

Darwinism: A Critique

By M. Ali Lakhani

Darwin's Idea and its Ideological Context

Charles Darwin is generally credited with being one of the greatest of modern scientists. His theory of evolution, hailed by many as an elegant explanation of the origins and diversity of life, is not only taken by the scientific establishment as incontrovertible (for many decades it has been the standard fare of most biology textbooks) but it has also been enormously influential due to its profound philosophical implications. Daniel Dennett called it 'the single best idea that anyone has ever had.'¹ The idea—which was also independently conceived by Darwin's contemporary, Alfred Russel Wallace—was that living organisms originated and evolved from a common biological ancestor by a mechanism of natural selection acted on by random mutations. Darwin first detailed the theory in his 1859 book, *On the Origin of Species*.² It was a controversial idea from the outset, even among scientists, but it took hold in some quarters particularly when championed by a growing number of supporters who came to be known as 'Darwinists' (the

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¹ He also refers to it as 'Darwin's Dangerous Idea' in his book by that name.

² The full title of the book was *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. The subtitle, with its reference to 'the preservation of favoured races', provides some hint of the theory's controversy and its application to eugenics as well as its appeal to social engineers. Commenting on the title, Marilynne Robinson notes, 'However generously this title is interpreted, clearly it does not assume that biological systems evolve by chance and not design, as Darwin is always said to have done. It clearly implies that whatever is right, and - even less tenably - that whatever is the product of raw struggle, and - still less tenably - that there is a teleology behind it all.' - from her essay, 'Darwinism', in Marilynne Robinson's *The Death of Adam: Essays on Modern Thought* (Picador, NY, 2005), pp43-44.

term was first coined in 1860 by Darwinism's chief polemicist, Thomas Henry Huxley, aka 'Darwin's Bulldog', who advocated rationalistic agnosticism as a scientific methodology and therefore had no use for any understanding of reality outside that framework), and later by the 'Neo-Darwinists' who have adapted his theory to genetic mutation (the most well-known of the Neo-Darwinists is the ideologue, Richard Dawkins, perhaps best known for promoting the ideas of 'the selfish gene' and 'the God delusion').

It is useful to clarify, before we examine some of the objections to the theory, that the term 'evolution' can mean different things, some of which are evident and not objected to. Understood simply as growth and change over time, or as the adaptation of an organism to environmental conditions, evolution is universally accepted and uncontroversial. The problem lies not with adaptive micro-evolution but with transformist macro-evolution—with the claim that, through a gradual process of random, heritable variation and natural selection (the natural processes that preserve changes beneficial to the survival of the organism, while eliminating harmful ones), one species can transform into a radically different new species—such as an ape into a man.³ Because Darwin based his ideas on materialistic explanations of how life and its forms evolved mechanistically, many Darwinists have no need for the 'God hypothesis'. And because his theory presumes no 'a priori' teleological justification—it naturally favors adaptive traits conducive to the preservation of the organism, a feature colloquially referred to as (in Herbert Spencer's phrase) the 'survival of the fittest'—it rules out intelligent design. The controversial aspects of the theory are therefore that it purports to do away with the need for any metaphysical explanation of the origin of life or consciousness, and also with scriptural understandings of creation and of the archetypal integrity of created forms, relying instead on material and mechanistic explanations alone, and that it consequentially denies any 'special' place for Man in the order of nature.

³ As David Gelernter puts it in his essay in the Claremont Review (referred to below), 'Over millions of years, small good-for-survival variations accumulate, and eventually (says Darwin) you have a brand new species.' But, as Martin Lings notes in 'Signs of the Times' (*Studies in Comparative Religion*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Winter, 1970), 'the only evolution that has been scientifically attested is on a very small scale and within narrow limits; to conclude from this "micro-evolution", which no one contests, that there could be such a thing as "mega-evolution", that for example the class of birds could have evolved from the class of reptiles, is not merely conjecture but perverse conjecture.'

Any serious consideration of Darwin's idea therefore invites not only questions about the scientific basis for the theory but also of its metaphysical presuppositions, in particular its outright rejection of supernatural causes operating in nature. As one of the pillars of materialistic philosophy, Darwinism has implications for bioethics (in issues such as eugenics or transhumanism), politics (as an argument for social engineering, colonialism or communism), psychology (because it implies there is no subject or 'soul' beyond the reified psyche or the brain), ethics (because it raises the issue of whether there can be any meaningful role for altruism, or anything other than 'self-interest and raw competition'⁴ in a 'selfish gene'), aesthetics (because it questions whether any archetypal reality can have meaning in a purely naturalistic world) and a host of other areas including, of course, religion (because it places in doubt the existence of God and the value of religion). It is no wonder then that Darwin's ideas have had far-reaching and major impacts on modernist thinkers ranging from Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, to the contemporary New Atheists, many of whom (like the biologist Richard Dawkins and the chemist Peter Atkins) are part of the scientific establishment.

While it is not surprising that Darwin's ideas have encountered considerable opposition within the religious establishment, it is unfortunate that some of that opposition has been propounded by rejecting both good science and sound metaphysics. This has allowed critics of religion to caricature it as irrational superstition and to depict its followers as unintelligent, credulous, and dangerous.⁵ This has led to a misapprehension of religion—causing it to become an easy target for both wags and skeptics ranging from the likes of H. L. Mencken to Christopher Hitchens, who have pilloried it—and the approach has also undermined its significant intellectual objections to materialistic science and philosophy, including Darwinism. One finds therefore that in the public square issues are often couched in reductionistic terms that present a false opposition between science and religion, with some proponents for science typically characterizing those who believe in

⁴ Marilynne Robinson, in 'Darwinism', *supra*, p29.

⁵ Marilynne Robinson: 'Creationism is the best thing that could have happened to Darwinism, the caricature of religion that has seemed to justify Darwinist contempt for the whole of religion'. ('Darwinism', *ibid*, p40)

God or an afterlife as self-deluded and unscientific while some proponents of religion take similarly reactionary positions against science. But despite the ‘Galileo affair’ or the ‘Scopes Monkey Trial’, there is no inherent opposition between science and religion, so long as these are understood integrally, as approaches to a reality which is transcendent. It is when they are reduced to a desacralizing dogmatism that faith and science come to be viewed in oppositional terms rather than as integrally connected. Insofar as modern science presumes to reduce the cosmos to its outer elements, and all knowledge to merely the quantitative and the measurable, it engages in an epistemological error which alienates the intellect from its integral foundations. While the reactions of Church and religious authorities in the cases of Galileo and Scopes may have been scientifically untenable (understood purely from the premises of modern science⁶) they were nonetheless rooted in an intuition about the integral and sacral nature of reality which was metaphysically sound.⁷

The roots of this epistemological error, which has been present in the history of human thought at various times, became most pronounced in modern Western philosophy with the Cartesian schism. By asserting the ‘cogito’ of the thinking subject discontinuously against the reified world, Descartes in effect ruptured the traditional unity between man and nature. The legacy of this schism was profound. One of the consequences was the loss of the sense of the sacred. Nature and knowledge, once desacralized, were no longer perceived through the lens of the sacred continuum of microcosm/macrocosm/metacosm or of knower/known/knowledge. The traditional understanding of knowledge as a sacred science (*scientia sacra*), which apprehended reality as based on the unity of being, was thereby replaced by a modern understanding

⁶ The matter of the Tychonian and Ptolemaic versions of ‘geocentrism’ versus the Copernican and Galilean versions of ‘heliocentrism’ remains controversial, but the former—which accords with traditional cosmology—has not been disproven by modern science. Far from being the case, as Wolfgang Smith argues in *Physics and Vertical Causation* (Angelico Press, 2019), geocentrism is a scientifically valid position, compatible with classical physics, and moreover ‘Earth’ is, allowing for planimetric reality, more than a merely a solid sphere of matter; rather, it is a spiritual creation with ontological significance, a theophany. The Catholic Church, as Smith argues in *The Wisdom of Ancient Cosmology* (Foundation for Traditional Studies, Oakton, VA, 2003) ‘has embraced a scientific outlook’ in recent years (at p181).

⁷ In the words of Seyyed Hossein Nasr (in personal correspondence with the author), ‘religious reductive dogmatism contains a limited truth but scientific dogmatism is simply falsehood’.

in which science became the way for man—as the ‘res cogitans’, now alienated from nature, the ‘res extensa’—to understand the external world without any reference to an integrating reality. At the same time as the ‘known object’ became reified as only physical matter rather than as theophany, the ‘knowing subject’ also became reified as the individual ‘ego’ of the psyche, cut off from its transcendent intellectual center, its pneumatic core. In consequence, the objectified world (the observed) and its disjunctive subject (the observer) were both reduced to their outward dimensions of quantitative matter, lacking the qualitative and archetypal dimensions of hylomorphic matter, while science came to be understood as merely the study of the external world cut off from the transcendent dimensions of subject and object—of the parts without reference to the whole, of the physical dimension of existence cut off from the higher orders of being.

A whole complex of factors—among them, the Catholic Church’s mishandling of the Galileo case—set the stage for the opposition of science and religion, an opposition which has persisted for centuries. With the ensuing decline of spiritual literacy, the book of nature was no longer regarded as reflecting the book of God. For many natural scientists, a literal reading of the Biblical account of creation was contradicted by science, yet many now lacked the inner understanding to interpret the signs of both scripture and nature. Anyone who glanced into a telescope could be persuaded that the earth was a mere speck in the universe, and that our existence could be of little significance within the vast panorama of the cosmos. The modern sciences taught that the material world was subject to natural laws which, as Newton and others had demonstrated, could be gleaned by human ingenuity alone. Empirical observation and reasoning became the methodology of the new naturalistic sciences, cutting off knowledge from its metaphysical moorings. As scientific discoveries led to technological inventions, these began to transform human lives, and science swiftly gained in prestige. Religion, by contrast, declined in influence in Europe. In the modern West, where Christendom had undergone both the Reformation and the Enlightenment, through a combination of religious wars and the assertion of secular authority, it now faced a growing challenge from the colonization of knowledge by modern science, and by ‘quitting the field’ for several centuries after Galileo, the Church—and thereby

religion—came to be increasingly viewed as unfashionable, unscientific and anachronistic. It was into this crucible that the ideas of Darwin were born.

Darwin—who was somewhat devout as a youth but had grown increasingly skeptical of religion following his voyage on the *Beagle*—was undoubtedly aware of the religious implications of his theory. In fact, his ideas about evolution had provoked in him a personal crisis of faith, as it would for many who followed him. Dawkins would later remark (in *The Blind Watchmaker*) that ‘Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist’⁸ and Martin Lings wrote that ‘There can be little doubt that in the modern world more cases of loss of religious faith are to be traced to the theory of evolution as their immediate cause than to anything else.’⁹ This is in marked contrast with many of the earlier great modern scientists, including Galileo and Kepler—and others like the physicist, Isaac Newton, and his contemporary, the father of modern chemistry in the West, Robert Boyle, as well as the experimental scientist, Michael Faraday—who regarded science as a way to better understand God. The fact that these remarkable scientists and many others who followed them (for instance, James Clerk Maxwell, Max Planck, and Werner Heisenberg, or, more recently, Francis Collins, John Eccles, and Wolfgang Smith, among many others) have been openly religious, or willing to admit of the transcendent realm, raises a question about the credibility of the thesis that science is incompatible with religion or, in some interpretations, with not mere Deism but a creative God operating in nature. The issue is significant because it underscores a growing rift between the Darwinian ideology of evolutionism and science, in particular with foundational physics which is increasingly undermining materialistic assumptions about the nature of reality.

Physicists understand the structure of physical reality (at the sub-corporeal level of atoms and quantum reality) to be indeterminate, probabilistic and epistemologically uncertain. Based on the collapse of the wave function and of the principle of indeterminacy, physical matter is found to be elusively ambiguous, subsisting in a state of

⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence Reveals a Universe Without Design* (Norton, NY, 1987), p.6.

⁹ Martin Lings, in his review of Douglas Dewar’s book, *The Transformist Illusion*, in *Studies in Comparative Religion*, 4:1 (Winter 1970).

quasi-existence, midway between being and non-being, between act and potency¹⁰; and in observing it, perplexingly, the observer, through the instruments of observation, appears to be implicated through the probability function in what is being observed. Through the strange phenomena of nonlocality and 'entanglement' (based on Bell's theorem), physicists have realized that quantum reality does not operate on the basis of Newtonian mechanics or even of Einsteinian relativity. According to quantum theory, unobserved particles can bilocate, existing enigmatically in superposition in two places at once—yet these laws evidently do not apply to the corporeal world of our senses. Physics, being pushed beyond the comfortable boundaries of materialistic science into the realm of metaphysics, is understanding that it cannot identify in simply materialistic terms what is real. At most, as Arthur Eddington once noted, physics can merely provide pointer readings to reality. Instead of embracing materialistic and mechanistic models of reality, some physicists—like Wolfgang Smith and Seyyed Hossein Nasr—insist upon more holistic understandings of reality where the whole is understood to be greater than merely the sum of its parts. They point out that the enigmas of physics are rooted in the metaphysical error of reducing reality to the single plane of quantitative matter,¹¹ conducive to scientific methodologies of measurement and analysis, and of thereby failing to distinguish between different ontological planes, in particular between the corporeal world observed by our everyday senses, the sub-corporeal world of quantum reality and physics, and the supra-corporeal realm of the angelic and the Divine. These planes, which constitute an integral and intrinsically harmonious reality, operate based on different laws, yet reflect a single intelligence operating

¹⁰ As Wolfgang Smith has commented in *The Wisdom of Ancient Cosmology* (*supra*, at p25), Heisenberg in his Gifford lectures remarked that state vectors or the so-called wave function constitute 'a quantitative version of the old concept of 'potentia' in Aristotelian philosophy', and that quantum objects were 'a strange kind of physical entity just in the middle between possibility and reality' - Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution of Modern Science* (Harper & Row, NY, 1962, p41).

¹¹ Materialistic science is the handmaiden of materialistic philosophy which, adopting the Cartesian disjunction of the reified subject and object, severs their traditional connection. This disjunction creates a cognitive distortion for the physicist who perceives objects (in the language of Alfred North Whitehead) as either 'conjecture' or as 'dream', creating (what Wolfgang Smith terms) a 'bifurcated reality'. See *The Wisdom of Ancient Cosmology* (*supra*, at pp22 and 41).

within and behind it. The design of the universe hints at this intelligence. The physical forces and ‘cosmological constants’ permit life on earth to exhibit a fine-tuning¹² so precise as to cause some scientists to wonder whether human and earthly existence are merely a matter of chance or of deliberation, and to speculate on whether the cosmos is expressly designed to sustain human life on our planet (the ‘anthropic principle’). Fearing that this would allow God ‘a foot in the door’,¹³ some scientists are inventing theories that are increasingly far-fetched (like that of the multiverse) and are beyond the methodologies of modern science to test or falsify, let alone prove.¹⁴ Others, like Wolfgang Smith, have taken up the challenge of integrating physics and metaphysics, arguing for the transcendent origin of reality and its archetypal design, and incorporating traditional doctrines of planimetry¹⁵ and vertical causation in an attempt to counter reductive understandings of reality. As with physics, mathematics too is pointing away from a purely material dimension to transcendence. Thus, Gödel’s incompleteness theorems establish that, as a matter of mathematical logic, no set can be validated purely from within. William Dembski’s mathematical studies of patterns promote the view that ‘specified complexity’ or ‘complex specified information’ (events, objects or structures that exhibit patterns

¹² The fine-tuning is not only a feature observed by physicists and cosmological scientists (for example in Sir Martin Rees’ listing of the six physical constants, or Sir Fred Hoyle’s calculations for the Hoyle State relating to the fine-tuning of carbon and oxygen levels to support life) but is a feature observed by microbiologists at the cellular level [this is discussed by, for example, Stephen C. Meyer, in his book, *Signature in the Cell* (San Francisco, CA, HarperOne, 2009) and also in Michael Denton’s recent book *The Miracle of the Cell* (Discovery Institute, Seattle, 2020)].

¹³ Richard Lewontin (in ‘Billion and Billions of Demons’, an essay in *New York Review of Books*, January 9, 1997) says that he and Carl Sagan had defended science based on ‘a commitment to materialism’ which was ‘absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door.’

¹⁴ Scientists like Dr. Sabine Hossenfelder, a research fellow at the Frankfurt Institute for Advanced Studies, have spoken out about how these theories are more science-fiction than science. See, for instance, her book, *Lost in Math: How Beauty Leads Physics Astray* (Basic Books, NY, 2018).

¹⁵ The term ‘planimetry’ refers to the cosmological structure of planes or levels of being, which descend from the ‘Inwardly Hidden’ to the ‘Outwardly Manifest’, from the Center to the periphery, from the uncreated Origin/Principle of the celestial order to the created domains of terrestrial reality. All planimetric order is rooted in the transcendent Absolute, which, in Man, is the immanent Center or Spirit. The planimetric structure of the cosmos radiates from the Spirit through the realms of Psyche to Matter. Reality cannot therefore be reduced to the material or psycho-physical without violating the cosmic origins in transcendence and the planimetric order of the cosmos.

with a low probability of occurrence, found, for example, in nature and in bio-organisms) are a reliable marker of intelligent design (the ‘design inference’).¹⁶ Information theory is based on a fundamental premise that no output can exceed the informational input—implying that the Darwinian premise that evolutionary outputs can transcend the intrinsic inputs is flawed. These aspects of theoretical and physical science, and mathematics, all point to a valid basis for non-material or metaphysical views of reality which hardcore materialists, for ideological reasons disguised as ‘science’, are loathe to embrace because of their adverse implications—especially for Darwinism.

It is, however, within the field of biology itself, in particular microbiology and molecular genetics—sciences not in existence in Darwin’s time¹⁷—buttressed by recent findings in paleontology, that serious challenges to Darwinism are emerging. Despite hostile opposition from the scientific establishment,¹⁸ a growing number of scientists have begun

¹⁶ William Dembski’s books include, inter alia, *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance Through Small Probabilities* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), which infers intelligent design based on a probabilistic model. In his book *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove, ILL, InterVarsity Press, 1999), Dembski illustrates ‘specified complexity’ by the following example: ‘A single letter of the alphabet is specified without being complex. A long sentence of random letters is complex without being specified. A Shakespearean sonnet is both complex and specified.’

¹⁷ Wolfgang Smith observes in his essay, ‘Gnosticism Today’, published online on June 29, 2020 (at <https://philos-sophia.org/gnosticism-today/>) (accessed on November 16, 2020), as follows: ‘Darwinist evolution has never constituted a bona fide — let alone a viable — scientific theory, and in fact could have been proposed only at a time when knowledge in the relevant domains of science — biology, biochemistry, and geology mainly — was yet in its infancy.’

¹⁸ Dissenters from evolution have often been persecuted simply for opposing the ‘established’ view that Darwin’s theory is good science and an incontrovertible ‘fact.’ Some researchers and professors have lost tenure and even been expelled from academic positions for presenting scientific criticisms of evolution. A prominent example is the case of Dr. Richard Sternberg of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History whose constitutional rights were found by a US Congressional investigation to have been violated after he published a peer-reviewed article by Stephen C. Meyer criticizing evolution and supporting intelligent design. This treatment of evolution-dissenters and of Darwin-skeptics is not only incompatible with the supposed openness to scientific inquiry which one would normally expect from science but it also creates a chilling effect within academia, where it is generally considered to be an act of academic suicide to challenge evolution. The persecution points to Darwinian evolutionism being an evangelical ideology and not a science. The evangelism is indicated, for example, in Richard Dawkins’ infamous quip, ‘It is absolutely safe to say that if you meet somebody who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane (or wicked, but I’d rather not consider that).’ (New York Review of Books, 1989, p35: ‘Put Your Money on Evolution’).

to dissent from the Darwinian dogma¹⁹ and to mount a solid challenge to the theory of evolution. The most recent of the prominent ‘Darwin skeptics’ has been Yale professor of computer science, David Gelernter, who denounced the theory in an essay titled ‘Giving Up Darwin.’²⁰ In that essay he stated:

There’s no reason to doubt that Darwin successfully explained the small adjustments by which an organism adapts to local circumstances: changes to fur density or wing style or beak shape. Yet there are many reasons to doubt whether he can answer the hard questions and explain the big picture—not the fine-tuning of existing species but the emergence of new ones. The origin of species is exactly what Darwin *cannot* explain.

There are several objections to Darwin’s transformist theory of macro-evolution²¹ based on both metaphysical and scientific grounds. We will first survey some of the scientific objections and then those based on metaphysical principles.

Scientific Objections to Darwinism

From the many scientific objections to Darwinism, we will consider only four: (1) There is no scientific explanation for the origin of life; (2) The irreducible complexity of bio-organisms renders it impossible, in practical terms, to randomly replicate it through evolution; (3) The DNA of bio-organisms points to intelligent design; and (4) The fossil record does not corroborate the transformist theory.

Origin of Life

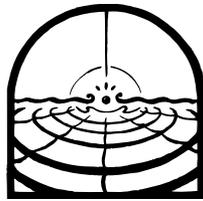
While Darwin’s theory does not strictly concern itself with how life originated, its focus being how it evolved thereafter from the simplest life form, the basic cell, to the diverse life forms in existence today, it has long

¹⁹ See for example the statement ‘A Scientific Dissent from Darwinism’, signed by over 1,000 scientists (posted online at www.dissentfromdarwin.org), which states: ‘We are skeptical of claims for the ability of random mutation and natural selection to account for the complexity of life. Careful examination of the evidence for Darwinian theory should be encouraged.’

²⁰ David Gelernter, ‘Giving Up Darwin’, published in the Spring 2019 issue of *Claremont Review of Books*.

²¹ A compelling and succinct overview of these are set out in William Stoddart brief note, ‘Six Fundamental Flaws In The Evolutionist Hypothesis’, published in *Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN, World Wisdom, 2008), pp33-34 (hereafter referred to as ‘Stoddart, *Flaws*’).

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