

NATURAL DISSENT: THE ETHICS OF EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY

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A visitor to the New England countryside stopping to ask directions from one of the natives is apt to receive the unsettling reply: "Stranger, you can't *get* there from here." The flinty retort is, of course, a logical fallacy, and so the lost traveler might insist that one can always get anywhere from anywhere, one way or another. Nevertheless, before pointing out the correct path, the obdurate Yankee will solemnly declare that to get *there* one really ought to begin *someplace else*.

In the essay that follows I will be taking the New England point of view with regard to some particularly rocky philosophical terrain: the terrain of evolutionary biology. I am primarily concerned with what natural selection means for ethical and moral reasoning, and here, I will argue, Yankee wisdom holds unbendingly true: You can't get there from here; you really ought to begin *someplace else*. To those who take their bearings from Darwinian theory, my thesis may be summarized by that old cartographer's premonition: Warning. There be dragons ahead.

Perhaps the best place for us to begin is with what Darwin actually said. In outline, I will first review how Darwin's ideas about morality emerged from his general theory of natural selection. Next, I will show how these ideas of Darwin's were influenced by, and interacted with, the ethical philosophy of utilitarianism. I will then discuss the so-called "naturalistic fallacy"—the impossibility of deriving values from facts—and show how this impossibility foiled the early romance between Darwinians and utilitarians. I will next discuss the ethics of Friedrich Nietzsche, whose nihilism some scholars insist cannot be linked with Darwin's theory, but whose ideas others believe are a logical conclusion to *The Descent of Man*. We will then see how some evolutionists have sought to avoid the nihilistic implications of natural selection by resorting to an untenable fact-meaning dichotomy that rapidly breaks down under scrutiny. Finally, I will highlight the questionable status of natural selection as intellectual orthodoxy, and the ironic mantle of heterodoxy that now falls on those who persist in the older traditions.

Darwin's Theory Revisited

Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection was inspired not primarily by his observations of the natural world, but by Thomas Malthus's theory of scarcity. According to Malthus in his *Essay on Population* published in 1798, human population growth would increase geometrically until it outran food supplies unless checked by war, famine, or disease.¹ Darwin was deeply impressed by Malthus's gloomy presentiment, which he saw as having a broader significance for all organisms. "[E]very single organic being around us may be said to be striving to the utmost to increase in numbers," he wrote in *The Origin of Species* in 1859. Further,

lighten any check, mitigate the destruction ever so little, and the number of the species will almost instantaneously increase to any amount. The face of Nature may be compared to a yielding surface, with ten thousand sharp wedges packed close together and driven inwards by incessant blows, sometimes one wedge being struck, and then another with greater force.²

Suffering, destruction, and death were thus the winnowing tools that allowed stronger and better adapted organisms to survive.

Under these circumstances, Darwin saw, any slight advantage that one organism gained over another would be critical to its success, while at the same time spelling its rival's doom. The mechanism, he believed, by which such competitive adaptations arose in nature, was random mutations. Pure chance conferred unpredictable advantages on the offspring of certain organisms. These products of indiscriminate luck were then preserved over generations according to the brute law of self-interest in the struggle for scarce resources. Through the accumulation of new modifications over time, some creatures evolved and diversified, while organisms that failed to keep pace in the mutational arms race were crushed to extinction by their more fierce or wily competitors.

The origin of the moral sense, it logically followed, was simply another adaptation aimed at ensuring human survival; its status was wholly relative to the function it performed. In *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, Darwin laid bare this fact, outlining how, through selective pressures, emotions, sociability, morality, and religion, all emerged as byproducts of biological necessity.

According to Darwin, social instincts induce animals to render valuable services to one another, ranging from baboons grooming each other to wolves hunting in packs. As a rule, the greater the cooperation

¹See Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers: The Lives, Times, and Ideas of the Great Economic Thinkers*, 7th ed. (New York: Touchstone Books, 1999), 75-105.

²Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. J. W. Burrow (London: Penguin Books, 1968), 119.

between members of a community, the greater their offspring. The extent, however, to which creatures can engage in such acts of reciprocal altruism is strictly determined by their ability to communicate effectively. In the case of humans, more elaborate forms of cooperation emerged as a result of language development. As the wishes of the community came to be better expressed, Darwin believed, “the common opinion of how each member ought to act for the public good would naturally become in a paramount degree the guide to action.”³ This, then, was the essence of morality: biological utility mediated by social contracts.

Once the first links in the chain of cooperation were forged, social instincts were reinforced through sensations of pleasure at in-group success, and, conversely, feelings of pain at social ostracism. “[T]he individuals which took the greatest pleasure in society would best escape various dangers,” Darwin wrote, “while those that cared least for their comrades and lived solitary, would perish in greater numbers.” Group sympathies in this way became so strong that the mere sight of another person suffering could create feelings of pain in those witnessing the fact. “We are thus impelled to relieve the sufferings of another, *in order that our own painful feelings may be at the same time relieved*”⁴ (emphasis supplied). Courage, honesty, and compassion might, therefore, develop along purely Darwinian lines of instinct and carefully masked self-interest.

Darwin's Ethics

The vacuousness of morality for its own sake, nevertheless, did not lead Darwin and his colleagues to despair. Critics of natural selection charged that the theory inspired an elitist ethic of “might makes right.” But this could not be farther from the truth so long as the biological success of human beings included such elements as cooperation and sympathy. There was, thus, no contradiction between the ideals of liberalism and the laws of evolution. If anything, many of Darwin's supporters believed, his theory could be seen as providing scientific grounds for a radical new egalitarianism—a fact not lost upon Karl Marx, who offered to dedicate the English edition of *Das Kapital* to Darwin (though Darwin declined the honor).⁵

Darwin's political and ethical views were both pragmatic and optimistic, influenced to a significant extent by the philosophy of John Stuart Mill. Eight years before *The Descent of Man* was released, Mill published *Utilitarianism*, his famous argument for a universal ethic based upon calculations of the

³Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (New York: P. F. Collier and Son, 1902), 186.

⁴Ibid., 144-145.

⁵J. W. Burrow from the preface to Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*.

common good. "Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle," wrote Mill, "holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness." This did not mean that individuals were free to satisfy their personal desires with complete disregard for other members of society, for maximal happiness, by definition, included the pleasure and pain of all human beings, and even "the whole sentient creation."⁶ The entire field of ethical inquiry was, therefore, reduced to a simple question: What action most increases, in quantity and quality, the total happiness of humankind?

Calculations of this sort clearly left room for individual acts of heroism and selflessness. Such actions, though, were deemed virtuous only insofar as they contributed to the success of the group. "The utilitarian morality does recognize in human beings the power of sacrificing their own greatest good for the good of others," Mill declared. "It only refuses to admit that the sacrifice is itself a good. A sacrifice which does not increase, or tend to increase, the sum total of happiness is considered wasted."⁷

In Darwinian terms, "happiness" is a chemical or psychological state selected by nature to reinforce biologically successful behavior. ("[E]motions are just evolution's executioners," says Robert Wright.⁸) The transition from statements of fact about the "sum total of offspring" in Darwin to statements of value about the "sum total of happiness" in Mill, was, therefore, practically seamless. After the social instincts were formed, Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man*: "The 'Greatest happiness principle' will have become a most important secondary guide and object."⁹ Utilitarian morality, by implication, is the only morality under the laws of evolution.

In mid-nineteenth-century England, utilitarian ethics were closely linked to the doctrine of progress. Mill believed that the application of his philosophy to society at large, accomplished through political and legal pressure, would eventually eliminate unhappiness altogether. "[M]ost of the great positive evils of the world are in themselves removable and will, if human affairs continue to improve, be in the end reduced within narrow limits," he wrote. "As for the vicissitudes of fortune, and other disappointments connected with worldly circumstances, these are principally the effect either of gross imprudence, of ill-regulated desires, or of bad or imperfect social institutions."¹⁰

⁶John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Utilitarianism* (New York: Bantam, 1993), 144, 150.

⁷*Ibid.*, 155.

⁸Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 88.

⁹Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 164.

¹⁰Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 153-154.

The solution to the problem of human suffering, thus, lay within the grasp of political and legal structures guided by reason: there was nothing inherent to the human condition to deny the ultimate perfectibility of humankind.

For Darwin, natural selection posited no final destination or purpose. Still, he predicted, the trajectory of evolution would lead to a utopian world order based upon the same utilitarian principles espoused by Mill. "As man advances in civilization, and small tribes are united into larger communities, the simplest reason would tell each individual that he ought to extend his social instincts and sympathies to all the members of the same nation, though personally unknown to him," he wrote. "This point being once reached, there is only an artificial barrier to prevent his sympathies extending to the men of all nations and races . . . becoming more tender and more widely diffused, until they are extended to all sentient beings."¹¹

Standards of morality, through inheritance, would in this way rise higher and higher until humans rejected all "baneful customs and superstitions" and instinctively treated each other according to Christ's golden rule, albeit for natural rather than spiritual reasons. Darwin's own long opposition to slavery is perhaps the best illustration of the humanistic spirit that would come to characterize society. By his own account, he was merely hastening the inevitable.

Historians of science frequently discuss Darwin's theory of origins as challenging the creation story of Genesis. Far less consideration is given to Darwinism as prophecy, as the new Revelation. In the economy of belief, however, evolution functioned not only as a scientific conjecture about the past, but as a secular reformulation of traditional Christian eschatology. Nature, "red in tooth and claw" in Alfred Lord Tennyson's famous words, would ultimately redeem humanity through her own inner workings. "Looking to future generations, there is no cause to fear that the social instincts will grow weaker, and we may expect that virtuous habits will grow stronger, becoming perhaps fixed by inheritance," declared Darwin. "In this case the struggle between our higher and lower impulses will be less severe, and virtue will be triumphant."¹²

The Hinge

The undoing of the utopian dream lay in a single word: ought. At first glance, the transition from statements of fact in Darwin to statements of value in Mill appears to be seamless. Upon closer examination, though, the fatal flaw in the argument becomes clear: in a purely Darwinian universe, no

¹¹Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 166.

¹²*Ibid.*, 169.

statements of value can be made. Ever. Every appeal to beauty, honor, justice, compassion, or purpose is excluded by hypothesis, so there is no standard by which any behavior can be judged, whether positively or negatively.

Ethical precepts in this regard have no intrinsic meaning or claim on human conduct, but are simply additional facts of natural selection to be catalogued alongside strong talons and sharp teeth. If something seems inherently right or good, it is only because what seems right generally aids humans in their struggle to survive. Yet should any particular moral trait cease to fulfill its biological function, morality would simply “evolve”—a euphemism to say that outworn ethics shall undergo extinction. Alternatively, individuals might retain an adaptively sterile code of moral behavior, but merely as a relic of their biological ancestry—an appendix to the soul.

In his classic treatise on liberal education, *The Abolition of Man*, C. S. Lewis exposed the futility of any ethical system founded on these premises.

Values, evolutionists tell us, are masks for self-interest and biological necessity. We must, therefore, learn to critically appraise all pretensions of goodness through the lens of reason. But what about the values of our educators? Lewis asks. “Their skepticism about values is on the surface: it is for use on other people’s values: about the values current in their own set they are not nearly skeptical enough.”¹³ Consider the cries of indignation that scientists who write about the selfishness of all human behavior would evince if someone suggested that their own profession was based upon rules of narrow self-interest that had nothing to do with *reason*. Or, consider the utilitarian ethics scientists often invoke.

Sociobiologists declare that the “real” value of seemingly virtuous behavior lies in the utility of that behavior to the community. A firefighter bravely sacrificing himself to save others is thus praised for serving the common good. To say that the death of an individual will serve the good of the community, though, is merely to say that the deaths of some people are useful to other people. On what grounds, then, are particular individuals asked to die for others? A refusal to sacrifice oneself is surely no less rational than consent to do so.

Strictly speaking, Lewis pointed out, neither choice can be rational, or

¹³C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1955), 41. Lewis, I am aware, was no biblical literalist. Yet his positive statements regarding the idea of organic evolution do not weaken his critique of what he variously called “orthodox Darwinism,” “the Scientific Outlook,” “universal evolutionism,” and “modern naturalism.” “I am certain that in passing from the scientific point of view to the theological, I have passed from dream to waking,” he wrote in his essay, “Is Theology Poetry?” “Christian theology can fit in science, art, morality, and the sub-Christian religions. The scientific point of view cannot fit in any of these things, not even science itself.” See *idem*, “Is Theology Poetry?” in *They Asked for a Paper*, C. S. Lewis (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962), 211.

irrational, at all. "From propositions about fact alone no practical conclusions can ever be drawn. *This will preserve society* cannot lead to *do this* except by the mediation of *society ought to be preserved*" (emphasis original).¹⁴ But without reinstating the transcendent ideals banished by natural selection, whence do we derive the idea that society ought to be preserved?

The Darwinian ethicist cannot appeal to the self-evident goodness of society—or even life—for then the same appeal to self-evident goodness could be made on behalf of virtues, such as justice and compassion, regardless of their utility. Philosophical materialism—that surly bouncer at the party of scientific inquiry—must expel all *oughts* that do not present an *is* calling card.

In the end, we are left with a conception of morality based not upon reason, but upon the mere fact of instincts. Humans sacrifice themselves for the good of the species not for any ultimate purpose, but in obedience to their natural urges. If these urges can be exaggerated in selected groups through the fiction of values, so much the better for the rest of us. Meanwhile, for those of us who are "in the know," all the old taboos are swept away at last. Sacrifice, being meaningless, may be avoided if others can be found to perform the task. Sexual desire, being instinctive, may be gratified whenever it does not endanger the species. Individual life, being expedient, may be ignored or disposed of whenever it does not serve the interests of the group.

Darwin understood all of this perfectly. Although he was not immune from the utopian spirit of his day, he also saw that his theory in fact left no foundation for morality of any kind. It could only endlessly describe behavior generated by instincts or whims. "The imperious word *ought* seems merely to imply the consciousness of the existence of a rule of conduct, however it may have originated," he wrote in *The Descent of Man* (emphasis original).¹⁵ Earlier, in *The Origin of Species*, he had praised queen bees for their "savage instinctive hatred" of their young.¹⁶ Now he implied there was no essential difference between bee morality and human morality:

If, for instance, to take an extreme case, men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive-bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker-bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters; and no one would think of interfering.¹⁷

Interference, after all, would only hinder the total happiness of the hive.

Evolutionists, like Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor, have thus taken upon themselves the tragic burden of truth for the sake of the greater happiness.

¹⁴Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 41.

¹⁵Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 157.

¹⁶Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 230.

¹⁷Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 187.

Knowing that the facts of natural selection will potentially erode any basis for morality, prominent evolutionary philosopher Daniel Dennett suggests that the ideal of the “transparent society” might need to be abandoned—elites should *allow* the community to misunderstand what is actually being said.¹⁸ In one of his notebooks, Darwin expressed a similar view:

[Natural selection] will not do harm because no one can be really *fully* convinced of its truth, except man who has thought very much, & he will know his happiness lays in doing good & being perfect, & therefore will not be tempted, from knowing everything he does is independent of himself to do harm (emphasis original).¹⁹

What is good for English gentlemen, Robert Wright interprets in *The Moral Animal*, might not be good for the impressionable masses. Wright goes on to make the startling statement that the prevailing moral ethos of many university philosophy departments is nihilism, and that this can be directly attributed to Darwin.²⁰ The full philosophical implications of evolution, he notes, have long been the trade-secret of scientists. But for the sake of the many, shouldn't we be grateful for their silence? Total happiness may require, well, intellectual subterfuge.

From Reason to Nihilism

And yet. What about those who opt out of happiness? Although Darwin himself believed that utilitarianism was the logical outworking of natural selection, Mill is but one of several patron saints in the pantheon of evolutionary philosophy. An equally compelling vision of morality based upon evolutionary concepts may be found in the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche.

The problem with all previous explanations of morality, Nietzsche declared in his magnum opus, *Beyond Good and Evil*, was that they took morality itself as a given. Yet what society had come to perceive as evil was originally acknowledged as good. What traditional ethics—corrupted by Judeo-Christian teachings—condemned as vice were merely untimely atavisms of older ideals. In the premoral period (vaguely associated in Nietzsche's mind with pre-Socratic Greece), the value of a deed was determined not by the actor's motives, but by the action's consequences. Strength, cunning, and brutality held no moral stigma, but were simply

¹⁸Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 509.

¹⁹Darwin, as cited in Wright, *The Moral Animal*, 350.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 328. Wright's project, it should be noted, is not to critique but to defend Darwin's vision and to rehabilitate sociobiology from its exile in the hinterlands of academic discourse following the twin disasters of American and Nazi race eugenics.

expressions of human vitality. "Strong wills" thus dominated "weak wills" as a means to their own self-preservation, while all effective energy was "will to power."

The moral period marked a reversal of this situation as deeds came to be judged by their underlying motives rather than their results. Nietzsche ascribed this readjustment in human psychology to religion, and particularly Christianity. "'God on the cross.' At no time or place has there ever been such a daring reversal, a formula so frightful, questioning, and questionable as this one," he wrote. "It ushered in a re-evaluation of all ancient values."²¹

Primarily, Christianity asserted the equality of all individuals and sided with those who suffer. Nietzsche found this notion—which he termed "slave-morality"—utterly insipid. "Among humans as among every other species of animal, there is a surplus of deformed, sick, degenerating, frail, necessarily suffering individuals," he wrote. By siding with these weaklings, Christianity had caused "the degeneration of the European race." It had "bred a diminished, almost ludicrous species, a herd animal, something good-natured, sickly, and mediocre."²²

In opposition to the emasculated slave-morality of Christianity, Nietzsche proposed an ethic of the "free spirit" in which the noble elite engaged in their own projects of value creation and self-mastery. What was required of the Nietzschean paragon was the "hardness of the hammer,"²³ the rejection of unmanly and morbid pity for others:

We are of the opinion that harshness, violence, enslavement, danger on the street and in the heart, seclusion, stoicism, the art of the tempter and every kind of devilry, that everything evil, frightful, tyrannical, predatory, and snake-like about humans serves to heighten the species "human being" as much as does its opposite.²⁴

Apologists for Nietzsche suggest that his philosophy has been misunderstood and distorted. No doubt this is true. But Nietzsche's defenders give away too much: the impression that his ideas were harmless betrays historical reality.²⁵ The suggestion that Nietzschean ethics find no support in Darwin is equally disingenuous. As it happens, Nietzsche may have never read Darwin and expressed only contempt for the naive social

²¹Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Marion Faber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 44.

²²*Ibid.*, 56-57.

²³Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Viking Press, 1954), 563.

²⁴Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 41.

²⁵See, e.g., Jonathan Glover's *Humanity: A Moral History of the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 11-44.

Darwinism that prevailed during his day. He was repulsed by the fact that under natural selection the weak herd may collectively overcome the strong few. And he resented the fatalistic undertones of the theory, which he deemed a threat to his own project of creating a new “science” of the Free Spirit. These significant differences in vision lay behind Nietzsche’s “Anti-Darwin” diatribe in *The Will to Power*.²⁶

Still, philosopher Hans Jonas points out, Nietzsche’s nihilism is demonstrably connected with the impact of Darwinism. “The will to power seemed the only alternative left if the original essence of man had evaporated in the transitoriness and whimsicality of the evolutionary process.”²⁷ It was precisely the inability of optimistic British gentlemen, such as Spencer and Huxley, to see that the old morality was truly dead and gone that Nietzsche sneered at—not Darwin’s notion of morality emerging from the welter of chance and competition for scarce resources. Nietzsche railed against the “plebeianism of modern ideas,” and insisted that the will to power could not be explained in material terms.²⁸ Yet his genealogy of morals, in fact, rested upon two ideas, both scientifically validated by the theory of natural selection: first, all of existence should be understood in terms of a constant struggle; and second, the natural world contained no inherent meaning. “If Nietzsche is the father of existentialism,” writes Dennett, “then perhaps Darwin deserves the title of grandfather”²⁹—absent Darwin’s worldview, Nietzsche’s would have had little intellectual currency.

Natural selection, Dennett goes on to declare, is “the universal acid”; it radically corrodes and ultimately destroys every traditional concept and belief in its path, whether in matters of cosmology, psychology, human culture, religion, politics, or ethics. Under natural selection, we are indeed “beyond good and evil”—or so a great many of Darwin’s most widely read interpreters and defenders insist.

Gould’s God

In the end, we may discover that we are able to order our lives in spite of—not because of—what we believe to be true: that morality is nature’s greatest ruse. Staunch evolutionists are loving parents and upright citizens.

²⁶John Moore, “Nietzsche’s Anti-Darwin,” a paper presented at the 11th Annual Conference of the Friedrich Nietzsche Society, Emmanuel College, Cambridge, September 8, 2001, on the web at: www.mith.demon.co.uk.

²⁷Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 47.

²⁸Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, as cited by Moore, “Nietzsche’s Anti-Darwin.”

²⁹Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 62.

Darwin himself was one of the most decent and humane figures of his time. But whether the moral reserves of human instinct prove stronger than the new value relativism remains to be seen. A more pessimistic view is that Western culture, steeped in philosophical and scientific indifference to good and evil, is rapidly expending its inherited value fat, the spiritual capital of its Jewish and Christian heritage.

Ironically, this latter premonition is no longer merely the grist of theologians. It is the avowed goal of sociobiologists to demonstrate that all of our loftiest ideals are grounded in purely pragmatic impulses toward genetic self-preservation. But some scientists are unable or unwilling to concede the old morality. Paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould is one such individual. Conscious of the impossibility of deriving values from facts, he has attempted to articulate a new relationship between Darwinian science and religious belief. Is there no way, he asks, that natural selection and religion can be defined in mutually respectful and beneficial terms?

Gould proposes what he calls the "Principle of Non-Overlapping Magisteria" or NOMA. According to this principle, science (by definition Darwinianism) and religion can be perfectly harmonized by a simple division of labor. "Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts," he writes, while religion attends to the entirely unrelated realm of "meaning and moral value." All attempts to create a Darwinian ethic are thus inherently flawed since they invariably encroach on the domain of metaphysics. However, religion for its part must refrain from making any claims about "factual reality." Once religion is weaned away from erroneous statements of fact, Gould maintains, we will realize "a respectful, even loving, concordat between the magisteria of science and religion."³⁰ Wouldn't this solve the problem of post-Darwinian morality once and for all?

I think not. By saying that it is the business of religion to ascribe meaning to the inherently purposeless facts of nature, Gould merely recasts religion as a less angst-filled variety of existentialism. But if no natural occurrence contains any purpose or meaning in itself apart from a human projection of value upon it, what distinguishes the claims of religion from purely philosophical attempts to generate meaning and values out of the void? What gives religious ethics any credence if divine justice and purpose are merely wishful metaphors that we can safely say have never interposed themselves upon *factual reality*? Having chopped its legs from under it, will evolutionists now command the truncated torso of religion to pick up its bed and walk?

³⁰Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 4, 6, 9-10.

Nor will it do to simply post a marker at the boundary between the biological and social sciences—"Thus far but no further"—as Gould and others are wont to do. Darwin, we have already seen, was the first to extend the logic of his theory to questions about religion and morality. He may have done so with greater reticence than many contemporary evolutionists, but not with less philosophical necessity or consequence. "The theory of evolution is not just an inert piece of theoretical science," writes Mary Midgley. "It is, and cannot help being, also a powerful folk-tale about human origins." Hence, scientists "calling for a sanitary cordon" to keep facts and values or scientific and human concerns apart are calling for something that is "both psychologically and logically impossible."³¹

Yet Gould's overture to religion is not mere dissembling. The evolutionary lobotomy of the soul is the death of goodness. Even more, the treacherous kiss of materialism spells the death of reason: if there is no value in anything, there is no value in thought. After Darwin, Jonas observes, both the classical understanding of man as *homo animal rationale* and the biblical view of humanity as created in the image of God are blocked. Reason is thus reduced to a means among means toward the individual's survival:

[A]s a merely formal skill—the extension of animal cunning—it does not set but serves aims, is not itself standard but measured by standards outside of its jurisdiction. If there is a "life of reason" for man (as distinct from the mere use of reason), it can be chosen only nonrationally, as all ends must be chosen nonrationally (if they can be chosen at all). Thus reason has no jurisdiction even over the choice of itself as more than a means. But use of reason, as a means, is compatible with any end, no matter how irrational. This is the nihilistic implication in man's losing a "being" transcending the flux of becoming.³²

No scientist can long tolerate such a repudiation of the mind, so somehow the old values must be surreptitiously readmitted through rear

³¹Mary Midgley, *Evolution as Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1, 15-21. There is, of course, a sense in which it is possible to speak of some scientific and some religious matters as each having their own particular concerns within "non-overlapping spheres." But Midgley's point remains. We can only value things within a factual context that makes our valuing intelligible, while brute facts can only be grasped and ordered within a framework of values and beliefs. So neither facts nor values can be conceived in radical isolation from each other. Further, the theory of evolution according to natural selection is not itself a mass of facts: it is a historical conjecture by which factual data may be connected, ordered, and valued. It is, in other words, a worldview very much on the "values and meaning" side of the equation. Gould's NOMA says that all our troubles will go away if we simply learn to embrace more than one worldview at the same time. Unfortunately, this remedy proves a very poor placebo when the conflict between materialist and nonmaterialist worldviews is precisely what is at issue.

³²Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life*, 47.

entrances. Gould selects the back door of personal sentiment, writing about the richness of Berlioz's *Requiem* and the goodness of baseball. The emotive power of music and play, he suggests, is meat enough to sustain us as we wander to and fro in the factual wilderness. Lest we insist upon more rigorous logic, he diverts us with obtuse jargon. ("Science and religion interdigitate in patterns of complex fingering, and at every fractal scale of self-similarity."³³)

Wright, meanwhile, tries to reclaim traditional morality through the semblance of reason, telling us that Christ and Buddha were the ultimate self-help gurus. But all this scrambling after ancient wisdom is futile. Evolutionists have sawn off the limb on which they were perched. Lewis predicted the final contortions of education in the materialist mold. "In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful."³⁴

Orthodoxy, Old and New

But what about the evidence? This, many will insist, remains the crux of the matter. We may not *like* the philosophical implications of natural selection, but we must still account for factual data in a way that is intellectually honest. What, then, are the alternatives? For many scientists and educators, there can be none. Intellectual honesty compels assent to evolution along Darwinian lines since materialistic explanations are, by definition, the only rational ones. Natural selection, we are told, was validated by individuals methodically pursuing an irrefutable empirical trail. That Darwinism is true is thus self-evident to anyone who has made a pilgrimage to the proper museum to gaze at the sacred bones.

Unfortunately, this account of Darwin's success, however sincerely believed or widely disseminated, is based upon a specious notion, namely, that materialism is a value-neutral method for interpreting factual data. It is not within the scope of this essay (nor the abilities of the author) to survey scientific challenges to natural selection. One need not be an expert, though, to detect a certain ill pallor, a weird and unwholesome glow, in statements such as the following one by Harvard biologist Richard Lewontin on the actual relationship between the empirical evidence and Darwin's theory: "Our willingness to accept scientific claims that are against common sense is the key to an understanding of the real struggle between science and the supernatural." He continues:

³³Gould, *Rocks of Ages*, 65.

³⁴Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, 35.

We take the side of science *in spite of* the patent absurdity of some of its constructs, *in spite of* its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite of* the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment, a commitment to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our a priori adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counterintuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. Moreover that materialism is absolute for we cannot allow a divine foot in the door.³⁵

The implication could not be more clear. When evolutionists tell us that we must accept certain “unsubstantiated just-so stories,” *in spite of* all countervailing reason, evidence, and common sense, it is clear that their interest is no longer primarily the discovery of truth. It is inculcating “the uninitiated” in the arcanum of a quite specific religious orthodoxy.³⁶ The word for such religious practice is *fundamentalism*.

Let us, then, take the actual empirical evidence at face value: small-brained, human-like hominids appear to have been in existence for over three million years. Now, how does this fact relate to Darwin’s mechanism of natural selection—the only mechanism presently admissible in scientific discourse? What are the ethical dimensions of Darwin’s theory as it relates to human development? How shall we understand the persistent connections between Darwinism and nihilism in the field of philosophy? And what are the social and political implications of seeing the world through Darwin’s eyes, through the lens of philosophical materialism? Textbook representations of the “fact” of natural selection have been less than forthcoming that these problems exist. The horns of the dilemma are, it seems, that evolutionists must either deny the fact of morality or abandon materialism as a paradigm to explain human nature and origins, and a great deal else besides. Most are unwilling to make the courageous cut, so instead they simply suppress the questions. Yet the questions, like so many fossils in a geological column, persist.

A final word on Genesis and mythological thinking. Throughout this essay I have argued that Darwinian theory is a highly corrosive philosophical cul-de-sac, but I have said little about any alternative path or my own beliefs about human origins. In fact, there may be numerous

³⁵Richard Lewontin, as cited in J. Budziszewski, *The Revenge of Conscience* (Dallas: Spence, 1999), 6.

³⁶“Evolution,” Midgley, 33, writes with no small piquancy, “is the creation myth of our age.”

alternative paths worth exploring, from Christian natural law theory to Aristotelian metaphysics. I am open to whatever insights may be gleaned from all of these. I also do not doubt that there are truths to be learned from Darwin himself; natural selection might well explain much of biological diversity. The nonmaterialist, G. K. Chesterton pointed out, can cheerfully admit a great deal of natural development according to physical laws into her worldview—it is the puritanical materialist who cannot allow any specks of the supernatural into his spotless machine.

My own heritage and study, however, have led me to a position probably best described as that of a “creationist.” I use the word deliberately, despite its awkward pedigree not because I subscribe to a wooden literalism in reading the Bible, but because I can find no progress in the fact-meaning dichotomy set forth by Gould and embraced by so-called “process” theologians such as Reinhold Niebuhr (whose theology Stanley Hauerwas traces with sympathetic but ultimately devastating effect back to Darwin via William James³⁷). Either the biblical creation story, in contrast to other creation myths, limns the contours of an actual event, or it is a false metaphor, a hollow conceit. History—what has happened in space-time—matters. And it matters not just for our thoughts, but for our feelings, our relationships, our values, and our actions.

The position I am advocating is close, I think, to that of J. R. R. Tolkien, a writer who fully understood myth and metaphor, and who deplored the dogma of scientism as unqualified Truth. In a letter to his son Christopher he wrote:

I think most Christians, except the v. simple and uneducated or those protected in other ways, have been rather hustled and hustled now for some generations by the self-styled scientists, and they’ve sort of tucked Genesis into a lumber-room of their mind as not very fashionable furniture, a bit ashamed to have it about the house, don’t you know, when the bright clever young people called: I mean, of course, even the *fideles* who did not sell it secondhand or burn it as soon as modern taste began to sneer. . . . In consequence they have (myself as much as any), as you say, forgotten the beauty of the matter even “as a story.”³⁸

The age of the earth and the precise order and nature of the creation might not be clear from the two Genesis accounts, Tolkien concludes, but the Garden of Eden—and our exile from it—are meaningful only so far as they are accepted as historical facts.

³⁷Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology: Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered at the University of St. Andrews in 2001* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2001), 49, 61, 77-78.

³⁸J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Letters of J. R. R. Tolkien* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981), 109.