

Charles Darwin

By Daniel Ray

Birth/Death: February 12, 1809 – April 19, 1882

Publications: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, 1859; *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 1871.

Key Terms: Evolution; natural selection; mutation; survival of the fittest

BACKGROUND AND BELIEFS

In the opening chapter of his autobiography, the famed 19th-century naturalist Charles Darwin confessed “that as a little boy I was much given to inventing deliberate falsehoods, and this was always done for the sake of causing excitement.”¹ The often complex and brooding naturalist obviously did not consider his two landmark publications, *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, to be invented falsehoods but the entire premise of his theory of evolution by means of natural selection originally rests upon a single metaphor he invented to explain how he thought the variety of life on Earth developed apart from God. In *The Origin of Species*, Darwin suggested that over time, nature unconsciously mimicked the intelligence of human breeders by “selecting” certain fit breeds for survival and reproduction. Darwin believed that “we may infer that this process, continued during centuries, would improve and modify any breed.”² The changes wrought by nature-as-breeder though would necessarily have to be small and gradual and happen slowly over long periods of time.

Is evolution by natural selection then actually a scientific theory or just the product of Darwin’s own imagination? Written between May and August of 1876, Darwin’s autobiography reveals an insightful detail that arguably inspired much of his scientific theorizing – his gradual change of mind in his early 30s toward Christianity. Darwin once considered becoming a clergyman in the Church of England, but shortly after completing his nearly five-year voyage on the HMS *Beagle* in October of 1836, he started to doubt the Bible. By 1839, he no longer believed it to be true.

I had gradually come by this time, to see that the Old Testament from its manifestly false history of the world, with the Tower of Babel, the rainbow as a sign, etc., etc., and from its attributing to God the feelings of a revengeful tyrant, was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos [sic], or the beliefs of any barbarian.³

Darwin, however, stated that he was “content to remain an Agnostic”⁴ on the question of God’s existence. Yet his rejection of the Bible likely served as the key motivation for constructing a historical narrative about how he believed the variety of life developed over time without God. For Darwin, the only viable alternative seemed to be that nature somehow possessed the intelligent, breeder-like creative prowess necessary to generate new species.

Darwin also suffered from a number of debilitating health issues during his adult lifetime. Often being confined to bed, he did not socialize much in his later years. In his mid-50s, for example, he recounted many of his frequent maladies, including bouts of melancholy, fits of weeping, and feeling as though he were dying.

Vomiting preceded by shivering, hysterical crying dying sensations or half-faint. & copious very pallid urine. Now vomiting & every paroxys of flatulence preceded by ringing of ears, rocking, treading on air & vision. focus & black dots All fatigues, specially reading, brings on these Head symptoms...nervousness when E[mma]. leaves me.⁵

In a letter written near the end of his life to William Graham in July of 1881, Darwin confessed he had a significant reservation about the trustworthiness of man’s mental capacities. Not only had he given up his trust in the Bible, but because of his own theory regarding the descent of man from

lower primates, and perhaps as a result of his own afore mentioned personal difficulties, he also seemed to anxiously wrestle with whether he could trust his own thoughts.

But then with me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of a 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 the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?⁶

Given all of the above, and the fact that his father and his teachers considered the younger Charles to have been "a very ordinary boy, rather below the common standard in intellect,"⁷ Darwin's impact upon the biological sciences and how we think of who we are as human beings, scientifically, philosophically, and theologically, is quite remarkable.

EVOLUTION BY MEANS OF NATURAL SELECTION

In order for Darwin to postulate that nature could act just like any intelligent human breeder, he needed time, *lots* of time. Enter Darwin's contemporary, geologist Sir Charles Lyell (1797-1875), author of the groundbreaking book, *Principles of Geology* (1830) which Darwin read during his voyage on the *Beagle*. Lyell proposed that Earth's geological features formed gradually over long successions of time, a process known as uniformitarianism. This stood over and against the prevailing early 19th-century view known as catastrophism, which suggested that many geological features came about through *catastrophic* events, like that of the biblical flood as described in Genesis 7-9. Lyell had not discovered anything new, per se, rather he strove to "free the science [of geology] from Moses,"⁸ meaning the creation account and story of the flood from the Book of Genesis. Lyell's ancient geochronology literally gave Darwin the much-needed bedrock for his own theory. Darwin could now imagine, biologically speaking, that anything was possible. Without huge swaths of time, however, evolution by means of natural selection would be utterly inconceivable.

Darwin's theory does not begin with the origin of life. Rather, it is an attempt to explain the "natural" origin of the *variety* of biological species, from the lowest single-celled organism to the intricate biological complexities of human beings. Staying true to his original metaphor, Darwin often ascribed characteristics of sentient, intelligent agency to nature itself. Nature, in Darwin's theory, literally *replaces* the intelligent agent but nevertheless retains all the characteristics of sentient intelligent agency. In the first edition of *On the Origin of Species* however, Darwin did not originally include the word "metaphorically" in the following description.

It may metaphorically be said that natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinising, throughout the world, the slightest variations; rejecting those that are bad, preserving and adding up all that are good; silently and insensibly working, *whenever and wherever opportunity offers*, at the improvement of each organic being in relation to its organic and inorganic conditions of life.⁹

In summary, Darwin postulated that absent any divine intervention, nature, coupled with huge swaths of time, could act just like any intelligent human breeder. All living things, he believed, have allegedly descended from a "universal common ancestor" somewhere in the ancient past. Evolution then selects certain species for survival while discarding others less fit to reproduce. By means of various and very slight gradual mutations within the cells of living organisms over time, and through sundry environmental circumstances, evolution by means of natural selection is allegedly capable of producing entirely new species.

CRITIQUES OF EVOLUTION BY NATURAL SELECTION

One fundamental inconsistency in Darwin's anthropomorphic metaphor is that evolution by means of natural selection has no end goal in mind. There is no telos involved in the process. Even the "survival of the fittest" is an artificial construct imposed upon nature by Darwin's own imagination. Nature, apart from God, has *no* purpose or direction; there is no good or bad, nor does nature possess any inherent capacity by which it may "scrutinize" what is "good" or "reject" that which is "bad." But if natural selection really turns out to be the process that yielded our consciousness and capacity to reason and think, then Darwin is correct on at least one point. We finally have no basis by which to trust our minds. As philosopher Alvin Plantinga has noted:

...[T]he probability of our cognitive faculties being reliable, given naturalism and evolution, is low [but] if I believe both naturalism and evolution, I have a *defeater* for my intuitive assumption that my cognitive faculties are reliable. If I have a defeater for *that* belief, however, then I have a defeater for *any* belief I take to be produced by my cognitive faculties.¹⁰

Another significant challenge facing Darwin's theory today is that of the complex, specified information within living cells; something about which Darwin had absolutely no knowledge. In 1953, James Watson and Francis Crick uncovered the astonishing double-helix pattern of deoxyribose nucleic acid or DNA. Working at the Cavendish laboratory in Cambridge, the duo discovered that "DNA stores information using a four-character chemical alphabet. Strings of precisely sequenced chemicals called nucleotide bases store and transmit the assembly instructions – the information – for building the crucial protein molecules and machines the cell needs to survive."¹¹

This "information" within DNA has often been described as a kind of computer code, even by those who are not friendly to the idea of intelligent design. Even atheist and Oxford biologist Dr. Richard Dawkins has noted that, "The machine code of the genes is uncannily computer-like."¹² The only known source of such "uncannily computer-like" information is intelligent agents. Neo-Darwinian evolution by means of natural selection, however, currently has no explanation for the origin of such biological information. What then are the chances that DNA would "naturally" align itself into a functional protein chain? Molecular biologist Dr. Douglas Axe researched this very question for 13 years, from 1990 to 2003 and found that "for one DNA sequence that generates a short *functional* protein fold of just 150 amino acids in length, there are 10^{77} *nonfunctional* combinations – combinations that will *not* form a stable three-dimensional protein fold capable of performing a specific biological function."¹³

Current evolutionary theories also cannot explain the origin of language. In a May 2014 paper titled "The Mystery of Language Evolution" published by the journal *Frontiers in Psychology*, the authors, geneticists, biologists, information theorists, and linguists from a variety of reputable research institutions from both the US and the UK conclude that "The most fundamental questions about the origins and evolution of our linguistic capacity remain as mysterious as ever."¹⁴ In addition, Darwin knew his theory also faced challenged from the fossil record. It was at best, wholly incomplete and did not contain the types of intermediary transitional fossils his theory suggests. One such continuing challenge to Darwin's theory from the fossil record is what is known as the "Cambrian Explosion." The Cambrian is a layer within the strata that contains a dazzling array of creatures that look like they came right out of the pages of a Jules Verne or H.G. Wells novel; creatures with gangly antennae, marvelously strange arrays of eyes, unique exoskeletons, and fantastical body types, just seem to appear suddenly in the rocks, without any evolutionary progenitors in the strata below them.

The sudden appearance of these creatures without any apparent precursors, prompted evolutionary paleontologist Stephen J. Gould and his colleague Niles Eldridge in the early 1980s to come up with a radically new idea that they believed could best explain the phenomena. They called it "punctuated equilibrium" (colloquially known as "punk eek") and suggested that such fauna as appear in the Cambrian strata "originate in geological moments" they termed "punctuations."¹⁵ These punctuations allegedly happen very quickly within a geological timescale, far quicker than traditional Darwinian gradualism would allow. Time, in other words, Gould and Eldridge believed, was not on Darwin's side when it came to the variety of fossilized fauna of the Cambrian. Despite their labors, Gould and Eldridge failed to provide a satisfactory physical mechanism that could adequately account for a punctuated-accelerated development of the multitude of Cambrian's wondrously unique body plans.¹⁶ Something certainly brought about these animals, but what exactly? Evolutionary biologists are still at a loss for an explanation. As Gould himself quipped in his 1989 book, *Wonderful Life – The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, the fossils of the Cambrian "are the Old Ones, and they are trying to tell us something."¹⁷

BIBLICAL RESPONSE

What are the fossils of the Cambrian trying to tell us? Given what is presently known about information in DNA, all the novel body plans discovered in the Cambrian shales would require a vast amount of complex, specified information; information for which slight, gradual mutations alone cannot account. Nature as Darwin's imagined "breeder" would have to be the ultimate source of this information, virtually creating novel body plans in a very short period of time. Put that way, the ultimate explanation for the existence of the Cambrian fossils begins to sound a lot like the creation account in Genesis after all. All Darwin has really done is idolatrously transferred God's creative and intelligent prowess to nature itself. Yet it is God who "spoke" creation into existence, creating the heavens and earth *ex nihilo*, out of no preexisting matter. The Bible does not explicitly say if God used preexisting material to create sea creatures, but Genesis does tell us that in regard to land animals, God created them from "the earth" (1:24) and "Out of the ground" (2:19), to include Adam (2:7). Carbon-based life did not assemble or arrange itself on its own. If this were in fact the case,

then evolution by means of natural selection would be just as miraculous as anything we would find in Scripture.

Yet if evolution is true, then man is diminished. No longer is he the creation and image-bearer of God, he is but an unintended biological by-product of a blind, purposeless process. As Darwin himself claimed in *The Descent of Man* “there is no fundamental difference between man and the higher mammals in their mental faculties.”¹⁸ By Darwin’s denigrating man to the same level as the animals, a host of baleful social consequences have followed. If we are not divine image bearers created for a purpose, then what becomes of morality? How should we interpret the Bible? How should we treat our fellow human beings? As John G. West notes, Darwin completely reinterpreted the “golden rule,” rejecting it as an objective moral precept emanating from God Himself, and instead claiming it to be an evolutionary by-product “connected to self-preservation.”¹⁹ This upending of man as a divine image bearer and the complete obfuscation of traditional Christian ethics and morality has led to over a century of “social Darwinism” where the “survival of the fittest” mentality has been applied to racism and eugenics. While many today who accept evolution claim this is a misapplication and misunderstanding of Darwin’s theory, the baleful impact of social Darwinism is an unavoidable consequence of seeing man as a mere animal, a biological descendant of the lower primates.

With Adam, however, Genesis tells us that God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (2:7). Adam is made in God’s “own image” (1:27) and commanded Adam and his wife Eve to “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (1:28). We have been “fearfully and wonderfully made” by God Himself (Psalm 139:14). We have been chosen in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world, to do good works that God has graciously prepared for us to do in advance (Ephesians 1:4; 2:8-10). Unlike evolution by natural selection, which robs us of purpose and meaning, God tells us we have been created for a purpose, to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Our lives have value and worth, meaning and purpose, simply on the basis that we bear the image of our Creator. We are loved with an everlasting love (Jer. 31:3; John 3:16).

“Theistic evolution” is one response to Darwin’s theory, but it is a theologically problematic compromise between Moses and Darwin, where God’s sovereignty, omniscience, and omnipotence, His upholding all things by the word of His power, are significantly undermined by the idea that nature retains some kind of autonomy apart from God. From a biblical perspective, however, God designed, creates, and upholds all life on Earth, that the heavens and the earth and every living thing exhibits the wondrously creative and intelligent workmanship of the triune Godhead, through and for Christ Jesus (Colossians 1:16), and that everything that God has made has been made for His purposes. Even Richard Dawkins said in *The Blind Watchmaker* that “biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.”²⁰ There is *actual design* nature. It is not just an “appearance.” And God of course, is the ultimate source of the information and design in DNA, not “nature” or evolution by means of natural selection. Design in nature is clear and apparent, for God has shown it to us. His invisible attributes are clearly seen in what He has made (Romans 1:18f).

Notes

- 1 Nora Barlow, editor. *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809 – 1882*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1958, 23.
- 2 Charles Darwin. *On the Origin of Species*. Chicago: The University of Chicago/Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952, 20. *Italics added*.
- 3 Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809 – 1882*, 71.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 78.
- 5 Darwin Online. “Darwin.” Last modified January 14, 202. Accessed August 4, 2025. <https://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?itemID=UVa-Darwin-Evolution-3314-1.43&keywords=crying%20hysterical&viewtype=text&pageseq=1>.
- 6 Charles Darwin. *The Complete Life and Letters of Charles Darwin Volume 1 & 2*. Seattle: Amazon CreateSpace, 2018, 136.
- 7 Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809 – 1882*, 27.
- 8 Katherine Lyell, editor, *Life, Letters, and Journals of Sir Charles Lyell, Bart*. London: John Murray, 1881, 268.
- 9 Charles Darwin. *On the Origin of Species*, 42. “Metaphorically” does not appear in the first edition. Note the connotations of intelligent agency here: *scrutinizing, rejecting, preserving, adding, and working*.
- 10 Alvin Plantinga. *Where the Conflict Really Lies – Science, Religion, and Naturalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 314.
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- 20 Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design*. New York: Norton, 1986, 17.



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