

Michael Ruse – Can a Darwinian Be a Christian?

PAIN

Utility Functions

[Intentionally Omitted]

Explaining Pain

At one level, the appropriate response is that none of this is really the concern of the Darwinian as such. Pain and misery exist in the animal world, whether Darwinism be true or not. The creationist must accept that the cheetah hunts the antelope and that the parasite torments the caterpillar. The problem of physical evil is not something invented by the Darwinian. But in a sense, this is a cop-out. Whatever else, Darwinism certainly concentrates the mind on the problem of physical evil. It shows that it is not just some contingent thing, readily explained away. Rather, the way in which organisms were created and the way in which they function is one which necessarily entails a great deal of pain and suffering. There is no getting away from this or pretending that it is something which could be minimized or considered just an unhappy by-product of the evolutionary process. Pain and suffering are right there at the heart of things and are intimately involved in the adaptive process. No one is about to say that the antelope dying in agony in the cheetah's jaws is showing much adaptation in its suffering, but fear and pain clearly have their role. The burnt child fears the fire, and for good reason.

Moreover, pain and ill are involved in more than just the struggle for existence. The source of new variation, random mutation, as often as not causes pain and suffering. For every mutation which brings benefit, there are hundreds which spell doom and disaster. Yet again we have something absolutely central to the Darwinian evolutionary process. Randomness is the key to new genetic mutations, on which the Darwinian struggle depends to create selection and consequent adaptation. Darwinism is the antithesis to the theory of evolution through guided beneficial mutations. And worse than this. Selection can actually keep deleterious mutations "balanced" within a population, as a kind of price for good or healthy or advantageous mutations. Sickle-cell anemia (caused by individuals having two sickle-cell genes) stays in the human population because carriers with but one sickle cell gene have a natural immunity to malaria, an immunity not possessed by those with no sickle-cell genes at all.

Theodosius Dobzhansky was aware of the costs: "A species perfectly adapted to its environment may be destroyed by a change in the latter if no hereditary variability is available in the hour of need. Evolutionary plasticity can be purchased only at the ruthless dear price of continuously sacrificing some individuals to death from unfavorable mutations."

Pain as Illusory

[Intentionally Omitted]

Pain as a Route to Faith

[Intentionally Omitted]

God Can Only Do the Possible

Third and finally in dealing with the problem of physical pain, there is a necessitarian argument based on the nature of law. God is free to create as He will, and because He is all-powerful and all-loving, He will create the best that He can. But this does not mean that God can do the impossible. God cannot make two plus two equal five. God can only do that which can be done, and the whole story of the Incarnation shows that what can be done is not defined simply by the laws of mathematics and logic. God wanted to save humankind from its sinful nature, but that did not mean that God could it any way he chose. He had to sacrifice Himself on the Cross. Likewise, God having decided to create, did then create - perhaps His choice, perhaps not - in an evolutionary fashion. And this being so, He has now locked into a path which would necessarily lead to physical evil. It comes with the method employed.

To see the force of this argument, let us suppose that God might have used “better” laws of nature, that is, laws which do not lead to physical evil. For instance, let us suppose that God made the laws of nature so that there would be no chance of humans or others being poisoned by the ingestion of dangerous substances. Unfortunately, mere tampering - fine tuning - would hardly be adequate.

“Would not either arsenic or my own physiological composition or both have to be altered such that they would, in effect, be different from the present objects which we now call arsenic or human digestive organs? To change the actual world sufficiently to eliminate natural evil, and therefore to instantiate a possible world with different natural laws, would necessarily entail change in existing objects themselves.”

Indeed, the changes might well have to be so drastic that no longer could one properly say that one still had the substances with which one started. “They would have to be different in some essential respects, such that with different essential properties they would become different things altogether.”

And this is just substances. Imagine what kinds of wholesale changes would be needed to pain-proof various processes. Fire could no longer burn, for fear that children and others might get trapped in smoke-filled apartments. But if fire did not burn, how could I warm myself through the Canadian winter and how cook my food and so much more? One change by God would require another and another and another, until everything had been altered. And could this be possible? Where would it end, and where could it end in a satisfactory manner?

“In particular, the introduction of different natural laws affecting human beings in order to prevent the frequent instances of natural evil would entail the alteration of human beings themselves. Human beings are sentient creatures of nature. As physiological beings they interact with Natura; they cause natural events and in turn are affected by natural events. Hence, insofar as humans are natural, sentient beings, construed of the same substance as Nature and interaction with it, they will be affected in any natural system by lawful natural events. These events will sometimes be propitious, and sometimes not. And insofar as man is essentially a conscious

being, he will be aware of those events which are not propitious and which for him constitute evils. Therefore, to prevent natural evils from affecting man, man himself would not be significantly changed such that he would be no longer a sentient creature of nature.”

And even now, who dare say we humans would be better situated. “Whether humans would have evolved but no infectious virus or bacilli or whether there would have resulted humans with worse and more painful diseases, or whether there would have been no conscious, moral beings at all, cannot be discerned.” The world is a package deal, and we simply have no right or authority to say that God could have created in such a way as to prevent such physical evil as there is. The hard nature of physical existence and being is not therefore a rebuke against an all-powerful God.

Almost paradoxically, the Darwinian supports this argument; and by a nice turn of fate, the strongest support comes from the arch-atheist Richard Dawkins himself! For the Christian, the key aspect of organic form is its adaptedness - you see God’s glory in life’s functioning - and if you take a Darwinian position, then this adaptedness or functioning is a major source of the pain and suffering that you see in the world. Darwinism equals natural selection, and physical or natural evil is a result of the causes or a consequence of this selective process. Here, therefore, we would seem to have a place where God might have done otherwise. Would not things be better all-around had He got adaptedness by a much nicer physical process than selection?, however, argues strenuously that selection and only selection can do the job. No one - and presumably this includes God - could have got adaptive complexity without going the route of natural selection. Why is this so? At least partly because adaptation and its complexity simply could not be produced by most putative evolutionary processes: by saltationism - evolution by jumps - for instance. As a matter of empirical fact, hopeful monsters - viable new life forms which represent complete breaks with earlier life - simply do not exist in nature.

But Dawkins’s claim is rather stronger than this. It is not just a question of hopeful monsters not existing. In some real physical sense, they could not exist - at least, they could not exist and have been produced by natural processes. “Wherever in the universe adaptive complexity shall be found, it will have come into being gradually through a series of small alterations, never through large and sudden increments in adaptive complexity”. The point is that physical processes do not suddenly and spontaneously bring about adaptive complexity. The only sudden changes are those that destroy or degrade. They are never creative. Boeing 747s crash into the ground and in an instant they are no more. Boeing 747s do not lie in pieces around the junkyard or on the ocean bottom and then in an instant form a fully functioning flying machine. In the case of organisms, there is no known physical rival to the slow, creative, adaptive-complexity-forming process of natural selection. So it is selection or nothing. “However diverse evolutionary mechanisms may be, if there is no other generalization that can be made about life all around the Universe, I am betting that it will always be recognizable as Darwinian life. The Darwinian Law...may be as universal as the great law of physics”. You cannot get adaptive complexity without natural selection.

The Christian positively welcomes Dawkins’s understanding of Darwinism. Physical evil exists, and Darwinism explains why God had no choice but to allow it to occur. He wanted to produce designlike effects - without producing these He would not have organisms

including humankind - and natural selection is the only option open. Natural selection has costs - physical pain - but these are costs that must be paid. And this applies also if you think that a scientific solution must be found to account for the appearance of humans, and if you think that arms races offer the most convincing explanation. the pain and violence which results from these is simply an inevitable tariff for achieving the desired end. What more can one say?

Well, one thing one might say is that one should beware of Greeks bearing gifts. The philosopher Daniel Dennett refers to natural selection as the “universal acid,” meaning that once it is up and running it corrodes everything. Having made appeal to the ubiquity of natural selection, should we not now allow the strength of Dawkins’s earlier encountered worry that invoking God as an explanation of design is no explanation, because God in turn requires explanation? If design can come only through selection, does this not mean that God Himself had to be the product of evolution? In which case, do we need another God behind our God and back in regress? To borrow a thought from Johnathan Swift:

So, naturals observe, a flea

Hath smaller fleas that on them prey;

And these have smaller fleas to bite’em

And so proceed ad infinitum.

As before, the answer will surely be that God’s existence and nature is not subject to or in need of the explanation that the contingent objects of this world demand. God exists necessarily and is immune to all acids, no matter how corrosive. Less metaphorical, the Christian will say that God is creator, not created. Even if we agree that God necessarily creates and fashions through a selective process, this tells us nothing about His own nature and being. It certainly does not tell us that He had to be made through natural selection. The Dawkins-Dennett worry is thus without foundation. Darwinism does not dissolve away Christian belief.

Faith and Reason

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