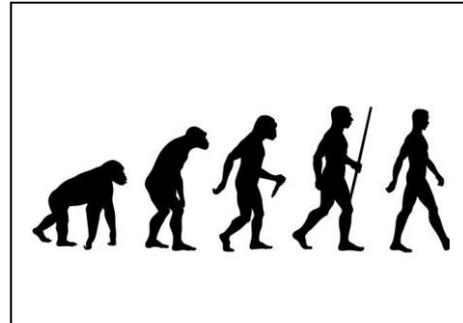


What is the deal with Darwin?

Part 1

Few words can set off powerful emotions as much as the “E – word”ⁱ I am of course speaking about evolution, as in Darwin’s evolution. It’s a debate that just doesn’t seem to be going away anytime soon.

According to Pew Research foundation (February 2019), 68% majority of white



evangelical Protestants and 44% of black Protestants see widespread scientific consensus on evolution, as do even larger shares of religiously unaffiliated Americans (86%) and white mainline Protestants (80%).ⁱⁱ Is this a case of ‘worldly science’ successfully infiltrating the Christian church? Are Christians naively being duped into believing alleged evidence, or is it because more and more Christians are looking at the evidence and going “this makes sense?” What’s the deal with Darwin? And are we being pushed into yet another false dichotomy of God vs Evolution?

A little story from my own life: I remember once in high school my science teacher holding a book on evolution. I immediately challenged her by saying “how can you believe that stuff because if you do you’re calling God a monkey!”

I’ll also lay out my cards on the table: I personally have battled to accept evolution as the explanatory paradigm for life on earth. In preparing and researching for this, I told myself that in order to be as fair as possible, I’m going to have to be more mature than I was in high school and put aside, as much as possible, my presuppositions. It is not my goal to Darwin-bash. In this article I want to explore more about the man himself, briefly touch on what the theory is (Google will gladly explain the theory for you if you want more detail), and then consider its cultural impact, especially in terms of how the debate has been culturally framed and pose the question of whether this framing is fair. A second article is being planned (if there is interest) which will outline the debate within the scientific community itself.

February 2021 marked the 150th anniversary of Charles Darwin's publication of *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, in which he expanded upon and tackled issues arising from his landmark book that made him famous: *On The Origin of Species* (1859).

It would not be an overstatement to say that Darwin changed the paradigm of science. In terms of impact, what Copernicus and Galileo did for astronomy, what Newton did for physics, Darwin did for the natural sciences.

Darwin was born 12 February 1809 in Shrewbury, Shropshire. He was child number 5 out of six. His dad, Robert Darwin, was a successful doctor and financier. His mom, Susannah, died when he was 8. Darwin was looked after by his elder sisters and maidservants, and in essence had a privileged upbringing. He attended Shrewsbury School as a boarder, but school really wasn't his thing. In his autobiography he wrote:

Nothing could have been worse for the development of my mind than Dr Butler's school, as it was strictly classical, nothing else being taught, except a little ancient geography and history. The school as a means of education to me was simply a blankⁱⁱⁱ

He went on to say

Looking back as well as I can at my character during my school life, the only qualities which at this period promised well for the future, were, that I had strong and diversified tastes, much zeal for whatever interested me, and a keen pleasure in understanding any complex subject or thing.^{iv}

Darwin had his naughty moments as a boy which he recounts in his biography, but what also became clear was that from an early age he had a love for observing and collecting. This following quotation references the time when he was 8:

By the time I went to this day school...my taste for natural history, and more especially for collecting, was well developed. I tried to make out the names of plants....and collected all sorts of things, shells, seals, franks, coins, and minerals. The passion for collecting which leads a man to be a systematic naturalist, a virtuoso, or a miser, was very strong in me, and was clearly innate, as none of my sisters or brother ever had this taste^v

This passion never went away, because of his time at Cambridge he writes:

But no pursuit at Cambridge was followed with nearly so much eagerness or gave me so much pleasure as collecting beetles. It was the mere passion for collecting, for I did not dissect them, and rarely compared their external characters with published descriptions, but got them named anyhow. I will give a proof of my zeal: one day, on tearing off some old bark, I saw two rare beetles, and seized one in each hand; then I saw a third and new kind which I could not bear to lose, so that I popped the one which I held in my right hand into my mouth. Alas! It ejected some intensely acrid fluid, which burnt my tongue so that I was forced to spit the beetle out, which was lost, as was the third one.^{vi}

His Dad, who had a huge impact on him, wanted him to study medicine, but that didn't work for him because he couldn't stand the sight of blood or suffering. His father suggested becoming a Christian minister as an acceptable alternative, and Darwin actually warmed to this idea because he thought it would enable him to pursue his interest in naturalism, especially if he became a country parson. Darwin's studies was a combination of theology, the classics, science and mathematics. As a student at Cambridge he would have been required to sign the 39 articles of the Anglican faith. Interestingly he didn't formally give up the intention of becoming a minister, but rather, in his own words, it "died a natural death when, on leaving Cambridge, I joined the "Beagle" as a naturalist."^{vii}

Just in terms of exposure to the Christian faith, Darwin in his upbringing had a father who was Anglican (but regarded as a free thinker), and Darwin was baptized as a baby into the Anglican church. His mom was a Unitarian, meaning they didn't believe in the trinity. During his time at Cambridge Darwin developed a close friendship with Professor Henslow, a man who Darwin really came to appreciate because of his vast knowledge base and capacity to observe minute details, and his deep religiosity made an impression on him. In terms of Darwin's own belief, it would seem that people like Dawkins want to paint him as an outright atheist, but this cannot be done with accuracy. It's hard to pin Darwin down. In fact, in one of his private letters to his wife Emma, he clearly states that he has never been an atheist.^{viii} Yet, in later times we see that he effectively abandoned historic Christianity, viewing the biblical writings as primitive. As former Times journalist David Aikman correctly points out:

"...it is now acknowledged that his disappointment with Christianity stemmed not from his insights into evolutionary theory but from the personal tragedy experienced in his own family when his daughter Annie

died at the age of ten. Chronic illnesses, which debilitated Darwin for months at a time and which today remain undiagnosed, were also a factor, because they made it difficult for him to reconcile a loving God with his experience of much suffering in his own life.”^{ix}

When one considers the fluctuations in Darwin’s faith journey throughout his life, it would seem the most accurate term to describe him would be agnostic.

In terms of his poor health, Charles Darwin suffered for over 40 years from long bouts of vomiting, gut pain, headaches, severe tiredness, skin problems, and depression. Twenty doctors failed to treat him.^x One medical journal postulates that he showed the classic symptoms of lactose intolerance.^{xi}

A life changing opportunity arose for Darwin to become a naturalist aboard the ship “Beagle.” This was a five year around the world trip (December 1831-October 1836), and it understandably had a huge impact on him. It was on this ship that he made observation upon observation upon observation, especially at the now famous Galapagos islands. It was this voyage and his observations that became the breeding ground for his famous “*Origin of Species.*”

Darwin was not the originator of the concept of evolution. The idea of evolution, or perhaps more accurately *transformism*, dates as far back as Greek philosopher Anaximander over 500 years BC and also Empedocles (ca. 495–35 BCE).^{xii} Furthermore, both early church fathers Augustine and Gregory of Nazianzus maintained that not every species of plants and animals were created by God; rather, some had developed in historical times from God’s creations^{xiii}. During the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas concluded after detailed discussion that the development of living creatures such as maggots and flies from non-living matter such as decaying meat was not incompatible with Christian faith or philosophy - but he left it to others to determine whether this actually happened^{xiv}. Certainly the idea of an old earth had become accepted as the norm based on geology. Prior to Darwin French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (1744-1829) had put forward the idea of species development over time and was published in *Philosophie zoologique* in 1809.^{xv} Darwin’s own grandfather had also put forward evolutionary explanations in his book *Zoonomia*. With respect to *Zoonomia*, although he was initially impressed, upon a second reading after an interval of ten or fifteen years Darwin said “*I was much disappointed; the proportion of speculation being so large to the facts given.*”^{xvi} The major contemporary of Darwin who independently also came up with the theory of Evolution was naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace who had sent a short manuscript to Darwin. On 1 July 1858, one year before the

publication of *Origin*, a paper which was jointly authored by them was presented, with neither of them being there, to the *Linnean Society in London*, and apparently it wasn't really noticed. Wallace's views differed from Darwin in a number of ways, most notably that Wallace understood divine intervention as being required for the origin of human beings.^{xvii}

The publication of *Origin of Species* did not go unnoticed. It was an immediate bestseller and immediately ignited controversy. Darwin was expecting this, and this is a primary reason why it took 20 years before deciding to publish his ideas, as he feared a backlash from both the scientific and religious community. One famously fierce advocate of his work, who earned the nickname of Darwin's bulldog, was Thomas Huxley, a fellow biologist.

What was it that Darwin, based on his observations, proposed to explain what he saw? Very simply put: species of organisms change as a result of random factors over time: at a micro level (adaptation to environment) and macro level (species change), and that we all share a common ancestry. The random changes which result in variation often have advantageous benefits, and over time these get passed on to result in the survival of what we see today. The name given to this is the process of natural selection. Darwin explains it as follows:

Let it be borne in mind how infinitely complex and close-fitting are the mutual relations of all organic beings to each other and to their physical conditions of life. Can it, then, be thought improbable, seeing that variations useful to man have undoubtedly occurred, that other variations useful in some way to each being in the great and complex battle of life, should sometimes occur in the course of thousands of generations? If such do occur, can we doubt (remembering that many more individuals are born than can possibly survive) that individuals having any advantage, however slight, over others, would have the best chance of surviving and of procreating their kind? On the other hand, we may feel sure that any variation in the least degree injurious would be rigidly destroyed. This preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection.^{xviii}

Or, in my attempt at creating a formula:

Single Cell + Variation + Inherited Traits + Selection + Time = Me (and everything else)

Darwin didn't use the word evolution until the very end of his book, but rather the terms variation or "modification with descent." The theory often gets called "survival of the fittest" because it's ultimately the fittest organisms (not in terms of exercise fitness but in terms of best fit to environment) that are able to reproduce and pass on their traits to the next generation.^{xix} This has been parodied through The Darwin Award (if you have a dark sense of humour, you may want to check out www.darwinawards.com), a tongue in cheek award to "salute the improvement of the human genome by honoring those who accidentally remove themselves from it in a spectacular manner!"

If you're tempted to write off the theory, try and put yourself into Darwin's head. You have seen similarities and differences between species, as well as similarities and differences between fossils which go back a long way to living creatures you see today. The fossil record definitely seems sequential, with shells at the bottom moving all the way to mammals at the top, and no human remains are found except at the very top. Your brain tells you, based on your numerous observations, that somehow these things must all be connected. The primary achievement of Darwin was that he offered a compelling explanation for what he saw.

So what was the rumpus all about with his theory?

My personal understanding is that it boils down to two things in particular:

Firstly, the notion that all life is derived from a common ancestor. Darwin saw life developing as a process which ultimately formed species (it's illustrated as a 'tree of life' in his writings). This went against the Christian understanding that species were created miraculously by God. It effectively places humanity in the same category as animals, albeit more evolved. In this sense, the Imago Dei has been removed.

Secondly, the idea that God was no longer needed.

This second point is crucial, because even though Darwin himself did not see his theory as being subversive of belief in God, in just about every explanation of Darwinian evolution I came across, it invariably began with a variation of the following refrain: "*Long ago people used to believe in a God who created everything, but....*"

Because of the notion of chance and long age as an explanation for life, Darwinian evolution became a camping ground for atheists, and it has developed from a camping ground to a luxury resort by its proponents. It was

accepted as fact by the 1870's and today it is the *de facto* paradigm for understanding the natural sciences.

In terms of the first point (life deriving from a common ancestor), we need to understand that, in the analogy of Galileo, Darwin is not looking at the Book of the Bible, but the book of nature. To this end, the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to understanding life will need to be done within the framework of science (the next article). One misconception worth clearing is that Darwin never said we evolved from monkeys or apes, but rather that we had a common ancestor; so that famous 1965 artistic depiction called *The March of Progress* or *The Road to Homo sapiens*, originally created in 1965 for *Life Nature Library* by the artist Rudolph Zallinger, got it wrong. In his BBC documentary called "The Genius of Charles Darwin – Part 2: The Fifth Ape," Dawkins explained it as follows as he speaks on location in East Africa (Kenya, his own birthplace):

"Between five and six million years ago, there lived in Africa an ape who had two children. One of those children was destined to give rise to us, the other was destined to give rise to the chimpanzees. If I stood here and held my mother's hand, and she held her mother's hand and so on, back to the grand ancestor of all humans and all chimpanzees, how far would the line stretch? The answer is about 300 miles"

The second point, that God was no longer needed, is the part that has had the biggest impact culturally.

Which is for me ironic, simply because Darwinian evolution doesn't do away with God: it just offers an alternative explanation, if it is true, of the creative process used by God. On its own terms, I can see the logic and elegance of evolutionary theory, but I would have to add another word: it's miraculous: it even has biblical themes of creation and re-creation! I must also be honest and admire the faith of the atheists who wholeheartedly believe that the incredible diversity we see in the world today is a result of life starting by pure chance as a result of chemical mixes in a primordial soup aeons ago *without reference to an intelligent initiator of the event*.

Nonetheless, in popular culture, Evolution is associated with atheism. For example, in an article the Life Sciences Education Journal last year, a study was published which showed that just over half of the interviewed biology students held the perception that accepting evolution meant you couldn't believe in God.^{xx}

Was there historically a total disregard of the theory by Christians?

Not at all.

For instance, the first American scientist to carefully review and publicly support Darwin's *Origin of Species* was a devout Christian named Asa Gray, now regarded as one of the most prominent American biologists of the 19th century. He had a 30 year career as biologist at Harvard University. As a professional scientist Asa, like Galileo, insisted that science was neutral in matters of religion and metaphysics. Gray found evolutionary theory incredibly stimulating to his scientific research, but never found it threatening to his faith. He had the foresight to realise that even though theologically Darwin's theory was not atheistic, some would use it as an "excuse" for unbelief.^{xxi}

Another unexpected source of support came from conservative theologian B.B. Warfield. B.B Warfield was a man who will be known for developing a powerful and enduring legacy in American evangelicalism for his belief that the Bible communicates revelation from God entirely without error. Here was a man who defended biblical inerrancy, and yet was also a cautious proponent of the possibility that God could have brought about life through evolution. His basic stance was a doctrine of providence that saw God working in and with the processes of nature, rather than completely replacing them. In Warfield's mind, a high view of biblical authority was fully compatible with a divinely guided process of evolution.^{xxii}

Charles Kingsley, a 19th century British clergyman and writer, said of Darwin's theory, "*We used to think that God made things. Now we understand that God made things make themselves.*"^{xxiii}

Frederick Temple, an academic, Anglican churchman who was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 1896, said the following:

The doctrine of Evolution leaves the argument for an intelligent Creator and Governor of the world stronger than it was before. There is still as much as ever the proof of an intelligent purpose pervading all creation. The difference is that the execution of that purpose belongs more to the original act of creation, less to acts of government since. There is more divine foresight, there is less divine interposition; and whatever has been taken from the latter has been added to the former."

Nonetheless there has been this historical tug-and-pull relationship between the Christian faith and evolution. But it was the year 1925 that really put this

debate on the cultural map, in a small town of Dayton, Tennessee. A legal confrontation was taking place between William Jennings Bryan on the one side, and Clarence Darrow on the other. As James Emery White puts it:

Their confrontation was not over a crime or misdemeanor; it was not over a legal suit involving a will or a trust. It didn't even involve special prosecutors or a grand jury. In fact, the courts had never encountered a case quite like this one. The subject was the very origin of human life. It is known in history books as the "Scopes Trial."^{xxiv}

A young biology teacher by the name of John Scopes was charged with violating a Tennessee law which stated the teaching of evolution was not allowed. The trial put defenders of evolutionary theory against those who wanted what was regarded as the Bible's view of the origin of the world. Jennings represented the State, and by implication all those who believed in the biblical view of creation. The same implication applied to Darrow who represented those holding to evolutionary theory.

James Emery White continues to explain:

It really was the clash of two worlds. Brian was the good-old-boy religious southerner. Darrow, in favour of evolution, was the outspoken religious agnostic from the North, polished and intellectual, supplied to defend Scopes by the ACLU. Many people do not know that the result of the trial found the teacher guilty, but not before Darrow (the evolutionist) had made a fool of Bryan (the creationist)...Bryan wasn't the sharpest biblical scholar around. So the verdict as it stands in history is intriguing: Bryan won the battle, but he lost the war...the conflict stamped the entire debate with an unmistakable image. Evolution vs creationism came to be seen as...science vs ignorance; the modern world of the twentieth century vs the American religious fundamentalism of the nineteenth century. That image has remained firmly in place for nearly a century and so have the lines of debate.^{xxv}

And the debate still rages on today.

Is it Darwin vs Christianity? It's been framed like that, and in an interview Dr Alistair McGrath, who is a former atheist and now Christian with 3 PhD's and teaches at Oxford, a biophysicist, Anglican minister, and apologist, who has debated Dawkins and wrote a rebuttal to the God Delusion called "The Dawkins Delusion," he makes the following observation:

My own reading of what is a very complex situation is that there is a cultural agenda going on here. It's about a certain group of Christians – mainly in North America – feeling threatened. As a result, they put up defensive walls against anything that they saw as being contaminating or threatening to their faith. Darwin's theory of evolution was seen as integral to American scientific culture, which those Christians saw as an enemy. I don't think any other Christian people do, but these North American Christians are seen as normative by people who want to tell a particular story. In fact, the North American response to evolution is quite different from, say, the British Christian response to evolution. It's actually quite a dramatic difference. This should immediately suggest to any intelligent person that there might be a cultural element in this matter. It's not Christianity versus Darwin. It's very much an American form of Christianity (a very specifically American form) which arose in an American context, responding to an American agenda, not Christianity globally.^{xxvi}

Many Christians today who are also top notch scientists understand evolution to be the creative means God used. Probably the most well-known is geneticist Dr Francis Collins, who served as Director of National Institute of Health under 3 Presidents in the USA, and who is stepping down at end of this year. Prior to taking up this key position, prestigious journal Nature points out how *“Collins made key contributions to the burgeoning field of genetics and medicine. He co-discovered the gene that causes cystic fibrosis, and his laboratory, eventually at the NIH's National Human Genome Research Institute (NHGRI) in Bethesda, Maryland, found genes linked to conditions including Huntington's disease and type 2 diabetes.”^{xxvii}*

In his book, *The Language of God*, Collins poses the central question that he was seeking to answer as follows:

In this modern era of cosmology, evolution, and the human genome, is there still the possibility of a richly satisfying harmony between the scientific and spiritual worldviews? I answer with a resounding yes!^{xxviii}

And so we could go on and on.

Of course the modern atheists don't like Christians who say evolution is the means God used to create. They want to hold onto chance plus time and leave God out of the equation totally. The New Atheists, led primarily by Richard Dawkins, want to see science as the total answer to everything, and create the

notion that religious faith is irrational. The irony is that they themselves have married science to the philosophical worldview of atheism, and scientism is the result. For an excellent treatment on this subject check out David Block's *God and Galileo* book! I further find it intriguing that Dawkins and co seem to display a lot of anger and antipathy towards a God they don't believe in.

Not every scientist holds to scientism. Not every scientist who sees the evidence pointing to evolution is in the scientism camp either. These are the sensible scientists who understand that science doesn't answer everything, least of all the ultimate questions of life. These are the scientists who appreciate, as Galileo did, that there is a book of nature and a book of special revelation

Evolution without God is indeed disastrous, and one corpse too many has been the evidence of that as political regimes applied the principle. Dawkins himself admits, in his documentary, that as a scientist he is thrilled by natural selection, but as a human being he abhors it as a principle for organizing society.

As you may have gathered, this topic is indeed huge. I've not gone into the history of the science which is really interesting, as, for example, the science of genetics (which Darwin knew nothing about) is being used as both support for and support against evolution. Those combining evolution with genetics are known as neo-darwinists.

Some concluding considerations.

Firstly, I believe the dichotomy of God versus evolution is false. I agree with James Emery White when he points out that the real divide is between a naturalistic view of the universe and a theistic one.^{xxix} Evolution may well explain the process of life, but it doesn't explain how it all started.

Secondly, if evolution is true, Christians have nothing to worry about. The real battle for Christians is not evolution, but highlighting the futility of scientism as an explanatory worldview. There are going to be many casualties.

Thirdly, if evolution is not true, then time will indeed tell. We must not be afraid to ask questions, but just as we also need to be ready to give an answer with gentleness and respect, so we must also be willing to ask questions in the same way.

Darwin was given a full state burial and was buried in Westminster Abbey. According to an article on Darwin's illness in Postgrad Medical Journal:

Darwin died just before 4 pm on 19 April 1882, not of his lifetime illness but apparently of a heart attack. Surprisingly no one seems to have considered whether he might have had a perforated peptic ulcer that would explain the severe pain and haematemesis he had at the time of death.²⁹ The study of lactose can lead to the ultimate dream he never fully addressed—the origin, as compared with the development, of species.^{xxx}

But that's another article....

ⁱ Ross, Hugh *Creation and Time* p73

ⁱⁱ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/02/06/how-highly-religious-americans-view-evolution-depends-on-how-theyre-asked-about-it/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The autobiography of Charles Darwin, p12 (accessed on Scribd)

^{iv} Ibid

^v Ibid, p.7

^{vi} Ibid p28

^{vii} Ibid.p23

^{viii} www.darwinproject.ac.uk/commentary/religion/what-did-darwin-believe

^{ix} Aikman, David (2008) *The Delusion of Disbelief* p83

^x *Postgrad Med J* 2005;81:248–251. doi: 10.1136/pgmj.2004.025569

^{xi} *ibid*

^{xii} <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/evolution-before-darwin/>

^{xiii} <https://www.britannica.com/science/evolution-scientific-theory/History-of-evolutionary-theory>

^{xiv} *ibid*

^{xv} *Ibid*

^{xvi} The autobiography of Charles Darwin p18

^{xvii} <https://www.britannica.com/science/evolution-scientific-theory/History-of-evolutionary-theory>

^{xviii} Darwin, Charles *On the Origin of Species* p88 – accessed on Scribd

^{xix} <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/encyclopedia/theory-evolution/>

^{xx} <https://www.lifescied.org/doi/10.1187/cbe.19-05-0106>

^{xxi} <https://biologos.org/common-questions/how-have-christians-responded-to-darwins-origin-of-species>

^{xxii} *ibid*

^{xxiii} <https://undeceptions.com/articles/does-the-theory-of-evolution-conflict-with-christianity/>

^{xxiv} White, James Emery (2019) *Christianity for people who aren't Christians* – p29

^{xxv} *ibid*

^{xxvi} <https://undeceptions.com/articles/does-the-theory-of-evolution-conflict-with-christianity/>

^{xxvii} <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-02727-9>

^{xxviii} Quoted in Aikman, David (2008) *The delusion of Disbelief* p91

^{xxix} White, James Emery (2019) *Christianity for people who aren't Christians* – p30

^{xxx} *Postgrad Med J* 2005;81:248–251. doi: 10.1136/pgmj.2004.025569