Darwinism and atheism: different sides of the same coin?

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What is Darwinism? It is atheism, thundered the nineteenth century Presbyterian divine, Charles Hodge. But is this true? Darwinism makes the claim that all organisms, living and dead, are the consequence of humble beginnings to the complex diversity of forms we see today. If you want to make this the basis of your stand has little support from history.

The birth of evolution

Evolutionary thinking is the child of the eighteen century, the Age of the Enlightenment: it is an offspring of the belief in the inevitability of upward social and cultural and intellectual progress. This ideology centres on the claim that it is possible to improve the social state of humankind as well as its store of knowledge: one could perhaps have predicted that more daring thinkers supposed there to be an analogous upward rise in the world of nature – from the most simple to the most complex, ending ultimately with humankind.

One such early progressionist-made-flesh was the British physician Erasmus Darwin. He was forthright in seeing upward trends in the organic world: trends of a kind which we today would label ‘evolutionary’. (The word ‘evolution’, meaning transformation of forms, tended not to come into general use until the middle of the nineteenth century.) Much given to expressing his views in verse, Darwin’s enthusiasm knew no limits:

Organic Life beneath the shoreless waves
Was born and nurs’d in Ocean’s pearly caves;
First forms minute, unseen by spheric glass,
Move on the mud, or pierce the watery mass;
These, as successive generations bloom,
New powers acquire, and larger limbs assume;
Whence countless groups of vegetation spring,
And breathing realms of fin, and feet, and wing.

Thus the tall Oak, the giant of the wood,
Which bears Britannia’s thunders on the flood:
The Whale, unmeasured monster of the main,
The lordly Lion, monarch of the plain,
The Lily, lovely embleme of the pure,
The Eagle soaring in the realms of air,
Imperious man, who rules the bestial crowd,
Of language, reason, and reflection proud,
With brow erect who scorns this earthy sod,
And styles himself the image of his God;
Arose from rudiments of form and sense,
An embryo point, or microscopic ens!

The ideology of progress was seen (with reason) to be a challenge to a Christian view of history. For the Christian, Providence is the key factor in events over time. We humans are fallen sinners, and it is through and only through God’s great love – as shown by His sacrifice on the cross – that we have hope of ultimate salvation. On our own, we are as nothing. Indeed to think that, without God’s grace, we can raise ourselves up at all is one of the oldest and deepest heresies of Christian faith. Which heresy is the very backbone of progressivism, for the doctrine or ideology is committed to the belief that upward improvement is possible in all realms of the social and the intellectual and – the crucial ‘and’ – that this is something which comes about through unaided human effort. There is no need or place for outside intervention and especially not for intervention of a supernatural or divine kind.

Early forms of evolution were therefore seen to be incompatible with Christian belief. The kinds of organic progressivism which lay at the heart of Erasmus Darwin’s thinking – as well as of other early evolutionists, like the French biologist Jean Baptiste de Lamarck (Figure 1) – were rightly taken to be at odds with Christian Providentialism. And it is worth noting that early critics of organic evolutionism, as often as not, based their critiques precisely on the perceived progressivism. Adam Sedgwick, for example, the Cambridge Professor of Geology (Figure 2), made explicit the way in which he linked evolution and progress: ‘I am no believer either in organic or social perfectability and I believe that all sober experience teaches us that there are conditions both moral and physical, which must entail physical and moral pain so long as the world lasts’.

Figure 1 Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck
fundamentalists) make much of the clash today's Biblical literalists (Creationists or the nineteenth century, serious thinkers had come to realize that at least some metaphor - early chapters of Genesis. Hence, for all that they were therefore promulgating or assumed that the early evolutionists thought to take this as a major stumbling block6. It was assumed that the early evolutionists thought that they were therefore promulgating or promoting atheism. In fact, to a person one can truly say that all of the early evolutionists were sincere believers. However, their belief was in a God as unmoved mover, rather than in a Christian providential God. That is to say, early evolutionists like Erasmus Darwin tended toward deism. They endorsed the idea of God as one who perhaps creates (certainly designs) but does not intervene, rather than the theistic idea of God as both Creator and interposer in the creation. Indeed, it seems not unfair to say that for people like Erasmus Darwin the law-like nature - 'natural' as opposed to 'supernatural' - of the evolutionary process was taken as a confirmation of the deism, rather than as a general challenge to any kind of religious thought7.

Charles Robert Darwin
Charles Darwin (1809–1882), grandson of Erasmus Darwin, student of Adam Sedgwick, and author of On the Origin of Species (1859), is rightly known as the 'father' of evolutionism. Not only did he provide solid evidence of the very fact of evolution, but he offered the mechanism which has established itself as the chief cause of change. Starting with the arguments of the clergyman-cum-political scientist, Thomas Robert Malthus, that population pressures and limited resources of food and space will lead to an inevitable 'struggle for existence', Darwin argued that those that do succeed – the 'fitter' – will tend to differ from the unsuccessful, and that this will lead to a natural equivalent of the breeders' practice of improving organic forms by judicial selection.

Can the principle of selection, which we have seen is so potent in the hands of man, apply in nature? I think we shall see that it can act most effectually ... Can it ... be thought improbable, seeing that variations useful to man have undoubtedly occurred, that other variations useful in some way to each being in the great and complex battle of life, should sometimes occur in the course of thousands of generations? If such do occur, can we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would be the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable variations and rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection8.

Given enough time, the end result will be full-blown evolution.

Where if anywhere did religion fit into all of this? The one indisputable fact is that Darwin’s own religion in general, and with Christianity in particular, was more complex than has often been thought to be the case. To see this, let us start at the beginning with Darwin’s education at conventional British establishments. Both at the great public school at Shrewsbury, and then at the University of Cambridge, he received an orthodox Anglican education9. This had its effect for, as a young man, Darwin intended quite sincerely to be a clergyman: the future evolutionist was a Christian of a conventional British Protestant variety. But this did not last: in the course of the voyage which he made around the world as naturalist on HMS Beagle (1831–1836), Darwin’s Christian faith started to fade away.

A major reason for this growing scepticism was that Darwin no longer found miracles to be overwhelmingly certain, something which his Cambridge mentors would have stressed as an absolutely central and crucial part of religious belief. The ‘set book’ for all undergraduates was Archdeacon Paley’s Evidences of Christianity, wherein it is argued that Jesus must be the Messiah for the disciplines would not have preached his message even unto martyrdom had they themselves not experienced his miraculous powers. As Darwin delved more and more into the mysteries of nature – most particularly the mysteries of geology – he became increasingly convinced that all can be explained by unbroken law. Miracles receded and with them so did orthodox Christian belief.

By 1837 – by which point Darwin had become an evolutionist – he was no longer either a practicing or a believing Christian, that is one who took Jesus Christ as his savior. However, like his paternal grandfather, and indeed like other members of his family, particularly his uncle and his father-in-law Josiah Wedgwood, Darwin had not slipped into atheistic non-belief. He too had rather developed an inclination for some form of deism: he saw God as unmoved mover, working through unbroken law. Indeed, for him, as for other evolutionists who had become increasingly sceptical of the faithful interpretations of the Bible, the five ‘supernatural’ - of the evolutionary process had not slipped into atheistic non-belief. He too had rather developed an inclination for some form of deism: he saw God as unmoved mover, working through unbroken law. Indeed, for him, as for other evolutionists who had become increasingly sceptical of the faithful interpretations of the Bible, the five
than randomly organized: they were thought to show evidence of functioning, which was taken to be evidence of a wise, all-powerful designer, the Christian God. As a telescope needs a telescope maker, so the eye needs an eye maker: the Divine Optician in the sky.

Darwin never relinquished this belief that the organic world seems as if designed. It stayed with him until his dying day. And indeed, such a belief is even to this day the chief mark of being a Darwinian. It was here that the mechanism of natural selection was intended not merely to explain evolution but evolution as such. Perhaps the belief in evolution made possible a suspension of belief. Without evolution through natural selection it would be difficult to see how design comes into being, save one postulates some kind of intervention by an external deity. But the evolutionism as such did not make Darwin a non-believer: indeed, given its stress on function, evolution was probably a factor in his not making this move.

After Darwin

For Darwin, religion was as much an aid as a barrier in becoming an evolutionist and moving towards his mechanism of natural selection. I would not claim that others (including his closest followers) would feel exactly as he did. It is classic Darwinian lore how, in 1860 at the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, the High Church Bishop of Oxford Samuel Wilberforce squared off against Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin's 'bulldog' and at that time professor of geology at the London School of Mines. Their debate ranged over many factors including science, but there is little doubt that religion was a major dividing point. Wilberforce was certainly no biblical literalist; but he felt most uncomfortable at the implications of Darwinism for humankind: particularly at the suggestion that we members of the species sapiens might have a purely naturalistic origin. Huxley, the man who invented the word 'agnostic', had no such qualms about Man's Place in Nature, to quote the title of the book he was to publish a year or two later.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the iconic status of the Wilberforce–Huxley clash, one should not overestimate the extent to which the two men really were quite different. As in Falstaff's encounter with robbers, most of the opposition grew in the telling. People like Huxley were fighting at that time for a secular professional civil service and state-supported meritocracy: a meritocracy that would include science and science educators at the school and university level. It suited them therefore to portray their opponents as being more religiously bigoted than they truly were. And then, in the years to come, when Huxley and his friends came to tell the history, there was a strong tendency to portray the religious opposition to Darwinism – a religious opposition which they claimed to have conquered – as being far more strident and formidable than it truly was. More than one Christian chided Huxley himself on his almost-deliberate misrepresentation of their beliefs and of his ascribing to them far stronger opposition to evolutionism than they truly felt.

In fact, for all the opposition, historians of the period suggest strongly that most Christians rapidly found an accommodation with evolutionism. Let me jump right into the century to make the point. Some of its most eminent and visible evolutionists have been sincere practicing Christians. Sir Ronald Fisher, the great statistician (Figure 3), is properly regarded as sitting on the pinnacle of creative evolutionary thought. His The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection (1930) was the truly great mathematicalization of the subject. He was also a Christian – a participating member of the Church of England – who worked hard to integrate his religious beliefs with his evolutionism. Fisher saw God as having set himself the task of creation through the process of evolution through natural selection. So, likewise, humans have a task of improvement here on earth, which for Fisher translated into the improvement of the human species through eugenics.

To the traditionally religious man, the essential novelty introduced by the theory of the evolution of organic life, is that creation was not all finished a long while ago, but is still in progress, in the midst of its incredible duration. In the language of Genesis we are living in the sixth day, probably rather early in the morning, and the Divine artist has not yet stood back from his work; and declared it to be "very good." Perhaps that can only be when God's very imperfect image has become more competent to manage the affairs of the planet of which he is in control.

Fisher drew a remarkable parallel between faith and works and Lamarckism and Darwinism: the former evolutionary theory stressing the inheritance of acquired characteristics (the giraffe's neck gets longer from generations of stretching), and the latter the survival of the fittest (only the long-necked giraffes had offspring).

In both of these contrasting hypotheses living things themselves are the chief instruments of the Creative activity. On
the Lamarckian view, however, they work their effect by willing and striving only; but, on the Darwinian view, it is by doing or dying. It is not mere will, but its actual sequel in the real world, its success or failure, that is alone effective.

We come here to a close parallelism with Christian discussions on the merits of Faith and Works. Faith, in the form of right intentions and resolution, is assuredly necessary, but there has, I believe, never been lacking through the centuries the parallel, or complementary, conviction that the service of God requires of us also effective action. If men are to see our good works, it is of course necessary that they should be good, but also and emphatically that they should work, in making the world a better place.

I am not pretending that this was a science-religion synthesis that would have been acceptable to everyone. But Fisher was far from alone in seeking some way of meshing his faith with his evolutionary science. There were others, notably the Russian-born American population geneticist, Theodosius Dobzhansky (Figure 4), author of *Genetics and the Origin of Species* (1937). These men were at the top of the profession: highly regarded and rightly so.

**Conclusion**

I suspect that no one was going to deflect the hostility of Charles Hodge, whose rhetorical question opened my essay. But as a committed evolutionist, I think the past does count and does have messages to teach us. Perhaps it is reasonable to be a Darwinian. Perhaps it is reasonable to be an atheist. I am not at all convinced that the one implies the other. And turning to history confirms my suspicions.

**References**

4. Lamarck, J-B. (1963 (1809)) *Zoological Philosophy,* Hafner