Leaving Darwin to go nowhere

Taking Leave of Darwin: A longtime agnostic discovers the case for design

Neil Thomas

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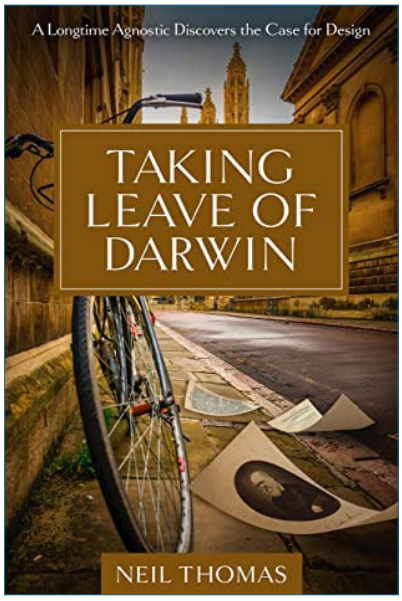

Lucien Tuinstra

Given that the publisher of *Taking Leave of Darwin* is prominent in the ID movement, it is likely that readers might have preconceived ideas about its contents. Throughout most of the book, the author keeps his cards close to his chest when it comes to his current worldview, and it is not until near the end that we can place Neil Thomas into a category.

A Reader Emeritus at the University of Durham, author Dr Neil Thomas studied at the universities of Oxford, Munich, and Cardiff. He has a wide variety of interests, including language, literature, and logic & rhetoric. Thomas has been a long-time member of the British Rationalist Association and has previously authored other books.

Taking Leave of Darwin is a thin paperback of 136 pages of text plus 14 pages of endnotes. The copious endnotes attest to it having been well researched, and the author has commendably managed to densely pack this wealth of information into a slim volume. Unfortunately, the author's frequent use of foreign expressions—mostly Latin, but also French and German—makes it abstruse at times. This is a shame, because it might turn off some of his readers, including perhaps those who might benefit from reading about the paradigm shift which occurred in the life of Neil Thomas: he now concludes that over the course of his life he has been conned!

Sandwiched between prologue and epilogue are six chapters, each starting with a pertinent quote setting the scene for the topic on hand. Chapter 1 gives some background about the theory of evolution, especially the views of Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace. Chapter 2 deals with Darwin's intellectual maturing from boyhood to adulthood and the immediate reception of *The Origin of Species*. The next chapter covers the longer-term impact of the book, including the response to Darwin's idea in more recent years. Fossil evidence and Darwin's *The Descent of Man* are also discussed. Chapter 4 turns to cosmology, as well as how bias can hinder progress in science. The fifth chapter details what the scientific method can and cannot do, while the final chapter brings everything together and reveals the personal journey of the author.

Accept magic?

The author helpfully presents the history surrounding *The Origin of the Species* and the controversy it caused. It is fair to say that Thomas has pierced its bubble of metascience and exposed the fallacious thinking of its contents. For example, in the prologue he talks about it apparently being "politically incorrect … to challenge the truth-status of *The Origin of Species*" (p. 11). Also, he has noticed "an alarming degree of bias" among specialists (p. 13), the ones who many people think are somehow free of partisanship.

He says it is generally accepted that *Homo sapiens* evolved from apelike ancestors, but to go on and insist we ultimately descended from microbes might stop a good number of people in their tracks (pp. 24–25). Darwinian natural selection (which he himself said would be better termed 'natural preservation', p. 17) was accepted to be capable of removing the weak; few ascribed creativity to it (p. 35). Thomas discusses the vocal tract differences of apes and humans and questions the evolution from one type to the other, because the brain has to develop in tandem with the vocal tract to drive any new mechanical features: "Synchronization of those two processes would of course point not to random evolution but to coordination and therefore design" (p. 68). He realises that simply adding time does not resolve the conundrum because he quotes from Jewish creationist Lee Spetner's book *Not by Chance! Shattering the modern theory of evolution* (p. 74):

> "When one deals with events having small probabilities and many trials, one should multiply the two numbers to determine the probability. One should not just stand gaping at the long time available for trials, ignore the small probability, and conclude that anything can happen in such a long time. One has to calculate."[1]

Thomas refers to the catch phrase 'just like that!' (p. 110) by the British comedian Tommy Cooper (1921–1984; figure 1) to describe how natural selection, in the minds of its advocates, is ostensibly endowed with an almost divine power. He shares a revealing quote by New Zealand professor Neil Broom,[2] from his book *How Blind is the Watchmaker? Nature's design and the limits of naturalistic science*: "megatime becomes the instrument of creative change. It is used as a kind of magic wand, waved at appropriate points in the argument in order to accomplish quite remarkable feats of materialistic magic" (p. 86).

When Darwin published his *Origin*, it was well known—and attested by himself in the book—that the fossil record did not show gradual evolution. If evolution happened at all, some believed, it would have to be by 'saltations' (abrupt jumps) to jump the discontinuities, something espoused later by Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldridge under the banner of 'punctuated equilibrium'—a view "that Darwin ruled out of account" (p. 64). Thomas describes Gould as the "insider's insider to the world of evolutionary science … [who] irreverently described 'the extreme rarity of transitional forms in the fossil record' as 'the trade secret of paleontology'" (p. 129). Quite!

Image: Colin Park / Statue to Tommy Cooper. / CC BY-SA 2.0

Figure 1. "Just like that!"—Tommy Cooper

Natural selection and its 'ability'

Neil Thomas is not alone in noting Darwin's appeal to artificial breeding to make his case for natural selection: "an odd stand-in for a mindless process" (p. 115). He continues to expose the fallacy of the reification of nature by questioning Darwin's own words: "One might legitimately ask, how it is possible to 'intently watch' and 'carefully select' unintelligently?" (p. 116). Perhaps because, as he observed earlier, "Darwin tended to humanize nature even as he naturalized mankind" (p. 80). Thomas clearly recognizes that Darwin "could not appeal to the wonder-working mechanism of chance variation and natural selection until a self-reproducing biological machine had first arisen" (p. 50). The only natural way *that* could come about is by abiogenesis (aka chemical evolution), contrary to the Law of Biogenesis (Louis Pasteur) that life only comes from life. This is understood by Thomas who then expounds, "since recent advances in molecular biology show that the humblest bacterium contains more genetic information than the instruction manual for NASA space probes" (p. 51).

The author acknowledges another issue with the artificial versus natural selection analogy, and illustrates this with an (unreferenced) example:

> "Forty years of research and development [to introduce artificial hearts to patients] and forty billion dollars went down the drain. If such gargantuan efforts and expense could not fashion a functioning heart-substitute, it becomes all the more difficult to imagine a heart being constructed by the serendipity of random mutations and natural selection" (pp. 112–113).

He perhaps ought to have elaborated a bit more. Instead of simply stating that "decades ago … the fatalities topped 200", it would have been helpful to cite current progress involving this medical procedure. For instance, people with an artificial heart *can* live longer, albeit that currently it is for a maximum of two years.[3]

What about the debate revolving around neo-Darwinism as the explanation of life? Thomas has the impression that,

> "... if so many persons of such luminous intelligence and ingenuity have bent their minds to solving the problem, and have come up with only the most questionable of hypotheses, then perhaps there is a mystery that will never be wholly unravelled" (p. 123).

If these hypotheses are so questionable, as indeed he makes clear throughout his book, one wonders what Neil Thomas himself believes.

Belief and honesty

Clearly, the author has been, and continues to be, on a journey. The question is whether he is really willing to follow where the evidence leads, or prefers the mystery to remain. Surprisingly, he calls Richard Lewontin intellectually dishonest. However, Lewontin was famously candid when he admitted:

> "We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs … *in spite* of the toleration of the scientific community for unsubstantiated 'just-so' stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism [emphases in original]" (p. 97).

Thomas is right in calling Lewontin out in his failure to follow where the scientific evidence leads, due to his materialistic commitment. Few atheists are so honest. The late Antony Flew abandoned his atheism for theism, which, according to Thomas, "seems to be the only conclusion which is unassailable on strictly logical grounds, however unwelcome that conclusion will seem to many readers, in whose number I count myself" (p. 126).[4] So says a lapsed agnostic and reluctant convert to the idea of God!

Figure 2. Where does the evidence lead?

And there you have it; Thomas does not want there to be "a supranatural intelligence" and he considers himself "a long-standing humanist with no allegiance to any revealed faith" (p. 146). He admits having disregarded some of his own assumptions (p. 127), but will he continue to travel the full journey to Christian theism? He thinks he knows and writes about where this would lead: "in the direction of an unknown (and potentially unknowable) source of intelligence outside of nature" (p. 143). As Thomas himself concedes, "Intellectual integrity was sacrificed on the altar of ideological commitment" (p. 118). But is Neil Thomas himself also wielding the knife that slays the offering?

Conclusion

Taking leave of Darwin gives a good overview of the history and current state of affairs when it comes to Darwinism, while at the same time serving as a roadmap of the journey the author has been on (and still is).

Neil Thomas calls the category of Theistic Evolution "deistic Darwinism" (p. 108), but where he would fit himself is not entirely clear. For all his scepticism of aspects of evolution, he is far removed from the biblical camp and the teaching of the age of the earth and Bishop Ussher's timeline of approximately 6,000 years (p. 23).

The book might be a helpful starting point for people who have an aversion to biblical creationist writing but are willing to probe the veracity of Darwinism. As this long-time agnostic author discovered, the case for design is strong. However, it's a shame that *Taking Leave of Darwin* doesn't take the reader to a more satisfying conclusion.

References

1. Spetner, L., *Not by Chance! Shattering the modern theory of evolution*, Judaica Press, New York, p. 166, 2006.
2. Department of Chemical and Materials Engineering, University of Auckland, 2002 to present.
3. NL Times, Utrecht surgeons implant first artificial heart in Netherlands, nltimes.nl/2021/11/15/utrecht-surgeons-implant-first-artificial-heart-netherlands, 15 November 2021.
4. Reminiscent of Thomas Nagel, who said, "I hope there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that." Nagel, T., *The Last Word*, Oxford University Press, 1977.