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We've been reading Charles Darwin all wrong

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Was Charles Darwin a Darwinist?

This is a question we would do well to ponder in regard to Darwin's *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, which was published just over 150 years ago, in 1871. Darwin always described this volume as his "big book," in preference to his more famous *On the Origin of Species*. It was the first to deal at length with a recognizable theory of natural selection and also marked Darwin's first public use of the word "evolution." The book did not in fact originate the term "survival of the fittest"—the English philosopher-biologist Herbert Spencer had first used it in 1864—but it does offer an introduction to what later became known as Social Darwinism, or eugenics.

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"With savages," Darwin wrote, in perhaps the most striking passage in the text,

the weak in body or mind are soon eliminated. We civilised men, on the other hand, do our utmost to check the process of elimination. We build asylums for the imbecile, the maimed, and the sick; we institute poor-laws; and our medical men exert their utmost skill to save the life of every one to the last moment. There is reason to believe that vaccination has preserved thousands, who from a weak constitution would formerly have succumbed to small-pox. Thus the weak members of civilised societies propagate their kind. No one who has attended to the breeding of domestic animals will doubt that this must be highly injurious to the race of man. It is surprising how soon a want of care, or care wrongly directed, leads to the degeneration of a domestic race; but excepting in the case of man himself, hardly any one is so ignorant as to allow his worst animals to breed. The aid we feel impelled to give to the helpless is mainly an incidental result of the instinct of sympathy.

This passage is not perhaps what most modern adherents of Darwinian thought have in mind when extolling their hero's rigorously materialist approach to evolutionary biology. Nor, to be fair, is it entirely representative of 1871's *The Descent of Man* as a whole. Even so, this was the partial reading of Darwin's theory seized upon by Adolf Hitler and his like-minded crew of genocidal fanatics in their quasi-scientific musings on the evolutionary process.

Here is Hitler, for instance, speaking at Nuremberg in 1933: "The gulf between the lowest creature which can still be styled man and our highest races is greater than that between the lowest type of man and the highest ape."

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This was of course a ghastly perversion of Darwinian theory, and in particular of *The Descent of Man*. But it is worth mentioning here if only to show the ease with which Darwin's teaching has been crudely misappropriated by successive generations of intellectually dubious adherents.

To take another example: Charles Darwin himself would almost certainly not have endorsed the views of many of his spiritual heirs today that the biblical story of creation and the evolution of the physical universe are mutually exclusive rather than twin manifestations of a divine act of self-revelation. It is a fallacy that never fails to strike me when I come to attend services in the nave of Westminster Abbey, just a few feet away from where Darwin lies buried.

Although Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, his central contention that all life forms have descended over time from common ancestors did not come out of the blue. The evolving science of natural history was heading for a collision with the Old Testament account of creation well before Darwin came by the social and anthropological insights he acquired from his seminal five-year voyage around the world on board the Royal Navy sloop HMS Beagle from 1831 to 1836.

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In 1829, Charles Lyell, a Scottish scientist-philosopher, published *Principles of Geology*, a book that among other things established that the age of the earth was significantly greater than the 6,000-year span allotted by traditional biblical historians. Some years before that, William Whewell, an English historian, scientist and ordained Anglican priest, had conducted pioneering research into the age of mineral deposits of gemstones that similarly refuted the orthodox consensus that God had created all living things and their habitats in immutable form.

Darwin's fame has endured beyond that of either of his two predecessors, but his essential thesis is a logical, chronological development of theirs. Indeed, he acknowledged the intellectual debt himself by opening *On the Origin of Species* with a quote from Whewell's *Bridgewater Treatise* about the consistency of scientific evolutionary theory with a natural theology of a supreme creator establishing laws:

But with regard to the material world, we can at least go so far as this—we can perceive that events are brought about not by insulated interpositions of Divine power, exerted in each particular case, but by the establishment of general laws.

Fond of Beetles

Charles Darwin was born in Shrewsbury, England, in 1809, the fifth of six children. He was baptized into the Church of England, did relatively poorly at school and eventually won a place at Christ's College, Cambridge, with the plan of becoming ordained as an Anglican vicar. At Cambridge his friend and cousin William Fox introduced him to entomology—and more specifically to the joys of beetle collecting.

Even at that stage it was clear that Darwin had one of those minds capable of holding two (or more) opposing philosophical viewpoints at the same time. Through Fox he became friendly with William Whewell. Through Whewell, he met other leading theologian-naturalists, who for the most part saw scientific discovery as confirming the existence of God based upon both reason and the evidence of coherent design in the natural universe. He saw nothing contradictory in the concept of God acting through the material laws of nature. Darwin particularly admired the English clergyman William Paley's 1802 work *Natural Theology or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, with its famous watchmaker analogy that an intelligent design of the universe implies a creator deity.

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Certainly, Darwin's motivation when embarking on the Beagle was not to put himself forward as the de facto head of a new religion, devoted to the primacy of rational scientific thought over that of the Bible. That mantle landed on Darwin's shoulders only long after his death, conferred by successive generations who have used (and often

misused) his central thesis that natural selection could cause species to evolve, in order to discredit the orthodox belief in an omnipotent creator.

Darwin himself never endorsed the more combative rhetoric of the secularists. In a letter of 1879 to John Fordyce, the 70-year-old Darwin wrote:

My judgement [on religion] often fluctuates. Whether a man deserves to be called a theist depends on the definition of the term. In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God—I think that generally (and more and more so as I grow older), but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.

It seems reasonable to infer that by the word “agnostic” Darwin meant to convey not so much a lack of belief on his part as his fundamental uncertainty as a scientist as to the existence and nature of a supreme creator. Both *On the Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man* contain extended passages that acknowledge the limits of scientific theory in determining the question of humanity’s ultimate origin. These were honest doubts that many contemporary Darwinists, Wallace perhaps foremost among them, found frustrating. Darwin again displayed this characteristic objectivity of thought when in 1867 he wrote to Ernst Haeckel, a German zoologist-philosopher:

I know that it is easy to preach, and if I had the power of writing with severity I dare say I should triumph in turning poor devils inside out and exposing all their imbecility. Nevertheless I am convinced that this power does no good, only causes pain. I may add that as we daily see men arriving at opposite conclusions from the same premises it seems to me doubtful policy to speak too positively on any complex subject, however much a person may feel convinced of the truth of his own conclusions.

These are not the words of a scholar adamantly denying the consoling existence of God’s love so much as they are of a mind broad enough to recognize its own limitations in advancing an overall theory of humanity’s purpose on earth.

Deathbed Repentance?

In 1915, a 72-year-old British evangelist and Temperance Union activist named (perhaps aptly) Lady Hope came forward to claim that 33 years earlier she had visited Darwin on his deathbed, where she found him reading the Bible; while she was there, she claimed, he had taken the opportunity to repent of his earlier agnosticism.

“I was a young man with unformed ideas,” Darwin supposedly told his visitor. “I threw out queries, suggestions, wondering all the time over everything, and to my astonishment the ideas took like wildfire. People made a religion of them.”

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In later years, Lady Hope’s story would be questioned both by Darwin’s family and many others. But some observers continue to believe it because it accords closely with Darwin’s known humility in acknowledging the challenges of seeking to accommodate an intellectually credible idea of creation to his own new theory. This was not a scholar who saw his crowning accomplishment in life as having “killed God.” Rather, Darwin struggled throughout to balance the extraordinary grandeur and variety of natural life with the pain and suffering inherent in the human condition.

Darwin was at all times honest enough to admit that nothing he had said or written over the years could aspire to wholly replace orthodox religious faith. “It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent theist and also an evolutionist,” he wrote at about the same time of Lady Hope’s reputed visit.

For many people today, Darwin has become a sort of secular deity, an icon for atheism who at a stroke swept away the antediluvian superstitions of his age and ushered in an invigorating new era of scientific logic and rationalism. A close reading of *On the Origin of Species*, however, strongly suggests that the work was not only an argument against the concept of miraculous creation but also a theist's case for the presence of intelligent design, broadly in keeping with Albert Einstein's subsequent aphorism that "God does not play dice with the universe."

Unlike Lady Hope and others, I would not presume to know what was going through Darwin's mind as he lay on his deathbed at home in England in the week following Easter in 1882. His last words were to his family, telling them, "I am not the least afraid of dying... It is almost worth while to be sick to be nursed by you." But I believe he would have been surprised to learn that his life's work on the biology of animate or inanimate organisms would in time lead to a widespread rejection of the Bible and the denial of the idea—contained within *On the Origin of Species* itself—that God might have created the universe not by miracles, but through imposing a divine framework (what philosophers now call the "lawlikeness") by which species evolve.

Perhaps the final words on the matter should go to Harvey Goodwin, the bishop of Carlisle, who preached the sermon in Westminster Abbey on the Sunday following Darwin's burial there in 1882:

I think that the interment of the remains in this place is in accordance with the judgement of the wisest of our countrymen.... It would have been unfortunate if anything had occurred—or may yet occur—to give weight and currency to the foolish notion which some have diligently propagated, but for which Mr. Darwin was not responsible, that there is a necessary conflict between a knowledge of nature and a belief in God.



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