

Intelligent Design: William A. Dembski & Michael Ruse in Dialogue

Edited by Robert B. Stewart

Fortress Press, 2007, 257 pages

Reviewed by Logan Paul Gage

Despite—or perhaps because of—the great volume of books published annually on Darwinian evolution and intelligent design, few new contributions are worth the time of those familiar with the major works of Dawkins and Gould, Johnson and Dembski. (Recent exceptions to this rule would include Michael Behe’s penetrating *The Edge of Evolution* and David Berlinski’s droll yet lucid *The Devil’s Delusion*.) Hence I found myself pleasantly surprised by the present volume, *Intelligent Design: William A. Dembski & Michael Ruse in Dialogue*, edited by Robert B. Stewart, professor of philosophy and theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary.

Professor Stewart organizes the Greer-Heard Point-Counterpoint Forum in Faith and Culture, which brings together an evangelical and non-evangelical scholar to discuss a matter of religious or cultural import. The 2006 forum on intelligent design was being prepared when on August 29, 2005 Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans. Most of the seminary was suddenly underwater, and Stewart’s own home was flooded. His family was safe but lost nearly ninety percent of their belongings. Nevertheless, Stewart persevered and found a church willing to host the group of scholars, chief among them Christian mathematician and philosopher William Dembski and atheist philosopher of science Michael Ruse.

In the first section of the book, Dembski and Ruse present papers and then converse informally about intelligent design, the idea that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection. The conversation is interesting, but not radically novel.

The remainder of the book, however, contains essays by some of the finest thinkers on intelligent design and evolution today. Chief among them are John Lennox of Oxford University, William Lane Craig and J.P. Moreland of the Talbot School of Theology, Francis Beckwith of Baylor University, and Nancey Murphy of Fuller Theological Seminary. Other more familiar writers also appear: Alister McGrath, Sir John Polkinghorne, and Wolfhart Pannenberg.

For the sake of space, let us survey just one of the essays, that of Alister McGrath. Here we see one way *not* to argue against the “new atheists.” I suspect that many Christian readers will have a natural sympathy for McGrath in his essay “Dawkins, God, and the Scientific Enterprise: Reflections of the Appeal to Darwinism in Fundamentalist

Atheism.” After all, he is thoughtful and balanced where his infamous interlocutor (Dawkins) is prone to triumphalism and rhetorical excess.

Even so, McGrath constructs a rather tenuous argument (if you’ll allow me to simplify): Since religion and metaphysics are important realities and yet, contra Dawkins, are not “scientific,” religion and science must not overlap much (McGrath subscribes to a variation of Stephen Jay Gould’s NOMA). Further, since Darwinism is true, and Christianity is also, Darwinian attempts to reduce all reality to the effects of the mutation-selection mechanism are wrong. Darwinism should stay in its proper place and discuss only biological development. Properly construed, science has little to do with religion and should stay out of the matter. Therefore, Dawkins and his ilk should not use Darwinism to promote atheism.

Now, I have no wish to defend Dawkins. But this kind of argument, while compelling at first sight, cannot stand.

First, McGrath talks right past Dawkins. When Dawkins says the question of God is “scientific,” he is a lay-philosopher speaking to a lay audience. He does not mean that scientists in white lab coats can do tidy experiments on God to settle the question, as McGrath and others seem to think. Rather, he means that the question of God’s existence is largely a question of empirical evidence. As Dawkins once put it, “A universe with a God would look quite different from a universe without one. A physics, a biology where there is a God is bound to look different.”

Yes, Dawkins takes this too far at times, nearly claiming that everything important is in the domain of science. (How convenient for the zoologist!) But his basic point—that the question of God is an evidential one (including evidence of the natural world) as opposed to an absurd leap of faith—is one many Christian philosophers and scientists (including McGrath) implicitly agree with when they argue for the fine-tuning of the laws of physics or appeal to the Kalām cosmological argument. Moreover, of course, the Christian scriptures concord with such a view, stating explicitly that we can and should know God—if only in rough outline—through the natural world.

But aren’t atheist fundamentalists still wrong to reduce all of life to a product of natural selection and random genetic mutations? Yes, and this is what is alluring about McGrath’s position. He intuitively grasps, as sensible people do, that life as we know it cannot be reduced to the selection-mutation mechanism. However, this is not because Darwinism and reductionism can be separated, as McGrath believes. Rather, it is because Darwinism, which is inherently reductionistic, is false.

As Daniel Dennett famously wrote, Darwinism is a universal acid. And once it is accepted, traditional religion, morality, and other notions corrode. But why must this be so? Why can’t McGrath be correct in asserting that a rational person can believe that 1) all of life developed by a Darwinian process, and yet 2) this fact has no drastic implications for religion, morality, or epistemology?

The trouble with this position begins early on. It is not that one cannot logically believe in Darwinism and the Christian God at the same time. William Lane Craig shows in his fantastic, if technical, essay how belief in Darwinism does not necessarily commit one to naturalism. However, once Darwinism is accepted, the very nature of what it means *to believe* is radically changed. Because we are biological creatures, accepting the proposition that all of life's diversity came about through the interaction of natural selection and random mutation means that our brains were built by this very process.

What then are we to make of traditional morality, given a Darwinian world? Well, as Darwin noted in *The Descent of Man*, if we had evolved with the selection pressures of the particular environment faced by bees, we would have bee morality. In other words, what humans call "good" is not based upon an objective, unchanging truth of reality. If we had faced different situations in our evolutionary history, perhaps we would view infanticide as ethical, Darwin implies. Natural law and virtue ethics, then, are out the window: the proper function of human beings cannot be discerned for the very good reason that there is no proper function of humans, only myriad different situations to which we must adapt or face extinction.

What about religion? Is it safe, as McGrath seems to think, from Darwinian explanations? Absolutely not. There are all sorts of brain mechanisms involved in religious belief. If the contingent, Darwinian process made our brains, it makes perfect sense to look for contingent explanations to explain away these particular beliefs. They must have had survival value at some point in the past; or, alternatively, as Dawkins and his wing of the atheist camp prefer, religion does not have direct survival value but is a by-product of something else that does have survival value.

Note too, that the Darwinian explanation really does *explain away* rather than explain religious belief. It is not that the Darwinian explanation for X and the content of X cannot both be true, but rather that, once one learns that particular religious belief X came about because we used to run from lions on the savannah, X loses its justification. I did not come to believe X by any sort of rational or designed process; rather, I believe X because my evolutionary history gave me a tendency to believe X. Luckily for us, Darwinian explanations of religious belief are extremely thin.

The deepest problem however, to which we have already alluded, is epistemological—a fact that neither Dawkins nor McGrath ever address. As philosopher Alvin Plantinga has shown, and as Darwin himself feared, given an unguided process of naturalistic evolution, it is highly improbable that our minds give us a reliable view of reality. As Darwin memorably phrased the problem:

the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?

If we accept unguided Darwinian evolution, we have lost all justification for believing in Darwinian evolution; if it is true, we cannot know it to be true. In a Darwinian scenario, our minds were not made to know truth but to survive, and these are two very different things indeed. There are all sorts of false beliefs which would aid survival.

What McGrath misses is that Darwinian evolution tells a story of how our brains developed and therefore has something to say about the contents of our minds. Thus, we cannot accept the Darwinian story of development and then cry foul when atheist Darwinists say that the contents of our brains came about by Darwinian selection and mutation. At that point, we have painted ourselves into a corner. We have accepted certain premises; and it is intellectually dishonest not to accept their unsavory conclusions.

If McGrath and others like Francis Collins wish to maintain this position, they owe the theistic community a positive account of how *homo sapiens* can develop via mutation and selection and yet still hold accurate beliefs about the world—especially our most cherished moral and religious beliefs. They must explain to us how all of our other features can be explained by Darwin's mechanism and yet somehow our beliefs about God and ethics remain unaffected.

Martinez Hewlett of the University of Arizona makes the same mistake in his essay, "The Evolution Wars." He wants to accept "the fruitful science of evolution without the ideological shrink wrapping." That is he wants Darwinian empirical observations without Darwinian reductionist philosophy. The problem, as we have seen, is that some scientific observations are philosophically loaded. Empirical science often overlaps with the realms of religion, philosophy, and meaning.

This is obvious in the rest of life, but as an intellectual culture we are stuck with this positivistic separation. For instance, Christian tradition has long rejected the idea that sexual activity can be disconnected from moral and spiritual reality. But why? It is just a physical act, right? Well, it is a physical act, but not *merely* a physical one. Some physical states of affairs imply non-physical realities: the sexual act implies trust, love, and commitment. Christian sexual ethics holds to a certain anthropology, a view of what the human person is; and it is this deep anthropology that a cavalier attitude toward sex undermines. Certain (physical) acts imply that the human person is (metaphysically) less than what he is.

Turning back to our current discussion, we see then that the conflict is not so much between God and Darwin as it is between reductionism and anti-reductionism. Those of us who want to maintain that *beliefs* about God and morality are more than the result of the historically contingent survival needs in our evolutionary past cannot give in to a theory which claims that *all our beliefs* are the result of this survival mechanism. And make no mistake: this is exactly what Darwinism claims. Of course Christians should feel free to adapt the findings of modern biology as they see fit to compose a form of guided or pre-programmed theistic evolution, but we must then remember (especially in our public rhetoric) that we are no longer speaking of Darwinism.

While *Intelligent Design* contains many worthwhile essays, it has two drawbacks for potential readers. First, if one is seeking a volume with the best arguments for and against intelligent design, this is not it. This is not because this group of ID advocates is incompetent; rather it is because of the nature of the essays. For instance, while Wesley Elsberry and Nicholas Matzke of the National Center for Science Education (a Darwin-only education lobbying group) argue directly against ID, no ID proponents argue the positive case for ID. Rather, ID proponents' essays take one aspect of ID and apply it to a narrower, scholarly reflection. For instance, philosopher of mind J.P. Moreland does not defend ID in biology. Instead, he argues that an intelligent design paradigm of psychology (specifically a Christian version of intelligent design psychology) compares favorably to the psychological paradigm of evolutionary naturalism.

So, the essays do not line up in a point-counterpoint fashion. In many ways this is commendable: *Intelligent Design* does not waste time treading over well-worn ground—with the exception of the Elsberry-Matzke attack where we hear recycled clichés to the effect of “ID is creationism.” Readers seeking a balanced, scholarly treatment of the scientific disputes should consult *Debating Design: From Darwin to DNA*, edited by Dembski and Ruse (Cambridge, 2004).

Second, and finally, the book does not fit neatly into common categories. Some essays are scholarly, and others are more popular; so it is difficult to recommend to either camp. Still, this volume is exceptional in that genuinely new ground is staked out. In one notable example theologian Ken Keathley unearths a fascinating historical parallel between current tensions among Young Earth Creationists and ID proponents by contrasting their disagreement to early the church's response to the flat or round Earth controversy involving early Christian thinkers Cosmas and Philoponus. Rather than sneeringly comparing one side to the “flat Earthers,” Keathley draws genuine lessons of caution for those entering the ID debate.

For bringing together original contributions such as this, readers will be grateful to Robert Stewart for his perseverance, even in the face of hardship and tragedy.

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