

The publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 was a watershed moment in both the history of science and the history of religion. The theory of evolution (transmutation of species) had had a number of ancient and modern subscribers, including Darwin's own grandfather, Erasmus Darwin. Charles Darwin's pioneering contribution, however, was to pinpoint a mechanism—natural selection—by which evolution had supposedly occurred and to support that hypothesis with a significant quantity of scientific evidence. Natural selection refers to competition in nature among plants and animals that results in the survival of those best adapted via randomly occurring variations. Thanks to Charles Darwin, scientists could now endeavor to explain plant, animal, and human life in purely material terms, without any recourse to God. Given such implications, religious and scientific controversy soon followed (as Darwin himself had predicted); moreover, the discord continues even to this day, especially in the United States.

It would be too tedious to read excerpts on all the different religious and philosophical points of view regarding the theory of evolution. The following three excerpts, however, do contain revealing perspectives and reference a number of others. The first excerpt is by Enoch Fitch Burr (1818-1907), the pastor of a Congregational Church in Connecticut who spoke and wrote extensively on the topic of science and religion. Burr's book, *Doctrine of Evolution*, published in 1873, rejects evolution as being incompatible with the Christian faith. The second excerpt is by the man himself, Charles Darwin (1809-1882), who in his autobiography explains why he is an agnostic; as one would expect, evolution and natural selection play an important role in his reasoning. Shaped between 1876 and 1882, Darwin's autobiography was intended for his family and was not published until after his death. The Irish philosopher, William Graham (1839-1911), penned the third excerpt. Graham's most important book, *The Creed of Science*, appeared in 1881. This book takes the position that, while evolution is likely true, materialism minus a Creator is clearly false. Graham's conception of the Creator, however, is more akin to the God of the philosophers than to the God of the Bible.

God and Evolution: E. F. Burr, Charles Darwin, and William Graham

E. F. Burr

(*Pater Mundi; or, Doctrine of Evolution*, by Rev. E. F. Burr, American Tract Society, 1873, pages 9-14, 16-20.)

The Doctrine of Evolution—known also as the Law Scheme, and the Developmental Hypothesis—in its ripest form, is that all things we perceive, including what are called spiritual phenomena, have come from the simplest beginnings, solely by means of such forces and laws as belong to matter. Suppose all matter exploded into one great cloud of atoms. Then these atoms, *by virtue of properties inherent in themselves*, would, in course of time, come together into worlds, into astronomic systems, into the vegetable and animal kingdoms, and even into that great spiritual realm which is the chief wonder and glory of Nature.

I propose to discuss these views at length, because they seem to me the great, and indeed the only possible, assailant of Theism from the side of science.

It is true that not a few persons of great consideration are disposed to think that the Doctrine of Evolution does not really assail our Theism at all. They say it is perfectly consistent with the existence of God, and even with His being the author of Nature. Supposing the nature of matter to be the proximate source of all natural structures and organisms, with their phenomena, the matter itself may have come directly from the hand of a Creator.

This must be admitted. A positive proof of the Law Scheme would do just nothing toward disproving a creating God. At the same time it is true that this scheme is extremely hostile to Theism and evangelical religion generally. One might conjecture as much from its history. It was started by old Greek atheists—Anaximander, Anaxagoras, Democritus, and Epicurus—in the interest of atheism. It was revised and enlarged in the interest of atheism, at the first of this century, by French atheists—Lamarck, St Hilaire, St. Vincent, and La Place. And, up to the present time, most of its leading supporters, the men who have pressed it with most zeal and intelligence, have been widely astray in point of religious belief. They have been materialists, rationalists, free-religionists. They have been deists, atheists, skeptics. They have been active foes of churches, ministries, Bibles. To a man, such gross errorists are now found catching at the Doctrine of Evolution with great eagerness. They scarcely need to be argued with in its behalf. They are ready to take it on sight. At once it becomes their pet philosophy. They dote on it; they put it forward on all occasions; they loudly advertise us that it is destined to be, at no distant day, the destruction of what they are pleased to call *superstition*—meaning Supernaturalism and the Christian religion. Especially true is this of the “fast and furious” unbelievers in Continental Europe. These men tell us with shining faces that they already see the beginning of the end; that all the sacred traditions are crumbling beneath the ponderous battleaxe of the new scientific giant. “God is dead,” say they, “or if not yet dead, He is *dying*.” And they blow a trumpet at the news. Whatever doubt others may have at the real bearing of the Doctrine of Evolution, these men seem to have no doubt at all. While some Christian people look on the speculation with favor, and still more do not as yet see their way clear to reject it (perhaps lest they should repeat the story of Galileo and his persecutors), these men feel, and are glad to feel, that, both in its practical influence and its logical sequences, it is quite inconsistent with a reasonable faith in the Bible and in God.

And I think their view is correct. The Law Scheme crowds God away till His great orb loses all sensible diameter. It contradicts that whole idea of a personal Divine interference in the affairs of the world, of which our Scriptures are full. Inspiration and miracles and regenerations and even prayers are scornfully cast out by it, as, at best, mere figures of speech. As to the Bible account of the origin of man, of the stage of advancement at which he appeared, of his fall, and of the way in which he is to be restored and saved—this scheme strikes it squarely in the face. Let men say what they will, evolutionism means *materialism*; and so denies to man moral character, responsibility, personal immortality; and so denies the chief use of having a God. “And thus,” says Hugh Miller, “though the development theory be not atheistic, it is at least practically tantamount to atheism. For, if man be a dying creature, restricted in his existence to the present scene of things, what does it really matter to him, for any one moral purpose, whether there be a God or no? If in

reality on the same religious level with the dog, wolf, and fox, that are by nature atheists—a nature most properly coupled with irresponsibility—to what one practical purpose should he know or believe in a God whom he, as certainly as they, is never to meet as his Judge; or why should he square his conduct by the requirements of the moral code, further than a low and convenient expediency may chance to demand?”

Evolutionism also denies that great class of Theistic *evidences* drawn from the admirable natural objects of the universe, and on which faith in all ages has so largely rested. Indeed, it is not too much to say that in effect it suppresses *all* Theistic evidences; for, after I have admitted that the properties of matter itself will account for all we find within the bounds of Nature, what shall hinder a philosopher from saying, “These atoms are just as easily conceived of as being eternal as is an Infinite Mind. The atoms we know to exist, the Mind we do not know to exist. In this case it is unphilosophical to assume the eternity of the unknown, rather than of the known, as an explanation of the facts. One assumption is simpler than two assumptions.” No satisfactory answer can be made to this. Accordingly, those scholars who hold to eternal atomic forces and laws which are able of themselves to build all the various natural structures, are universally atheists. Founded by atheism, claimed by atheism, supported by atheism, used exclusively in the interest of atheism, suppressing without mercy every jot of evidence for the Divine existence, and so making a positive rational faith in God wholly impossible, the Doctrine of Evolution may well be set down as not only a foe to Theism, but a foe of the most thorough-going sort.

...the [evolutionary] hypothesis has come to have a very large following and influence, and threatens to have more. It has taken to itself the dress, the airs, the language, and the ideas of our best science. It speaks with the voices, writes with the pens, and persuades with the reputations of well-known scientific men to whose entire scholarly life and labors it is evidently giving shape. So it has managed to come to great notice and influence. It dwells unmolested under the eaves of Christian colleges. It sits honorably in professors’ chairs. It is rewarded for its labors by Commencement honors. It is even invited to expound itself in our Theological Seminaries; and to feed itself to the young men who are about the feed the churches. It no longer confines itself to obscure treatises in the dialect of the learned, but tries to popularize itself to the utmost. ...It has its tracts and its catechisms, and even its pictures. It has its Apostles’ Creed, its Westminster Shorter, and even its “Can you tell me, child, who made you?” And the people and the youth are, to an alarming extent, being snared by such means. ...And why not, seeing that not a few and devout eminent theists and Christians, looking merely at the unquestionable fact that organization by atomic forces and laws is perfectly consistent with the existence of God, and overlooking the equally unquestionable fact that it is perfectly inconsistent with all *evidence* of His existence (especially with that evidence from the things that are made, which the Christian Scriptures say leaves even the heathen without excuse), have been led to tolerate and sometimes to favor so much of the Law Scheme as philosophically draws after it all the rest.

...No observant theist can fail to see that it is the great intellectual adversary of religion in our times. The rational battle for religion is no longer on the metaphysical field: it is now almost wholly on the field of the natural sciences; and the champion of unbelief on the field is the Doctrine of Evolution. And a formidable champion it is. As M. Guizot says, “All those

who are still Christians and believers in a supernatural life, must become more united against the invasion of materialistic doctrines." There is no other speculation from which so much is to be apprehended; none equally seductive and dangerous in all the speculating past...

Charles Darwin

(The Autobiography of Charles Darwin, edited by Nora Barlow, W. W. Norton & Company, 1958, pages 73, 75-78.)

Although I did not think much about the existence of a personal God until a considerably later period of my life, I will here give the vague conclusions to which I have been driven. The old argument of design in nature, as given by Paley, which formerly seemed to me so conclusive, fails, now that the law of natural selection has been discovered. We can no longer argue that, for instance, the beautiful hinge of a bivalve shell must have been made by an intelligent being, like the hinge of a door by man. There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows...

...suffering, is quite compatible with the belief in Natural Selection, which is not perfect in its action, but tends only to render each species as successful as possible in the battle for life with other species, in wonderfully complex and changing circumstances.

That there is much suffering in the world no one disputes. Some have attempted to explain this in reference to man by imagining that it serves for his moral improvement. But the number of men in the world is as nothing compared with that of all other sentient beings, and these often suffer greatly without any moral improvement. A being so powerful and so full of knowledge as a God who could create the universe, is to our finite minds omnipotent and omniscient, and it revolts our understanding to suppose that his benevolence is not unbounded, for what advantage can there be in the sufferings of the millions of the lower animals throughout almost endless time? This very old argument from the existence of suffering against the existence of an intelligent first cause seems to me a strong one; whereas, as just remarked, the presence of much suffering agrees well with the view that all organic beings have been developed with variation and natural selection.

At the present day the most usual argument for the existence of an intelligent God is drawn from the deep inward conviction and feelings which are experienced by most persons. But it cannot be doubted that Hindoos, Mahomadans and others might argue in the same manner and with equal force in favour of the existence of one God, or of many Gods, or as with the Buddhists of no God. There are also many barbarian tribes who cannot be said with any truth to believe in what we call God: they believe indeed in spirits or ghosts, and it can be explained...how such a belief would be likely to arise.

Formerly I was led by feelings such as those just referred to, (although I do not think that the religious sentiment was ever strongly developed in me), to the firm conviction of the existence of God, and of the immortality of the soul. In my Journal I wrote that whilst standing in the midst of the grandeur of a Brazilian forest, "it is not possible to give an

adequate idea of the higher feelings of wonder, admiration, and devotion which fill and elevate the mind." I well remember my conviction that there is more in man than the mere breath of his body. But now the grandest scenes would not cause any such convictions and feelings to rise in my mind. It may be truly said that I am like a man who has become colour-blind, and the universal belief by men of the existence of redness makes my present loss of perception of not the least value as evidence. This argument would be a valid one if all men of all races had the same inward conviction of the existence of one God; but we know that this is very far from being the case. Therefore I cannot see that such inward convictions and feelings are of any weight as evidence of what really exists. The state of mind which grand scenes formerly excited in me, and which was intimately connected with a belief in God, did not essentially differ from that which is often called the sense of sublimity; and however difficult it may be to explain the genesis of this sense, it can hardly be advanced as an argument for the existence of God, any more than the powerful though vague and similar feelings excited by music.

With respect to immortality, nothing shows how strong and almost instinctive a belief it is, as the consideration of the view now held by most physicists, namely that the sun with all the planets will in time grow too cold for life, unless indeed some great body dashes into the sun and thus gives it fresh life. Believing as I do that man in the distant future will be a far more perfect creature than he is now, it is an intolerable thought that he and all other sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued slow progress. To those who fully admit the immortality of the human soul, the destruction of our world will not appear so dreadful.

Another source of conviction in the existence of God, connected with the reason and not with the feelings, impresses me as having much more weight. This follows from the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity for looking far backwards and far into futurity, as the result of blind chance or necessity. When thus reflecting I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man; and I deserve to be called a Theist.

This conclusion was strong in my mind about the time, as far as I can remember, when I wrote the *Origin of Species*; and it is since that time that it has very gradually with many fluctuations become weaker. But then arises the doubt—can the mind of man, which has, as I fully believe, been developed from a mind as low as that possessed by the lowest animal, be trusted when it draws such grand conclusions? May not these be the result of the connection between cause and effect which strikes us as a necessary one, but probably depends merely on inherited experience? Nor must we overlook the probability of the constant inculcation in a belief in God on the minds of children producing so strong and perhaps an inherited effect on their brains not yet fully developed, that it would be difficult for them to throw off their belief in God, as for a monkey to throw off its instinctive fear and hatred of a snake.

I cannot pretend to throw the least light on such abstruse problems. The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic.

William Graham

(*The Creed of Science*, by William Graham, C. Kegan Paul & Co., 1881, pages 47-52.)

We repeat—the fatal defect in Darwinism, and in all the more or less systematic presentments that have lately been given of the whole doctrine of Evolution, whether by Spencer, Haeckel, Huxley, or Strauss, is the denial, express or by implication, of all and any purpose or Final Cause in the universe. For in purpose, in some sense of the word, and, moreover, in a rational purpose, however difficult it be to define the conception in human language or to assimilate it to our notions of purpose, the human mind, nevertheless, obstinately continues to believe. All men believe in it—the mass of mankind guided by common sense, as well as the masters of thought who have meditated most deeply on this all-important question. The greatest names in philosophy from Aristotle and Plato to Descartes and Leibnitz, to Kant and Hegel, even to Schopenhauer and Hartmann, have believed in purpose in some sense of the word; the only thinkers opposed being Democritus and Epicurus in ancient times, perhaps Spinoza and Hume in modern times, together with the present representatives of these. And apart from the balance of philosophical authority in its favour, can any rational and candid mind doubt that there was a purpose in the course of evolution of the universe? Can any one really doubt that the human consciousness on our earth was not meant and intended to come finally out of the whole evolutionary process and struggle for existence? At least, can any one doubt that the eye and the ear, which open out the world to all the animals, were not somehow, in Nature's aims; or can they believe the other alternative, that the first rudimentary eye came one day as the result of lucky chance, a fortunate meeting of the atoms—that it only appeared after infinite impotent combinations had in vain been tried, at one happy moment when the right number and due arrangement of particles were hit upon? Is this credible? And then the same origin must be assigned for the ear, and for all the other organs of sense, as well as for all the mutually adapted organs of the body—the origin of chance, a perpetual shifting and rearrangement of the atoms by chance and mechanical necessity till the new and startling phenomena appeared. We say by chance, since they were not themselves endowed with any self-moving power, nor was any concert possible amongst them, nor any general marshalling agency supposed. Now, it is faintly conceivable, though incredible, that chance might produce the physical organ, which, it must be allowed, is resolvable into cells and nerves and finally into a collocation of atoms. Given endless time to exhaust all wrong arrangements, an instrument like the eye might in the end result; but it would clearly require an incredible period of time, by the laws of probability, before the right combination of atoms resulted from chance alone. But even if the right arrangement which gave the physical organ at last did result, there is still a gulf from the organ to the seeing power. What is this new phenomenon, the fact of vision, which opens out a new world, which one day or one moment came, having been non-existent just before? Is this new thing not something like creation? It is the product of the atoms, the effect of molecular changes, says the materialist. Then the atoms are literally creative—they have produced from nothing a most wonderful thing; they have evolved or evoked this unique power from

no pre-existing materials; for the fact of vision is wholly different from the material particles which compose the organ—it is a thing not made up of them, nor of anything but itself, which one moment was not and the next moment was; and this is creation—call it evolution, if you please. It is creation, and, moreover, it is very like creation *ex nihilo* [out of nothing], pronounced so absurd—only that the blind atoms have accomplished the miracle, according to the materialist.

In short, we say to the materialist: you believe in creation after all, under the name of evolution; only it was matter which effected the creation; and you believe in the miracle of creation from nothing, only that the atoms, acting without intention or concert, accomplished the miracle. You believe in a creation by the atoms, only that the atoms did not know what they were about to do or what was about to happen. They had no intention of producing the result—nor could have had any; and the creation or evolution, first of the senses, then of consciousness, and last of the highest human reason, was the result of a long series of fortunate accidents. This is the real and most important issue raised to-day by Darwin, as in ancient times by Democritus—whether chance or purpose governs the world...

Now, for my part, I am quite prepared to give up the old anthropomorphic Creator, who went to work in the construction of worlds and organisms as the architect and machinist. I gladly deliver myself, by the aid of the scientific doctrine of the eternity and indestructibility of matter, from the old dogma of the creation *ex nihilo*, of the earth and planets by creative fiat. I am even ready, on the strength of the united demand of modern philosophy and thought...to surrender the human attributes of personality and consciousness in the Deity... We can give up all these imperfect conceptions of God, one and all; but yet we cannot abandon all belief in a purpose, an intention, a finality of some sort, which has been and still is manifested in the universe, and in the evolution of human destiny.

...We require a guiding inner principle; we even require to postulate creative agency where a new fact appeared, such as life, sensation, consciousness, unless these too existed from eternity as well as matter; but we do not require to postulate a personal Creator or special creations of the different species of plants and animals. We must have a purpose, and there must be creative power, at each new appearance between the chemically constituted cosmic vapour and the most developed human species. Evolution is granted, and the difference between creation and evolution is hardly worth disputing about. ...There is, then, a purpose; it has been creative, and in a certain sense it is supernatural; for, as Herbert Spencer admits, there is a "power behind humanity and all things," which is not exhausted in any of its forms as shown in evolution. And this power behind Nature, and yet manifesting itself in Nature, might still be called supernatural as well as natural, were it not for the special association of the former word with miraculous interventions. But the power itself is admitted by all, excepting only those who, like Hume, maintain that phenomena alone, with nothing behind them, compose the universe...