

## **A world without God; a world with God**

### **Paul R. Boehlke**

Darwin's 1859 publication of *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection* offered another worldview. Darwin provided a mechanism by which life could be explained without any reference to God.

Science is not separate from its times. Furthermore, the events in an individual scientist's life, as seen in the first part of this magazine series, also affect scientific claims. Science is a human activity subject to everything that is human. There is bias. There are limits. There is human error. What happened with Darwin was that biology took a philosophical turn.

Physics had already taken this turn. Isaac Newton (1642–1727), perhaps Britain's greatest scientist, had described the universe as completely explainable using fixed physical laws. Everything was like a clock wound up and running, so there was no need for God to actively preserve it. This allowed God to be the Creator of the laws, but his active role as preserver in day-to-day operations was deemed unnecessary.

Darwin's uncle, Erasmus Darwin (1731–1802), an agnostic before the term was invented, had espoused evolutionary changes among creatures. He emphasized the characteristics that were acquired through the artificial breeding of animals and the marriages of humans. But his statements did not attract much attention. We do know that his nephew, Charles, took note of his ideas.

French scientist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744–1829) also suggested that animals could evolve. He thought that an animal could acquire helpful physical changes during its life and then pass them on to its offspring. The classic example was that giraffes would reach for the highest leaves on trees thereby slightly stretching their necks. He believed that this change would be passed on to the next generation. They in turn would stretch to add even more height to this helpful adaptation. But Lamarck lacked support for his ideas. Darwin and many others, therefore, rejected his mechanism of acquired characteristics but not the idea of evolution.

### **Reason added to Scripture**

At the same time, in a well-meaning effort to explain all of nature, theology and science were mixed together. Human reason ended up reaching far beyond both Scripture and nature.

The Bible and nature were viewed as two revelations from God, each for our learning. Unfortunately, theologians often felt that the book of nature was clear by itself without the revelation of God in the Bible. As science produced more discoveries, this "natural theology" attempted to explain even these new discoveries of nature in terms of the moral lessons they believed God had plainly put there. The country parsons and the

upper classes of England would often spend much time dwelling on questions concerning nature's meanings.

In the process natural theologians went too far. When dinosaurs were being discovered, William Kirby (1759–1850), an outstanding entomologist, suggested that there might be a cavern under the crust of the earth where dinosaurs still lived so that dinosaurs would not be evidence for an old earth. Furthermore, this cavern would be filled with water, the same hidden water that God used in the biblical flood. The dinosaurs, because they were viewed as lizards by the science of that time, would enjoy the water. In order to keep dinosaurs from predating Adam and Eve, Kirby invented scientific supports for faith that could only eventually draw ridicule.

Kirby stated in the spirit of the times, "The author of Scripture is also the author of Nature and this visible world, by types indeed, and by symbols, declares the same truths as the Bible does by words. To make the naturalist a religious man—to turn his attention to the glory of God, that he may declare his works, and in the study of his creatures may see the loving-kindness of the Lord." The natural theologians filled their writings with examples of a good creation but neglected the violence and cruelty also evident in nature. Darwin focused on the other side: that nature was suffering and could be cruel.

### **The result**

Any consideration of theological meaning in biology was removed by Darwin. In his theory of natural selection, the variety in nature undergoes cold selection by the environment just as the breeder of cattle selects the animals to be bred. Those that are more fit pass their traits on and have more offspring. So a species survives and changes; nature makes us what we are. Of course, Darwin's argument polarized his readers.

Darwin's *The Origin of Species* held that we are the results of a natural process and implied that this life is all that there is. Darwin conceded that God could have started it, but the rest was simply an uncaring mechanism. In modern times Stephen Jay Gould of Harvard added that if evolution could somehow be done over, humans most likely would not even occur. By chance, the process would take different turns.

The applications of evolutionary thought vary. At the extreme, humans have no purpose in life, are merely equal to animals, and are left without any moral and ethical guidelines.\* Our aggressiveness, even rape, can be explained as a result of the struggle to retain our genes—to survive (Richard Dawkins) to survive. Any behaviors in which we sacrifice for others can be transformed into selfish behaviors benefiting the survival of our genes. For example, if one would give up life or goods to defend his tribe, he is helping their genes, which are like his, to make it into the next generation. In this framework, all effort is simply self-serving. Furthermore, we have no special place in nature. All species are the equal results of evolution. It's not difficult then to understand why some attempt to free research animals from laboratories.

All this would be fine, and we would have to resign ourselves to it if it was true, but it is not. God revealed a different view.

Combining science with theology can be philosophically dangerous. If theology endorses a particular brand of science, it exposes itself to attack. For example, in the history of science, it made sense to many that organic compounds could only be made within a living being who contained, according to the science of the time, “a vital principle.” This idea seemed to fit well with the Christian faith. Then when Friedrich Wohler (1800–1882) synthesized urea (a compound found in the urine and other body fluids of mammals), it was a blow to both vitalism and Christianity.

Jacques Roger in *God & Nature* states, “Here again, it would have been wiser perhaps not to have linked religion with a changeable philosophy and a transient stage of scientific knowledge. But few can resist the intellectual trends of their age, and, in any case, it is much easier to identify the error of the past than to see the misunderstandings of the present.”

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This is the second article in a four-part series on creation and evolution.

*\*A great many theistic evolutionists believe that God used evolution to create us. They would not accept all of the dark aspects in this paragraph.*

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