

Darwin's struggle with the problem of evil



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One of the myths surrounding the theory of evolution in our day is its supposed separation from all non-scientific bias. It is accepted – and even strongly promoted by some – that evolutionary theory has far-reaching consequences for the meaning of life, but that the theory itself is not dependent upon any such non-scientific convictions. However, the irony is, though this understanding is asserted by many, the theory of evolution is heavily grounded upon metaphysics. Contrary to popular belief, all knowledge is based upon assumptions – whether identified or not – and Darwin's arguments for his theory were driven not so much by impartial scientific analysis, but by problems arising from his own personal concept of the Creator. What is particularly interesting to note is that it is these same non-scientific arguments as expressed by Darwin which are also being used by scientists today as the mainstay of their own proofs for evolution.

The problem of "Nature, red in tooth and claw"

Effectively Darwin's theory is a *theodicy*, that is a solution for the problem of evil. Darwin's theodicy was primarily a solution not so much for moral evil within humans, but for natural evil within creation as a whole. Simply put: Darwin saw nature as "red in tooth and claw" and Darwin could not perceive of God creating (in a special-creation sense) the world in this way. In other words, Darwin had a specific, yet inaccurate view of how God would work. For Darwin, this incorrect image of

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God did not match up to the reality of the natural world in general and to evil within the natural world in particular.

For example, Darwin considered that special creation by a Creator necessarily implies an independence or a randomness of design which is not found within the natural world. Therefore similarity of design, which is clearly evident within the world around us, automatically implies common descent and not special creation. Similarly, Darwin believed that God could not be expected to micro-manage creation, creating all the detailed variation and complexity of life both independently and fully optimised. Darwin considered it utterly fanciful that "the shape of his nose was designed" (citation in Hunter 2001, p.63). Another misconception of God by Darwin was that,

once created, God would not meddle with the universe. For Darwin, the implication of God continuing to be actively involved within creation would be that such a God is an imperfect craftsman. For Darwin, "everything in nature is the result of natural law." (citation in Hunter 2001, p.121) Therefore – following Darwin's reasoning – because God would not create the world the way it is, special creation is impossible. Of course, with special creation now being impossible, the theory of evolution necessarily becomes a fact. That, in a nutshell, is Darwin's primary, but metaphysical argument for evolution.

However, in what specific way does evolutionary theory solve Darwin's misgivings over God's relationship to natural evil within this world? The answer to this question is straightforward. For Darwin the crucial ingredient is that God distanced himself from the universe by inserting natural laws in between. In practice God relinquished control over the universe to these natural laws. Of course, a side effect of these laws was to introduce natural evil into the world. Though God only created efficiency and harmony, the natural laws which God put in place became the source of natural evil. Do you follow therefore Darwin's solution to the problem of natural evil within this world? Because God is *distanced* from the natural world by the insertion of natural laws, so God cannot be held *accountable* for natural evil.

Interestingly, this theodicy of Darwin with respect to natural evil is very similar to an often-proposed theodicy with

respect to moral evil. In Darwin's day – and also today – many suggest that man's *necessary freedom of will* is the cause of moral evil. God sees what happens but does not, because of man's supposedly inviolable autonomy, influence it. In other words, because God is necessarily *distanced* from moral evil by man's free will, so God cannot be held *accountable* for man's actions.

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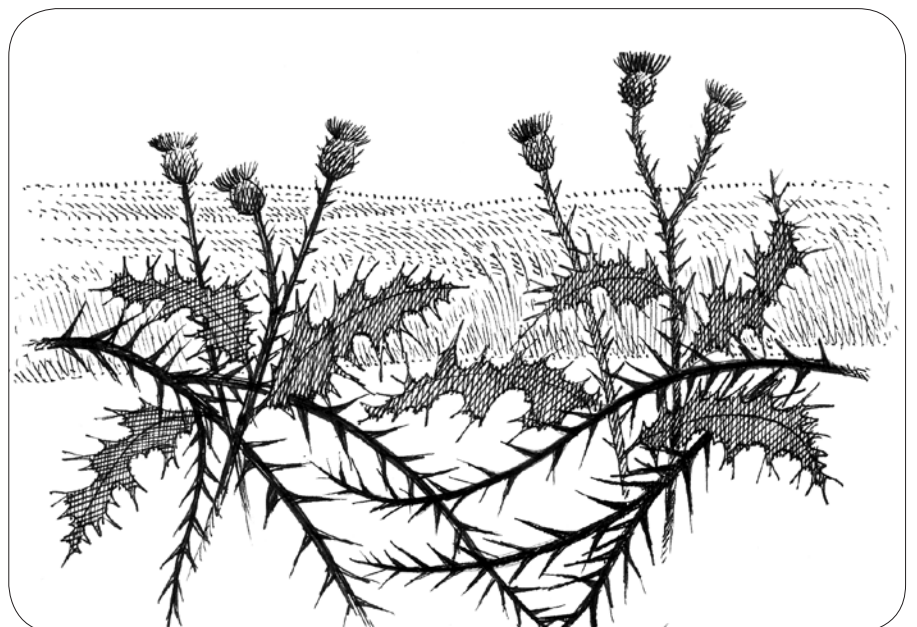
Of course, this often-proposed theodicy for moral evil, as with Darwin's theodicy for

natural evil, also proves to be inadequate. The Bible does not teach that creation, whether moral or natural, is outside of God's control. (Proverbs 16:33, Matthew 6:25-34, 10:29-31, Romans 8:28, Hebrews 1:3) The Bible's own solution for the problem of moral and natural evil is far more profound.¹

Where does Darwin's solution for natural evil lead?

However, this mistaken theodicy of Darwin also brings in with it other far-reaching and serious consequences. *Firstly*, because God is considered to be disconnected or distanced from the physical world, the spiritual and the physical become mutually exclusive or non-overlapping realities. Science and religion are classified as

independent of each other. One – science – is considered to be within the public arena; whereas the other – religion – is considered to be only a matter of private belief. Further, God's non-interference in the world is deemed obligatory in order for science to work correctly in practice. Any “unscientific” appeal to the supernatural – whether by a God-of-the-gaps argument or via Intelligent Design – is thought to ultimately stifle scientific curiosity and advance. In other words, the use of the supernatural within science (for example, the concept of Intelligent Design) is held to be not wrong, but simply improper! Now, this *naturalistic* worldview is obviously pervasive in our own day. However, what is the end result of this argument? Simply put: such a private and distant God as



Thorns and thistles, one consequence of the Fall. © D. Tyler, illustrated by P. Snow.

this ultimately becomes an irrelevance to our lives. Effectively, no theodicy is actually required because there is no such thing as evil. To quote Richard Dawkins: “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 pointless indifference.” (citation in Hunter 2001, p153)

A *second*, but related consequence of a non-interfering, distant God is a revival of both Gnosticism and Deism. Deism – a belief that God does not act in order to influence events within this universe – was prevalent in Darwin’s day. God governs through natural law but not by supernatural intervention. Miracles are deemed messy, implying that God is flawed. In reality, Darwin – at least early on and like many of his contemporaries – was a Deist. Gnosticism – part of which is a belief that the material world is evil – also holds that God is thoroughly disengaged from this world. An utterly pure God must never be contaminated by any involvement with the material universe. As a result, we find no evidence for God within nature. This world runs *only* on secondary causes, and all natural phenomena are never the result of divine providence. Of course, both Deism and Gnosticism portray a God who is not the God of the Bible. The God of the Bible is fully engaged with his creation. “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14; see also Job 38-40, Psalm 19:1, Hebrews 4:15, 1 John 1:1-3, 4:2.)

Thirdly, Darwin’s flawed theodicy may also lead to an open-theistic understanding of God. Open theists believe that the future doesn’t exist and therefore cannot be known by anyone – including God himself. Now, evolution is seen to be independent of God, thus outside of God’s control. As a consequence – with the evolutionary process fashioning an undirected natural and human history – God cannot predict anything that will happen. For Kenneth Miller this is the logical outcome of evolutionary theory. He writes: “Obviously, few religious

people find it problematical that their own personal existence might not have been preordained by God ... but strangely, some of the very same people find it inconceivable that the *biological* existence of our species could have been subject to exactly the same forces.” (citation in Hunter 2001, p.171)

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Circular reasoning

So what can we conclude from this brief examination of Darwin’s struggle with the problem of evil? Primarily, we can see that the overarching metaphysical implication of the theory of evolution – whether from an atheistic or a theistic viewpoint – is that God has no ongoing *active* role within nature. Therefore, evolution carries us inevitably towards naturalism. However, we can also see that, as well as having this serious metaphysical consequence, evolution itself rests foursquare upon a metaphysical premise – namely, that a Creator would not create the world the way it is. This is naturalism in another guise. Interestingly, this premise is still used today in order to bolster this struggling theory in the face of onslaught from many quarters. However, do you see the circular reasoning? While evolution carries us towards naturalism, naturalism itself is used as a justification for evolution. ■

References

Hunter, Cornelius G., (2001) citation in *Darwin’s God: evolution and the problem of evil* Grand Rapids, Brazos Press.

Note

¹ Clearly, this is a vast subject beyond the scope of this article, but see, for example, the argument of Elihu in Job 32-37; also consider Ephesians 2:6f, 3:10f.



Lion Kill. © iStockphoto.com/Natasha Chamberlain.