

Field of evolutionary psychology explains why theistic evolution and Darwinism are incompatible

Darwin, God and the Meaning of Life: How evolutionary theory undermines everything you thought you knew of life

Steve Stewart-Williams

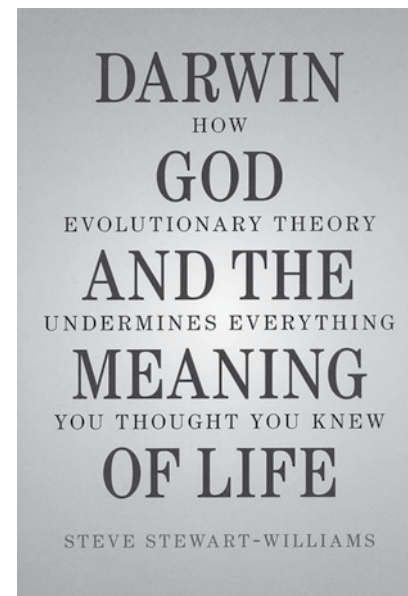
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Can the idea of God, as the monotheistic religions have it, be reconciled with evolutionary science? This question was carefully considered by Charles Darwin and has been by many scholars since. If God created Heaven and Earth and evolution is true, then God must have made the world by means of evolution.

While theistic evolution is certainly the solution opted for by a vast majority of contemporary theologians to ease tensions between religion and science, the scientific validity of this choice is questioned by the field of evolutionary psychology. On the contrary, if Darwin was right and common descent of all living species is a fact, then it is far more likely that we find ourselves in a universe without God, purpose, or objective moral values. Theistic evolution is at best a scientifically irrelevant personal conviction. It is essentially religious, not scientific.

This devastating verdict on theistic evolution comes from an unusual source—a book published by Cambridge University Press and



written by a committed evolutionist. Dr Steve Stewart-Williams was born in Wellington, New Zealand, and presently serves as lecturer in evolutionary psychology at the Malaysia campus of the University of Nottingham. While not a friend of creationism by any stretch of the imagination, his book shows that theistic evolution is not a realistic alternative. Stewart-Williams demonstrates that the theory of Darwin, also in its modern formats, cannot be reconciled with the traditional monotheistic religions.

Darwin's departure from theistic evolution

For historians this condemnation of theistic evolution does not really come as a surprise. Those familiar with

Charles Darwin's life are aware that his personal struggles to reconcile God and evolution were profound, if only to save face with his contemporaries and not to antagonize his theistic (Unitarian) wife, Emma. However, as Darwin made progress in defining the mechanism of natural selection and understood its implications, he gave up on religion and God.

With the publication of his *Origin of Species* (1859), he still presented himself like a theistic or perhaps a deistic evolutionist. This may have been due to the social pressures of his day and age, as every respectable person in Victorian times was supposed to believe in God as Creator. However, even decades before this he had genuine doubts about God and nature. A memo from Emma (dated January 1839) confirms this. It is clear that already by then Darwin had honest and conscientious doubts about God (even in her Unitarian sense) and was giving up on the possibility of divine revelation altogether. Darwin always kept his wife's memo and added the following in his own handwriting and with his initials: "When I am dead, know that many times I have kissed and cried over this."

In his later years Darwin may best be described as an agnostic. He had given up on the idea of God in the traditional sense altogether. This wasn't malice, but the result of a genuine intellectual struggle. Charles Darwin did not develop his theory to destroy Christianity or religion from the outset. Like many since, he merely discovered that evolution and traditional religion could not both be true. While it is technically possible to believe in evolution and theism at the same time, this does not make for a good or even preferable solution.

Separation of faith and science

Considered at first glance, theistic evolution presents itself as the perfect answer to apparent contradictions between scientific theories and faith

in God. It only seems to take the relatively small sacrifice of no longer reading the Genesis account literally, but metaphorically. As fairy tale with a beautiful historic message: God is responsible for our existence. Theistic evolutionists differ on the extent that God interferes with the universe and current affairs, but for all of them God is the great mastermind behind evolution. Natural selection is God's tool. Famous names are counted among their number, including Ronald Fisher, Theodosius Dobzhansky, and Francis Collins.

One of the main characteristics of theistic evolutionism is the conviction that faith and science are completely distinct fields with different realities as their object of research. 'Non-overlapping magisteria' summarized Harvard professor Stephen Jay Gould—an agnostic himself.

As a psychological construct, this distinction seems to work, but at a practical level it invites several objections. The main reason that faith and science are considered non-overlapping fields is not because they are, but because evolutionary theory has gained a virtual monopoly and pushed out any practical notion of God as a reality from the exact sciences.

Science used to approach God quite differently. Before the Enlightenment and the age of rationalism, faith and reason were not separated, but integrated. If evolution were true, this would indicate that the idea of theistic evolution constitutes a break with the entire history of human life, as far as we know it. Before the 18th century, followers of any major monotheistic religion believed that God had authoritative views on politics, agriculture, stewardship, warfare, civil and criminal justice, how kings should rule, etc. Religion was not restricted to a private opinion in church on Sunday. Christianity wasn't looked upon as a non-government organisation that was useful from a civic perspective for encouraging voluntary service

and charity. Quite the contrary, all universities in Western civilization considered theology the queen of the sciences. All other fields dealt with fallible theories flowing from human thinking, experience and observation, but theology had the infallible Word of God as its object of research. This was considered a far more reliable source of truth than any human scientific endeavour. If an omnipotent and omniscient Creator existed and spoke to mankind, then He was likely to know better than mere mortals.

Theistic evolution breaks completely with these traditional concepts of Western civilisation, if not in theory then in consequence. Stewart-Williams points out that theistic evolution always results in discarding parts of the Bible. Not that the words are denounced necessarily, but theistic evolutionists attach new meanings to the ancient texts, which their original writers did not intend to convey. Normal linguistic rules seemingly no longer apply and the history of the reception of the text is ignored. This used to be called 'eisegesis' or '*Hineininterpretierung*' in German, but for some reason this is considered philologically acceptable even when it is not. This has led to a virtually worldwide inferior practice. Faithfully establishing the message of the ancient texts to its original readers is no longer the object of research, but the meaning that 21st century readers wish to derive from Scripture is the new focus.

Misinterpretation of Scripture

Admittedly, the Bible is not a textbook for physics or biology, but Stewart-Williams expresses his frustration about hearing this statement *ad nauseum* from educated Christians who go into theistic-evolution default mode. The evolutionary psychologist considers it rather simplistic to propose that Scripture only intends to convey *who* made the heavens and the earth, including all living species (p. 62).

He points out that a non-prejudiced reading of the Bible would indicate that the *how* of creation is of essential importance to the texts, not only in Genesis, but throughout Scripture. There is actually a reason that Jews and Christians always took these texts literally, for thousands of years until Darwin arrived on the scene. A coincidence? Not likely, according to Stewart-Williams.

Theistic evolutionists might object that evolution actually helped theologians to arrive at the 'true message' of the Bible, winnowing out the wheat from the chaff as it were. But how likely is this? Would it not be more realistic to admit that the human authors of Scripture were wrong, not intentionally, but because of their less advanced knowledge and primitive worldview? Would it not be far more courageous to acknowledge that the Bible is a book with lots of factual and historical mistakes? Consequently, where theologians claim to have more knowledge and a more accurate worldview than the writers of Scripture, they assume the role of intermediary priests who correct the ancient doctrines and traditional texts as they see fit. Scholars today do not only know more than the Apostles, but also claim to know better.

It is refreshing to listen to a neo-atheist view on this topic. Stewart-Williams does not mince his words:

"The idea that the biblical stories are symbolic is charitable to the point of absurdity. What would we think of a university professor who, happening upon unambiguous errors in a favourite student's work, concluded that the student was speaking symbolically and awarded her top marks? The whole notion that Genesis is metaphorical, and that evolution is a testament to the glory of God, smacks of the kind of spin doctoring that gives politicians a bad name. Liberal Christians alter their original religious beliefs to make them compatible with

evolutionary theory, and then scoff at the idea that there was ever any threat. In doing so, they casually downplay just how radically they've rewritten their religion. Arguably it is not the same religion as the one it evolved from; it merely shares the same name" (p. 63).

The evolutionary psychologist doubts whether there is essential agreement or continuity between theistic evolution and core doctrines of the monotheistic religions. Theodosius Dobzhansky, for instance, was a prominent theistic evolutionist, and even resorted to pseudo-theological arguments for evolution.¹ But he rejected the existence of a personal God and the possibility of life after physical death.

Stewart-Williams concludes that one golden rule always seems to apply in theistic evolution: evolution always takes precedence over religion. Civilization still awaits the birth of the first theistic evolutionist who starts to believe more of the Bible instead of less. It seems to inevitably be a one-way road where faith concedes.

Wishful thinking or science?

For evolutionary psychology though, the main problem with theistic evolution is that it is scientifically incompatible with the main feature of Darwin's theory: random natural selection. The driving force behind the theory of evolution is that there is no intelligent design or intended architecture of the species at all. Viewed from this angle 'theistic evolution' is a contradiction in terms. Darwin's theory does not allow for intentional causes or purposes in evolution. It may look like that in hindsight, but this is only imaginary, because the operating mechanism tells us differently. No goals, chance mutations only.

Stewart-Williams considers the introduction of divine guidance for the process of evolution inconsistent with

the heart of Darwin's theory, a form of wishful thinking really. Theistic evolutionists wish to cling to God for other than scientific reason, while claiming a scientific premise. Classical Christianity also believed in primary causes and in predestination and the divine governance of all things as a mystery of faith, at times seemingly against all hope and facts. There was, however, a striking difference with theistic Darwinism in worldview and scientific premises. It also had a different epistemology. The thinking of traditional Christianity was based on the conviction that God's Word is a reliable source of knowledge that can be accessed scientifically. Theistic evolution no longer shares that basis.

A second scientific problem for evolutionary psychology that makes theistic evolution highly unlikely is the present state of nature. There are manifest imperfections in the alleged 'design' of living creatures. Theistic evolution essentially discards the traditional doctrine of the Fall and a universal curse. It extrapolates from the present state of this world to the original creation. It therefore fails to give secular evolutionists an acceptable explanation for the imperfect state of nature and the 'wicked' processes that natural selection adopts. If God is responsible for the world in its current state, this reflects poorly on a good and almighty Creator.

Secular Darwinism has perfectly acceptable explanations for imperfections after random mutations, but this ceases to make sense if this process is led by an almighty hand. For this reason, evolutionary psychology fails to regard theistic evolution as an improvement of Darwin's theory. Instead of explaining more, it only produces extra questions and complications. From a scientific point of view this is not preferable.

In addition to this, from a theological point of view, the problems flowing from the theistic evolutionist position requires a complete

re-evaluation of one's concept of God. The traditional Gospel of creation, fall, and redemption ceases to make sense because it is no longer factual. Stewart-Williams insists that if the world was created imperfect (including death and sin, amongst other things) this dictates another view of God than is held by the big monotheistic religions. The reality of nature does not point to a good and almighty God, but rather contradicts this. For this reason several theistic (and deistic) evolutionists have openly replaced classical faith in a personal God with a non-personal power: "May the force be with you." This is essentially the 'god' of Einstein, Dobzhansky, and George Lucas.

For the greater good?

Another problem for evolutionary psychology is the field of ethics. Darwin's theory explains morality as resulting from choices that are ultimately driven by the outcomes (successful or unsuccessful) of random mutations in specific situations. In other words, Darwinism dictates situation ethics, non-surprisingly in an age of modernism and post-modernism.

Darwin, God and the Meaning of Life demonstrates how evolution undermines the concept of human dignity (pp. 258–279), as well as any form of thinking about good and evil in absolute terms. This should have been clear 150 years ago, with the publication of Darwin's *Descent of Man* (1871). If one truly embraces evolution, there is no longer any absolute good or wrong. It is even questionable whether human guilt exists at all or only lies in the mind of the beholder. Mankind is predetermined by random mutations and circumstances; today scientists conclude that even our genes are. Nietzsche grasped this at an early stage. To his mind, people still said they believed in good, evil, sin, and

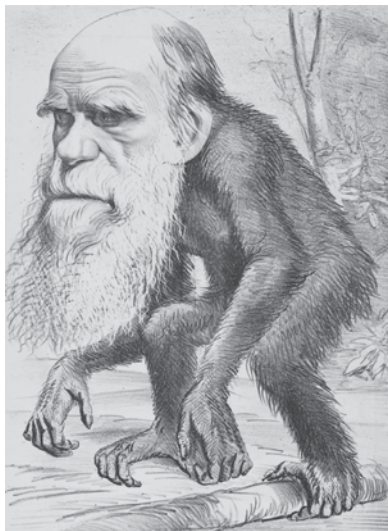


Figure 1. "A Venerable Orang-outang", a caricature of Charles Darwin as an ape published in *The Hornet*, a satirical magazine. Date 22 March 1871

guilt, but in principle these things no longer existed objectively.

As a neo-atheist, Stewart-Williams is personally content with this state of affairs. To him this does not mean that man is an immoral being or that evolutionists are bound to lead a dissolute life. It does imply, however, that any objective measurement of good or wrong is impossible. Evolution destroys ethics in the traditional sense, and replaces objective moral law with situation ethics. The guiding principles for choices are only found in a specific context, as the next step on the evolutionary staircase and genetic consequences are considered. Moral choices and conventions are no longer moral in the classical sense, but at best a social contract between people, not unlike the rules of chess or other board games.

For Stewart-Williams, utilitarianism or the quest for 'the greater good' is the new norm. While he insists that avoiding suffering and promoting happiness lack any philosophical foundation as such after Darwin, they should still be defended on practical grounds as a personal choice (pp. 305–307). Unfortunately the author ignores the fact that there was a time when

his views were almost universally implemented in the scientific world, in the US eugenics programs of the 1930s as well as in Germany and Russia around the same time. But this might be one of the chances that mankind has to take while natural selection presses on towards the greater good.

Reflection

While *Darwin, God and the Meaning of Life* delivers a devastating verdict on the theory of theistic evolution, its analysis also invites self-reflection for Christians who are committed to the classical view of creation. To what extent is the Lord (and his Word) no actual part of our thinking and actions, but only a theory we adhere to? Even if we claim to embrace truth and divine revelation, are we willing to take all facts into account? Are we willing to be corrected, even by atheists if that be the case? Scholars like Stewart-Williams may have reason to be appalled at Christians who preach creation, but who advertize survival of the fittest and utilitarianism by their actions.

References

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