

A Short Essay on Evolution, Materialism, and Classical Theism

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Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, published in 1859, had at least two significant consequences, one philosophical and one scientific; the former consequence was extrinsic, and the latter, intrinsic. The philosophical consequence was that biological evolution by natural selection (henceforth "evolution") became associated with materialism; this consequence was extrinsic because it came about merely by virtue of the cultural circumstances in which the theory was introduced. The scientific consequence, due to the intrinsic value of the theory, was that evolution became a remarkably successful unifying principle for all of the biological sciences. While the philosophical consequence seems to originate in a reaction against a popular (though arguably inauthentic) view of God, the scientific consequence led to a flowering of new research and technological achievement. In any event, *On the Origin of Species* was a major contribution to the scientific literature.

The idea of natural selection removed some of the apparent need for divine interference in the realm of natural causes.¹ Although Darwin's version of evolutionary theory, which one might call *phyletic gradualism*, seems to be ruled out by the fossil record and was replaced in 1972 by the *punctuated equilibria* of Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, the central idea of natural selection as introduced by Darwin remains. If, in combination with changes in the environment, the random variation of individuals within a species lead by selection of the fittest

to the emergence of new species, then the origin of a species need not require God's interference with the ordinary functioning of the material world.

Materialism became associated with evolution at least in part because of the Protestant English intellectual tradition of natural theology, perhaps best summarized by William Paley in his *Natural Theology; or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, published in 1802. Paley pointed to each of several amazing structures—like the eye—whose existence seems to make sense only if, acting like a watchmaker, God interfered with natural causes to introduce a being possessing both the amazing structure and the ability to pass the structure on to progeny. One whose belief in God depended in large part on such a view might be moved toward atheistic materialism if one were impressed by evolutionary theory. If God's special action be unnecessary for the origin of every species, then perhaps God's action is not needed at all, so the argument might go. The house built on the idea of God's necessary interference with the chain of material causality was a house built on sand, and Darwin's idea of natural selection was a rising tide that undermined the foundation.

A problem with the Darwinian approach to materialism, however, is that not every imaginable divine action is of the same kind, and not every kind of divine action has the same importance. There is a qualitative difference between God's *creating* material things that interact with each other according to their own natural causality and God's *interfering* with things that He creates. The elimination of the idea of divine action as the proximate cause of natural phenomena is in fact a point of *agreement* between the Judeo-Christian tradition and the program of modern atheism. Just as the Jews opposed the nature gods of the cultures surrounding ancient Israel, so too

¹Natural selection does not answer the question of how life began in the first place. Natural selection can in principle answer the question of how life, once begun in a single organism, could have given rise to the observed diversity. The lack of even a principle to explain the origin of the first living thing is a gap that remains open for divine interference with the chain of natural causes. However, to rely upon the idea of divine interference is not a properly scientific approach.

do modern atheists rightly resist the idea of the divine as a proximate cause for ordinary happenings in nature. However, such opposition is not aimed against what is truly divine. The Jews believed in God without believing in gods, and the modern Christian properly believes in God without reducing Him to the level of Zeus, whether for the explanation of lightning or for the explanation of the fossil record. Even if natural causes and random variation produce new species, God is the creator of natural causes and random variation; as the prophet Elija observed from the cave when the wind blew and the earthquake shook the ground, the God of Abraham is not properly understood as acting like a merely natural cause.

To demand—as Paley did and as those who promote Intelligent Design (ID) still do today—to demand a god who will prove his existence by acting at the level of natural causes is not to seek the Christian God. Therefore, to deny the demands of Paley or of ID is not to deny the Christian God. Had England resisted Protestantism, Darwin's theory might have been proposed without substantial controversy, for the Catholic view of natural theology proves the existence of God without demanding that God interfere like a pagan god in ordinary events.

Natural selection does not deny God and therefore does not imply materialism. Materialism became associated with evolution because of a failure to recognize the transcendence of God. Materialism is mixed in with evolution just as, in a carefully crafted conspiracy theory, an impossibility is mixed in with a genuine and interesting possibility. Materialism grew in popularity as the conceptual benefits of evolution and other modern scientific theories were ever more widely appreciated.