he has caught me in a fatal paradox. If, as Darwin feared, the convictions of the evolved human mind are untrustworthy, then "methodological naturalism and science itself" are thereby decertified along with revealed truth. But if so, one wonders how Darwin, the host of this paralyzing thought, managed to carry on with his researches instead of falling into nihilistic despair. Precisely because doctrinaire certainty is unreliable, Darwin felt that convictions should be demoted to hypotheses and then be subjected to community standards of review. Many fallible minds in disciplined, mutually critical exchange can, after all, make some headway against entrenched prejudice. That is the scientific ethos, against which Plantinga and his fellow creationists are implacably and atavistically arrayed.

2. Some 95 percent of polled Americans profess a belief in God, but the figure among scientists, as Benjamin Kissin says, is only about 40 percent. Here is further evidence that science and religion make awkward bedfellows. Kissin is surely right about the needs and influences that keep doubt at bay for theists in both populations. My essay wasn't concerned with belief per se but with resistance to Darwinism, which I ascribed to "existential angst, moral passions, and protectiveness toward sacred tradition." Those, too, are components of personal psychology.

Professor Kissin charges me with harboring "a somewhat cavalier attitude toward religious scientists." But I was passing judgment on arguments, not on people. Even when exceptionally keen minds attempt to make intellectual peace between Darwinism and faith, one of two things always happens: evolutionary doctrine gets bowdlerized or the dogmatic claims of theology are put under the rug. In exhorting theists to "confine themselves solely to their personal belief in God and its associated religious practices," Kissin effectively acknowledges that the problem is intractable.

Given the fact that neither religion nor science is about to loosen its grip, Professor Kissin regrets that I didn't propose a viable means of accommodation between them. Happily, however, no one is waiting for directions from me. Most believers just muddle through, tacitly acceding to scientific rationality while ducking the big

contradictions. Compared to the sophistries cranked out in "Science and Religion Studies," this refusal to be bothered looks positively wise.

3. I welcome Charles Gross's and Roger Shattuck's letters, but I'm afraid that Shattuck has misconstrued my essay as a plea for atheism. In my experience, there is no important difference in understanding between people who call themselves atheists and those who say they are agnostics. Both groups of nonbelievers could readily subscribe to Huxley's judgment that human immortality is neither supported by any evidence nor subject to disproof. In any case, "Saving Us from Darwin" merely urged a secular, empirically plausible apprehension of our uniquely dangerous species, including its penchant for hearing imaginary messages from above. Many theists would surely agree, especially after the recent horrific display of what can be done by people who think they possess a "special revelation" of God's agenda on earth.

Notes

[1] E.g., Steven Pinker, "Talk of Genetics and Vice Versa," *Nature*, Vol. 413 (October 4, 2001), p. 465; Douglas J. Emlen, "Costs and Diversification of Exaggerated Animal Structures," *Science*, Vol. 291 (February 23, 2001), p. 1534; David Tilman, "An Evolutionary Approach to Ecosystem Functioning," *Proc. Nat. Acad. Sci.*, Vol. 98 (September 25, 2001), p.10979.

[2] Andrew Shtulman, *Intuitive Evolution: Are We Predisposed to Misunderstand Darwinism* (BA thesis, Princeton University, 2001).

[3] Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (Norton, 1987).

[4] Here and later I am quoting Alvin Plantinga's two-part essay entitled "Methodological Naturalism?" The text can be read on links to the Access Research Network Web site, www.arn.org.

Copyright © 1963-2006 NYREV, Inc. All rights reserved. Nothing in this publication may be reproduced without the permission of the publisher.