

God and Evolution

2 June 2002

When I was about six, I announced to the world that “I don’t believe in God, I believe in science.” This impressed my parents, both scientists and philosophical materialists, as no doubt it was meant to do. At the time and for many years afterward, while I might not have continued to own that sentiment, I believed that what I said was actually meaningful. Evidently many other people continue to believe that, right or wrong, such a belief reflects some kind of rational distinction. The opposition of God and science is taken for granted by a great many otherwise intelligent and well-educated people, religious believers and otherwise. This applies to the ethics and morality of the conduct of scientific research and the application of scientific technique—but disapproval of one or another action on the part of scientists is not limited to believers, nor is this the center of the supposed opposition. Rather it is in the notion that the theories and explanations for natural phenomena generally accepted by the scientific community is somehow opposed to the doctrines of theistic religion—and I will take Christianity as the typical case, since it is the one I know best—that the crux of the issue between science and religion is supposed to reside. And no theory, I suppose, is more debated in this context than Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection. Many Christians believe that acceptance of evolution is inherently a denial of God, and many evolutionary scientists are happy to concur in this notion. Their contention that evolution by natural selection is a proven fact is a very convenient whip to drive out religious belief.

One legacy of my upbringing in a household of skeptical scientists is an interest in *Scientific American* magazine. I grew up with this venerable periodical and still subscribe. Its editors and writers comprise some of the most vociferous of religion’s scientific detractors. I have been told by colleagues in modern intellectual history that *Scientific American* was a pioneer in anti-Christian propaganda in the nineteenth century, and it appears to me that at the commencement of the twenty-first the periodical has returned to these roots in a concerted manner. Now as before the great point of conflict is evolution. An article in the March 2002 issue reprints a map taken from a 2000 study of science standards in schools in the United States that rates them from “unsatisfactory” to “excellent” in direct proportion to the degree that evolution is taught as the exclusive approach to biological development (*Scientific American*, March 2002, p. 30). Michael Shermer of *Skeptic* magazine has become a regular contributor to *Scientific American*; in his “Skeptic” column he is a devoted flogger of religious belief, arguing that the “standard scientific theory” of the development of life is that “God had no part in the process” (*Scientific American*, February 2002, p. 35). For skeptics like Mr. Shermer, it is all to the good that Christians should oppose evolution, since that gives evolutionists a good reason to oppose Christianity.

Even if it is a proven fact that most practitioners of the scientific disciplines believe that God had nothing to do with the process of the development of life or any other process—and I am not familiar with the data that

claims to prove this—that would not make it a scientific theory, since it is not provable or disprovable by scientific method. In the view of a logical positivist, that makes it a meaningless question, but I am content to leave the logical positivist in the desert of his own presuppositions. If he chooses to cut himself off from most of the questions that have occupied the human race as long as we have recorded memory, that is his problem. I will take it as given that there are questions that can be considered by human reason that are not amenable to scientific method, including, of course, the scope and validity of scientific method itself.

More to the point is the issue of evolution. Does the theory of evolution by natural selection exclude God in a way that makes it incompatible with belief in a theistic religion like Christianity, so that only an alternative scientific theory is acceptable for a Christian believer? Or alternatively, have opponents of Christianity created the opposition between evolution and God in order to use scientific evidence against Christianity? I contend that it is the latter case, and that the (extrascientific) opposition of some scientists to Christianity has successfully misrepresented evolution both to their own followers and to Christians as well, so as to forge a weapon to attack beliefs that have nothing to do with science.

Historically, the campaign represented by *Scientific American* and Mr. Shermer the Skeptic begins well before Darwin and outside natural science proper. In the evolutionary debate, its first great exponent was T.H. Huxley, who served as Darwin's first great apostle, Darwin's own position being somewhat ambiguous. The full examination of this so-called debate would make a fascinating and probably very long work of intellectual history. Likewise a discussion of good and rational reasons to believe in God, especially in the context of evolutionary theory, would be quite edifying—and I may attempt it one day. I would like to consider here what evolution is and is not, with a view toward removing it from the argument between belief and unbelief.

As I understand it, the theory of evolution by natural selection holds that organisms that have characteristics that are unsuited to their environment tend to die sooner than those with characteristics suited to their environment. Those with the suitable traits pass them on to their offspring, thus making those traits more common in the overall population. Over the course of time, therefore, as environments change, the organisms found in them will be different. The organisms now alive are the descendants of organisms with different characteristics, and the characteristics they have, they have because those with other characteristics were unable to reproduce in sufficient number. This process took place over many millions of years, and therefore must be inferred from an examination of the characteristics of organisms that are presumed to have lived at different times. The evidence discovered by scientists strongly supports this inference, which is called a theory not because it is unproven and tentative, but because it is a scientific explanation for something that cannot be directly observed. The ramification of evolutionary theory consists mainly in attempting to identify with organisms were the ancestors of other organisms that looked different, and what traits and environmental events led to the survival of some and the demise of others.

Nothing in evolutionary theory implies progress. If the organisms alive today are better than those that were alive 200 million years ago, it is not the result of natural selection. Natural selection only implies that they are more suited to today's environment than the organisms that directly preceded them. Progress implies both a standard of judgment and a goal, and evolution has neither. Evolution is not a reason for anything, but rather a description of what appears to have happened. It does not provide us with judgments; we bring those to it from somewhere outside our understanding of biology. In order to communicate their ideas in a comprehensible manner, evolutionary biologists speak of one species of organism evolving into another, as basilosaurs into whales. But no basilosaur ever turned into anything. The descendants of some basilosaur whose bones have been dug up, or of one very like it, are presumed to have been different from their ancestors, and their descendants likewise, and after millions of years some descendant looked very like a whale. The poetry of evolution reads as if they were trying to be whales all along, but we cannot take this literally.

In a recent *Scientific American* article, Ian Tattersall makes exactly this point: "Natural selection is most certainly not a generative force that calls new structures into existence; it can only work on variations that are presented to it, whether to eliminate unfavorable variants or to promote successful ones" ("How We Came to Be Human," *Scientific American*, December 2001, p. 58). Evolutionary biologists appear to differ on the question as to whether variations have happened at a continuous rate, or have tended to come in clusters with long periods of relative equilibrium in between. What evolutionary theory can tell us is that some variation occurs all the time, and that some variations have resulted in organisms better adapted to changed conditions. Where the variations come from is another question. One could say they are perfectly random and uncaused; one could ascribe each variant to divine Providence; or one could take some intermediate position. Any of these options, however, is an act of faith in something. If natural selection is the sandpaper that God uses to shape His creation, then it may all have a meaning and purpose—but one outside itself, not one that can be discovered by biology. If not, then it has no meaning or purpose, being the result of blind chance or ineluctable necessity.

Within the human mind there appears to be some sort of personalizing imperative. We treat everything as if it had a personality and a will. We swear at our computers. We speak of objects obeying the law of gravity, as if they had a choice about it. And we speak as if organisms were somehow deliberately following an evolutionary plan. Even in *Scientific American* we find sentences like "The bacterium presumably kills off males to benefit its own relatives" (L. Hurst and J.P. Randerson, "Parasitic Sex Puppeteers," *Scientific American*, April 2002, p. 58). I am sure that the two scholars who wrote that sentence had no more belief that bacteria could have an intention or even an understanding of their "evolutionary strategy" than Newton believed his apple was a willing participant in a cosmic polity. Because of this personalizing imperative, evolutionists, even the most cautious, slip in ascribing motives and intentionality to species or to natural selection itself. Even Dr. Tattersall, in denying that natural selection is a "generative process" nevertheless imagines that variations

are “presented” to it, as if it were a king holding audience, and like an absolute monarch it “eliminates” or “promotes” its subjects. We humans cannot speak but in metaphors.

When we hear the personalizing metaphor for natural selection, however, we can easily be led to think that natural selection is some kind of substitute for God. Anti-Christian evolutionists in the tradition of Huxley, glossing over the issue of the origin of variation, attempt to present a case that evolution explains everything. The response from the Christian is to reject the theory that is the object of the evolutionist’s idolatry, as if the theory itself were making the claims its overzealous or unscrupulous defender is making for it. Variation may be the work of God or of random genetic error, but it is not the work of natural selection. Natural selection is no more a god or a devil than the precession of the equinoxes. Neither natural selection nor its results can be in themselves good or bad. Any judgement of value concerning the existence or behavior of an organism must come from some other source; evolutionary theory can be of no help here.

But again, we humans, for some reason (I think I know what it is, but I won’t say here) seem compelled to make judgements all the time. Indeed, while they are claiming to be writing about evolution, scientists can reveal more about themselves than about the phenomena they are studying. To read such an article calls to mind Douglas Adams’s *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, where he imagines that the earth is a giant laboratory built by superintelligent aliens who, disguised as the white mice used in experiments, are studying the human scientists. In the January 2002 *Scientific American*, a mathematician, an economist, and a biologist wrote an article called “The Economics of Fair Play,” (*Scientific American*, January 2002, pp. 82-87) purporting to explain the origins of altruism. It appears from the article that the researchers who carried out the experiments discussed, which were various games involving sharing and decision-making, expected the subjects to behave more selfishly than they did, and found they had a bit of explaining to do when the results turned out otherwise. Neither the result they got nor the contrary would have shaken their faith that human behavior must have an evolutionary basis—this is no surprise. They further conclude that they are explaining the evolutionary basis of “ethical standards and moral systems” (p. 87). Thus they appear to be arguing that evolution has not only produced a pattern of behavior, it has produced a pattern of good behavior. This judgement that altruism is good, however, either comes from something outside the pattern being studied, or it is merely a case of an instinctive impulse validating itself, and it therefore meaningless.

A more recent article proclaims the authors’ judgement in its very title: “The Disturbing Behaviors of the Orangutan” (A.N. Maggioncalda and R.M. Sapolsky, *Scientific American*, June 2002, pp. 60-65). What is “not so pleasing” (p. 65) about the apes is that some males among them practice forcible rape in order to reproduce. At the same time, “the recognition of alternative [reproductive] strategies built around female choice has generally met with a receptive audience among scientists.” The discussion of the behavior of the orangutan is fascinating; almost as fascinating is the discussion of the behavior of the scientists. No objective observers they: rather they are disturbed by one observation and receptive to another. Drs. Maggioncalda and Sapolsky are

compelled to make clear how they come down on the issue of rape as applied to humans. Although they state that this behavior has evolved to allow the orangutans to survive, they warn sternly against the “wrongheaded conclusion” that “because forcible copulation occurs in orangutans and something similar occurs in humans, rape has a natural basis and is therefore unstoppable.” To be sure, that conclusion has little basis in the evidence, but that the two scientists take such pains to warn us off it tells us more about their values (which I believe are good ones) than about the biological origins of behavior in apes or humans.

In his February 2002 column, Mr. Shermer, *Scientific American's* Skeptic in Chief, quotes a statement by Richard Dawkins that “the universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but a blind, pitiless indifference” (p. 35). While calling this statement “a reality,” he nevertheless feels free to ascribe to creationists a “nefarious influence.” How so, if there is no good or evil? Why should he work for “The Gradual Illumination of the Mind” as his column is titled, if what is at bottom of the universe is “blind, pitiless indifference”? Even Dawkins himself refers to the indifference of the universe with the value-laden term “pitiless.” If indifferent processes have produced everything there is in the universe, where did Dawkins even learn about pity?

Thus there is a lot about life, indeed a lot about evolutionists, that evolution cannot explain, even granted that the theory of natural selection is valid. If some skeptics follow Mr. Shermer's lead and reject Christianity because belief in the providence, and even in the existence, of God is incompatible with evolutionary theory, they are mistaken in their logic. Christians should not follow them to this conclusion simply because they are running into a prison of their own making.