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Darwinian Narratives: Cultural Impact and Reconsideration

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Abstract

The rise in the West of religious unbelief and its sometimes companions, relativism and nihilism, has been widely noted. Dostoyevsky's famous dictum, "Without God, everything is permissible," has in many quarters been taken as more recommendation than warning. The causes behind this trend are surely complex, but a key accelerant appears to have been the triumph of Darwin's theory of evolution, in its original and now updated forms. Taken to its logical conclusions, the theory, together with part of its methodological apparatus (methodological naturalism), would seem to drain physical reality of meaning and humans of free will, significance, and higher purpose. Atheist philosopher Daniel Dennett called it a "universal acid." The subject is one that could fill many books. One manageable way of rendering the subject manageable in a single paper is by considering key narratives that buttress Darwinian theory and by tracing the theory's impact on the narrative arts of literature and film. How have Christians in the academy responded to modern evolutionary theory's impact on the culture? One response has been to graft it onto Christianity in the hopes of neutralizing the theory's more pernicious cultural implications. In practice, such attempts have tended to fundamentally alter either modern evolutionary theory or Christianity or both. Before attempting any such union, we would do well to revisit the foundations of the theory.

Keywords: evolutionary theory; methodological naturalism; progress narrative; theistic evolution; intelligent design; evolutionary psychology; nihilism; literary naturalism; modern architecture; biological information

1. Introduction

Nineteenth-century Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky's famous dictum, "Without God, everything is permissible" has in our time and in many quarters been taken more as recommendation than warning. The cause for the rise in atheism and its frequent fellow travelers, relativism and nihilism, are complex; but various prominent thinkers, religious and non-religious, have pointed to the rise and ascendancy of modern evolutionary theory as a contributor.

American philosopher Dennett (1995) distilled this view perhaps most memorably when he described Darwinism as a "universal acid," one that "eats through just about every traditional concept and leaves in its wake a revolutionized world-view… dissolving the illusion of our own authorship, our own divine spark of creativity and understanding."

This may indeed be an implication of Darwinism, but notice that the logical chain is self-defeating. If Darwinism tells us that authorship, including all we associate with that notion—e.g., creativity, reason, freedom of will—is illusory, then we lose any firm ground for trusting the argument of Daniel Dennett or of any other human thinker, for they are merely conscious automatons running algorithms built up by mindless evolutionary

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processes over millions of years—algorithms that are survival- and reproduction-seeking first and only truth-seeking incidentally. And if that's the case, then the ground for trusting Darwinian theory has gone to pieces under us, since human reason was employed to establish the idea.

Darwin (1881, letter no. 13230) himself voiced this concern. "With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy," he confessed to William Graham. "Would anyone trust in the convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?"

One might argue that a truth-seeking orientation is the survival-enhancing feature par excellence, and therefore natural selection would tend to prefer it over any emerging tendency that ran contrary to truth-seeking; but embracing that argument problematizes that voluminous literature of evolutionary psychology and sociobiology, which offers a long train of Darwinian stories to explain all manner of human beliefs and behaviors—e.g., religious practice and belief in a transcendent moral order—as delusions foisted on us by our evolutionary programming, delusions said to have aided survival and reproduction and thus to be favored by natural selection.[1] To avoid falling into contradiction, it would seem that at the very least either the confident proclamations of evolutionary psychology/sociobiology must go, or the ground for trusting human rationality as a truth-seeking apparatus must go.

In practice, the evolutionists who wrestle with this question often indulge in special pleading, employing evolutionary theory to explain common forms of ostensibly delusional behavior (e.g., belief in God and absolute morality) and then claiming these explanations as a retrodictive triumph of evolutionary theory while, at the same time, treating their own beliefs about evolutionary theory as immune to evolution's warping effect on human reason, and doing so with insufficient warrant. The larger cultural impact of all this has been to diminish our culture's faith in rationality, seen in the postmodern turn.

Some contemporary scientists and philosophers have acknowledged the seriousness of the challenge. Cognitive scientist Hoffman (2019), in *The Case Against Reality: Why Evolution Hid the Truth from Our Eyes*, mounts a sophisticated effort dubbed Interface Theory to deal squarely with the epistemological skepticism engendered by modern evolutionary theory, and to do so without falling into unrelieved epistemological nihilism. But in the process he comes to question our very ability to even perceive physical reality, opting instead for a description of our experience as analogous to someone playing an immersive video game while wearing a headset (Hoffman 2023).

Plantinga (1993), widely considered one of the most influential living philosophers, opts instead for discarding Darwinian materialism. His book *Warrant and Proper Function* lays out a detailed argument that evolutionary naturalism is self-defeating while theism is not. In the work's concluding chapter he completes the argument and rebuts a series of objections. Thus, for example:

> Even if we thought it likely, on balance, that evolution would select for reliable cognitive faculties, this would be so only for cognitive mechanisms producing beliefs relevant to survival and reproduction. It would not hold, for example, for the mechanisms producing the beliefs involved in a logic or mathematics or set theory course. According to Fodor (as we saw) "Darwinian selection guarantees that organisms either know the elements of logic or become posthumous"; but this would hold at most for the most elementary bits of logic. It is only the occasional assistant professor of logic who needs to know even that first-order logic is complete in order to survive and reproduce. (p. 232)

Plantinga judiciously frames his argument probabilistically, arguing that at the very least his argument merits agnosticism on the question of whether evolution + naturalism could evolve higher creatures capable of reliable cognition.

In the journal *Nature*, biologist and psychologist Bolhuls and Wynne (2009), after taking pains to emphasize that they are in the mainstream of evolutionary thinking, spend most of the rest of their article raising an evidential challenge to a common defense of the view that the human mind evolved from that of an ape-like ancestor. The common defense is the claim that proximity to humans on the evolutionary family tree nicely correlates with the degree of overlap for the suite of qualities that characterize the human mind, with our nearest evolutionary cousins, among the apes, overlapping the most. "Few within the scientific pale would argue against the proposition that life on Earth has evolved and that this general principle can be extended to the process of thought," write Bolhuls and Wynne. "But in taking an evolutionary approach, biologists have tended to assume that species with shared ancestry will have similar cognitive abilities, and that the evolutionary history of traits can be used to reveal how we and other animals perform certain mental tasks. A closer analysis suggests things aren't so simple" (p. 832).

The remainder of their article presents considerable evidence against the assumption under review. Two instances: (1) There were experiments that seemed to demonstrate that monkeys possess a particular human cognitive capacity—i.e., a sense of what constituted fair play—but that reading of the experiment has since been undermined by a follow-up experiment. (2) Bird studies demonstrate that some species share certain impressive cognitive capacities with humans not shared by monkeys and apes.

Keep in mind, Bolhuls and Wynne are not Darwin skeptics trying to knock the theory down. They are mainstream Darwinists who are simply acknowledging some evidential challenges. To defend evolutionary theory against the contrary evidence that they have presented, Bolhuls and Wynne (2009) appeal (p. 833) to that favorite recourse of Darwinists when confronted with an uncooperative evolutionary tree, the idea of convergent evolution.

It should be noted that there have been leading life scientists who looked at the problem and broke with strict Darwinian materialism. While maintaining allegiance to the Darwin/Wallace theory of evolution in broad outline, Nobel Prize-winning neuroscientist Eccles (1989) came to reject Darwin's insistence on a reductionist and purely materialistic account of the origin of the human brain and intellect. "I maintain that the human mystery is incredibly demeaned by scientific reductionism, with its claim in promissory materialism to account eventually for all of the spiritual world in terms of patterns of neuronal activity," he insisted in his book *Evolution of the Brain*. "This belief must be classed as a superstition" (p. 241).

What, on his accounting, is missing from the Darwinian materialist story? "Since materialist solutions fail to account for our experienced uniqueness," he wrote, "I am constrained to attribute the uniqueness of the Self or Soul to a supernatural spiritual creation. . . It is the certainty of the inner core of unique individuality that necessitates the 'Divine creation.' I submit that no other explanation is tenable; neither the genetic uniqueness with its fantastically impossible lottery, nor the environmental differentiations which do not determine one's uniqueness, but merely modify it" (p. 237).

There are those who argue that the problem with the Darwinian explanation for the origin of the human mind runs deeper still. Darwin and many prominent thinkers in his wake have wrestled with the question of how consciousness itself could emerge from a purely physical process of evolutionary development. In an article in the *Journal of the History of Neurosciences*, distinguished neuroscientist Smith (2010), former Dean of Faculty of Life and Health Sciences at Aston University in Birmingham, UK, details the various places in Darwin's corpus where the gentleman of Down Houe explored this question. Then

Smith traces attempts to solve the problem in the decades after Darwin. Smith concludes, "A close reading of Darwin's post-Beagle notebooks shows him wrestling with the problem of consciousness in an evolutionary world" and "his initial problem remains unsolved. We may be closer to an understanding of how the living world originated on the surface of this planet. . ., but of how it is that it includes qualia, that is phenomenal or sensory consciousness, we are no nearer understanding than Darwin was a century and a half ago." The title of Smith's article puts his point succinctly: "Darwin's Unsolved Problem: The Place of Consciousness in an Evolutionary World."

Noted atheist philosopher Nagel (2012) comes to a similar conclusion in his chapters on consciousness and cognition (Chapters 3 and 4) in his Oxford University Press book *Mind and Cosmos*: *Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False.*

There is cause, I submit, for taking Nagel's title as welcome news. If one carries Darwinian materialism to its logical end, and takes it as gospel, one comes to regard the human drama—including love, joy, jealousy, courage, creativity, wickedness, righteous indignation, and grace—as all boiling down to glands, instincts, and brain chemistry reacting to environmental stimuli. It becomes a soulless concoction of matter and energy cooked up over millions of years in that mindless alchemist's lab we call evolution by natural selection. Thus, the human brain, according to Harvard sociobiologist Wilson (1978, p. 195), is but "the product of genetic evolution by natural selection," and the mind, nothing more than "an epiphenomenon of the neuronal machinery of the brain."

An evolutionist may, of course, contest such pessimistic conclusions. What is difficult to contest is the far-reaching effect of the Darwinian acid. Clinical neuroscientist Tallis (2014), in *Aping Mankind: Neoromania, Darwinitis and the Misrepresentation of Humanity*, begins by noting the rapturous reception of *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* by Gray (2002), Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics. Gray's book, according to Tallis, paints a very low view of humankind and human nature, and grounds much of the explanation in Darwinism. Its rapturous reception, says Tallis, "reveals much about the current zeitgeist: in particular the extent to which the notion that we are 'just animals' has become an orthodoxy, as the supposed implications of what Daniel Dennett called Darwin's 'dangerous idea' sink in" (p. 4).

Again, this is the assessment not of a creationist or proponent of intelligent design but of an evolutionist, and, in this case, a self-professed atheist. Certainly there are intelligent evolutionists who have proposed explanatory antidotes to the universal acid of Darwinism. What is difficult to deny is just how effective the acid has been at transforming the culture in the face of all such proposals.

2. Antecedents

The "universal acid" of Darwinism has, of course, been far from alone in eating away at the verities of the Judeo-Christian West. Baruch Spinoza in the 1600s; Voltaire, Rousseau, and the various intellectuals of the French Revolution; Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, in which Christianity is assigned the role of civilizational boogeyman; the philosophical work of Hume and Hegel, of Ludwig Feuerbach and Arthur Schopenhauer; the rise of Russian nihilism—all this and more had been undermining the theistic and specifically Christian foundations of Western culture well before *The Origin of Species* appeared on the scene in 1859. And some of these voices undoubtedly exerted a powerful influence on Darwin himself, in some cases directly but more often indirectly in contributing to the intellectual climate of Darwin's upbringing, his education at Cambridge, and his life in England leading up to his formulation of his theory of evolution, a milieu steeped in Enlightenment thinking and, with it, a rising tide of deistic thought and a turn

away from faith in religious creeds and miracles, evident in the outlook of Darwin's father and grandfather Erasmus Darwin.

One could trace the pre-Darwinian *acid* (maintaining and extending the Dennett metaphor here) further back to the Catholic Church's sanctioning of Galileo for his heliocentric model and to the blow this act dealt to the credibility of Church authority, especially through the way the event was caricatured and retold in the Enlightenment.[2] Others might also point to certain impulses of the Protestant Reformation (e.g., a relatively low view of church tradition and an emphasis on an individual encounter with Scripture) that, when taken to unanticipated extremes in later centuries, swept away much more than Martin Luther and other early Protestant reformers had intended.

We should also acknowledge in this brief flyover the influence of an investigative rule known as methodological naturalism, the idea that when doing science, one should only invoke purely material or natural explanations for natural phenomena, even where a given phenomenon might give the impression of have been designed for a purpose and resist, at least initially, a naturalistic explanation. Proponents of methodological naturalism may cite Darwin's theory itself as evidence of the efficacy of the methodological rule, since until the triumph of Darwinism it was widely acknowledged that living things gave the strong impression of having been designed for a purpose, and by hewing to the rule of methodological naturalism and continuing to search for a purely natural cause for the diversification of organic life, Darwin was able to advance science in a way that he wouldn't have if he had simply thrown up his hands and attributed life's great diversity to God (Notice, however, that it is problematic to use Darwinism to defend methodological naturalism and, at the same time, to use methodological naturalism to defend Darwinism. That is to argue in a circle).

Methodological naturalism, it should also be noted, is distinct from ontological naturalism, the view that nature is in fact all there is. Some thinkers are both ontological naturalists and methodological naturalists. Some reject ontological naturalism while nevertheless holding to methodological naturalism. One might imagine that this methodological rule is relatively new. However, while its status as conventional wisdom in the scientific community is a relatively recent historical development, the idea itself has deep roots. In the Christian West, we find arguments for an early form of methodological naturalism in the seventeenth-century writings of Francis Bacon,[3] in the fourteenth century philosophical works of John Buridan and Nicole Oresme, and even in the century prior.

Philosopher of science Stephen Dilley argues for Boethius of Dacia's thirteenth-century work *On the Eternity of the World* as a notable early text in the development of methodological naturalism under Christendom. The work was composed, explains Dilley (2007, abstract), "during the height of the controversial assimilation of Aristotle's natural philosophy with Christian theology in the thirteenth century."[4] Boethius argued for a fully formed methodological naturalism, a view that persisted despite being censured in Bishop of Paris Stephen Tempier's Condemnation of 1277. The evidence for this is that in the century that followed, "eminent scholars, like John Buridan and Nicole Oresme, were openly embracing methodological naturalism."

Dilley continues, quoting the latter two scholars:

> "In natural philosophy," Buridan explained for instance, "we ought to accept actions and dependencies as if they always proceed in a natural way." In *Quodlibeta*, a work of natural philosophy, Oresme notes that "there is no reason to take recourse to the heavens, the last refuge of the weak, or demons, or to our glorious God as if He would produce these effects directly, more so than those effects whose causes we believe are well known to us." (Dilley 2007, p. 63)[5]

These arguments, filtered through and amplified by later thinkers of the scientific revolution, and strengthened by the many successes of that revolution in identifying natural explanations for a host of once mysterious phenomena, came together to persuade Darwin and many of his contemporaries of the wisdom of methodological naturalism. By the mid-nineteenth century, the scientific culture of Europe had enthusiastically embraced methodological naturalism, if not monolithically then at least to a sufficient extent that Europe had become a far more welcoming host for Darwin's creation-without-a-creator model of organic development than it was a generation or two earlier.[6]

Also notable in this context is the rise of nominalism, particularly in the works of William of Ockham in the fourteenth century, which challenged the view that universals represented realities outside the mind. Taken to its logical end, nominalism provided aid and comfort to the French Enlightenment's emphasis on individual experience and its skepticism toward absolute standards of morality and social behavior. A similar indebtedness can be traced from Ockham to the Russian nihilists.

This is, of course, only a cursory sketch of a sprawling subject. Philosophers typically assume that civilization's influences flow from philosophy to the other cultural enterprises. Poets imagine that the great masterpieces of poetry exert a primary influence on the philosophers and on other mere mortals unconnected to the muses, while scientists and inventors stress how science and technology have reshaped civilization's understanding of ultimate reality.

I should note in this context a speculation by non-scientist Lewis ([1967] 1996, p. 236). Through most of his career at Oxford and, later, Cambridge, he did not reject evolutionary theory broadly understood, although he did develop strong doubts about Darwinian evolution by the 1960s. And yet well before that he speculated that a cause outside of a strict attendance to the scientific evidence may have played an outsized role in favorably disposing Westerners to Darwin's theory. As he saw it, steady technological progress in the period preceding Darwin likely had encouraged Westerners to replace the classical view of humanity devolving from a golden age with the view of human culture ascending ever upward; and, according to Lewis, this optimistic outlook was then applied to nature in the form of evolutionary thinking.

This technology-fueled optimism, however, has undone itself in many quarters. The unraveling has gone something like this: Technology evolves. Observation of this reality is then generalized to nature—evolution as creator. Swept up into this, humankind evolves upward to become its own technologically proficient god and, beholden to no higher power, discards the old religions said to have evolved to enhance survival and reproduction but that have now proven obsolete. The discarded religions, however, provided the ground for belief in ultimate meaning and purpose. We find ourselves in a society brimming with technological solutions, but to what end? What is this "new man," this new humanity, when stripped of higher meaning and purpose? "We are the hollow men," intones Eliot (1925). "Between the idea/And the reality/Between the motion/And the act/Falls the Shadow."

Then, too, perhaps the West's slide into a culture in which "the best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity" (Yeats 1920) is to a substantial degree the old pattern outlined in the book of Judges—a people of God who, materially blessed by the Lord, forsake God in their comfort and prosperity.

3. Accelerant

We can acknowledge that some or even most of the factors touched on above have played a role in fanning the flames of religious unbelief that have burned through the West, and yet still maintain that Darwinism functioned as a potent accelerant. It was one thing for certain Enlightenment philosophers to construct an atheistic framework, and for

skeptical poets and historians to create a space for cultured unbelief. But there was still the pesky matter of living things seeming to shout design. Anyone who has studied a hawk on the wing, admired a cheetah at full speed, or marveled at the birth of a child has beheld systems of unparalleled engineering sophistication. The atheist biologist Dawkins (1986, p. 1) has gone so far as to define biology as "the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose."

And as Dawkins further argues, it was Darwin and his theory of evolution by random variation and natural selection that finally offered a plausible way to regard this powerful impression of design as illusory. There was indeed a designer of sorts, so goes the Darwinian account, but it was a mindless one, a "blind watchmaker," as Dawkins put it in the title of one of his better-known books. In explaining away this insistent appearance of design, Darwin's theory was decisive in the intellectual history of the West. As Dawkins (1986, p. 6) summarized the matter, "Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist."

We should acknowledge in passing that there were various forms of evolutionary theory both before and after Darwin's strictly materialistic formulation, some more and some less friendly to materialism: the materialistic accounts of ancient classical thinkers, including those of Democritus, Epicurus, and Lucretius; the deistic formulation by Darwin's grandfather Erasmus Darwin, Lamarckism with its emphasis on evolution via acquired characteristics, taken up by American naturalist Edward Drinker Cope and others; the anti-mechanistic idea of an élan vital in Henri Bergson's evolutionary framework; the vitalism of Hans Driesch; "third-way" evolutionary theory, often referred to as the "extended evolutionary synthesis," a loose affiliation of recent and contemporary mainstream evolutionists theorists, including Oxford's Denis Noble and University of Vienna's Gerd Müller; and the frankly teleological and Platonist framework of Michael Levin (a biologist with appointments at Tufts and Harvard). Be that as it may, the mainstream of evolutionary theory has been for many decades, and remains today, thoroughly materialistic in its proposed mechanisms, and is either neo-Darwinian or what we might describe as neo-Darwinian adjacent, meaning, they augment classical neo-Darwinism with additional purely materialistic mechanisms (e.g., neutral evolution, natural genetic engineering, Hox gene mutations.). Proponents refer to their work as part of "the extended evolutionary synthesis" precisely because they see it as an extension of the materialistic project of neo-Darwinism, rather than as a radical break with it. For all the variety of thought in this third-way movement, it remains true that Darwinian materialism remains king in origins biology, and thus is the primary focus of the present paper's consideration of the causal adequacy or inadequacy of modern evolutionary theory.

I should also emphasize that belief in evolutionary theory does not, of course, force one to embrace atheism, or transform one into a relativist or nihilist. There are atheists who find a way to hold to belief in a moral order and to life as purposeful. And there are many who hold to a Judeo-Christian outlook while accommodating belief in some form of evolutionary theory. Darwin (1879, letter no. 12041) insisted that "it seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist." His prominent American promoter, Asa Gray, made it his mission to promote Darwinism among his fellow Christians in the United States. The co-discoverer of the theory of evolution by natural selection, Alfred Russel Wallace, went on to press for a form of evolutionary theory that required the involvement of an "overruling intelligence" (Wallace 1869), a view in harmony with the views outlined in the prominent English zoologist Mivart's (1871) *On the Genesis of Species* and formulated in the next century under the term "telefinalism" by the French biophysicist Pierre Lecomte du Noüy. And today one could go to almost any Christian university in the United States and find the biology department populated with what are

typically referred to as theistic evolutionists, with some of them, following the branding preference of the organization BioLogos, describing themselves as evolutionary creationists.

But such an accommodation is difficult to achieve without something significant being discarded. The Christian biologist may hold to a purposive and directed form of evolution, one that God informed and guided along the way in the history of life, thus maintaining the Christian vision of a created order marked by divine purpose and foresight. But in this case, the biologist isn't holding to evolution as Darwin envisioned it, or to evolution as the theory was reformulated in the twentieth century under the label of neo-Darwinism, or indeed to any form of modern evolutionary theory considered mainstream. This tension was visible early on, when Darwin welcomed Gray's support and encouraged him to keep up the work of promoting the theory to religiously inclined Americans, but broke with Gray in their private correspondence. There Darwin (1860, letter no. 2998) made clear that he could not go along with Gray's attempts to attach to Darwinism the idea of a Creator discreetly guiding what only appeared to be an unguided and purely random evolutionary process.

A distinct but related approach is to see purpose as arising from a finely tuned stochastic process. Think of an above-board Las Vegas casino. It always wins in the long-run despite the fact that all the games of chance under its roof are genuinely chance-driven. The casino doesn't need to fix individual poker hands, load the dice, or manipulate spins of the roulette wheel for this to be true. All it has to do is create a stochastic process, a framework, in which over a large enough sampling size, its winnings reliably exceed its losses.

Certainly there is no theological problem with God employing chance/stochastic process in creation. An understanding of stochastic processes underlying the second law of thermodynamics, for instance, combined with an understanding of how critical this second law is to numerous life-critical processes, makes it abundantly clear that God does accomplish at least some of his work through chance processes. However, as a way of explaining the evolutionary process as a kind of undirected directed process overseen by God, the appeal to evolution as a chance-fueled but specifically stochastic process runs into problems both theological and scientific. Theologically, it allows divine foresight and planning at only the very coarsest of levels—say, an evolutionary tendency toward increasing fitness that might—might!—lead to greater sophistication as a ride-along. But the process, random at heart, could burp up just about anything over time. As George Coyne (n.d., p. 7), former director of the Vatican observatory, put it in a handout for a talk he gave on multiple occasions, "If we truly accept the scientific view that, in addition to necessary processes and the immense opportunities offered by the universe, there are also chance processes, then it would appear that not even God could know… with certainty" that "human life would come to be." This runs counter to the doctrines of God's foreknowledge and of his having very particular intentions in Creation.

A second theological problem with viewing evolution as a mindless stochastic process of creation is that it leaves in place an evolutionary anthropology in which human sin is not the product of free choices by a humanity who was created good and then freely chose to fall into sin. Instead, this version of theistic evolution sees humans and human sinfulness as the product of millions of years of random mutations and natural selection that bred individuals who are a mix of selfish and social impulses.

For a Christian to embrace such a view is to sacrifice beliefs long understood as core tenets of orthodox Christian faith. Such an evolutionist may be able to maintain belief in a divine Creator, and even in One who set up a process that led to intelligent creatures; but most of the traditional Christian theology and Christian anthropology that extends beyond this must go by the board, at least assuming the evolutionist is striving to hold to a coherent understanding of reality.

Meanwhile, Darwinism goes right on serving as an accelerant of unbelief, providing as it does a way to explain away the powerful impression of foresight and planning in living things. Evidence for this can be found in 2016 polling in the United States, which found that 66 percent of atheists and 44 percent of agnostics answered that "for them personally, the idea that 'life began from non-life through an unguided process of chemical evolution' has made the existence of God 'less likely,' while 65 percent of atheists and 43 percent of agnostics said that for them personally, the idea that 'all life forms on Earth (including humans) were produced by an unguided process of mutation and natural selection' has made the existence of God 'less likely.'" These two ideas topped the survey list as drivers of unbelief, outperforming such also-rans as evidence for universal common ancestry and the presence of disease and death in the world (West 2016).

4. Evolution's Origin Story for Art and Religion

The humanist-evolutionist might seek to retreat to art and religion to touch the sublime and transcendent, finding there some ground for meaning and purpose. But this is difficult to manage without first throwing overboard a reductionist story close to the heart of Darwinism, according to which some of our ancestors had one or more natural and wholly random variations/mutations that led them to believe in a spiritual dimension that included immaterial qualities like nobility, good, and evil. This non-rational conviction, so the story goes, helped them survive, reproduce, and pass this mutational cluster along from one generation to the next in a growing population of deluded but flourishing ancestors. These creatures eventually expressed their delusion in everything from complex religion to art.

On this view, the impulse toward artistic creation is essentially the human songbird attracting a mate—art as the byproduct of sexual selection. As for the content of art under the hegemony of Darwinist thinking, such works tend to present humans as mere animals, or as cogs in a pitiless meat grinder. Here "art" is meant in its broadest sense to refer to all the creative arts, and one of the earliest places we see such effects is in the aesthetic movement known as naturalism (to keep the scope of this essay manageable, the following brief analysis will focus on the narrative arts of literature and film).

Émile Zola, Thomas Hardy, George Eliot, Theodore Dreiser, Jack London, and Stephen Crane are among those who wrote in the naturalist vein. Some, such as Hardy, began as literary realists and, in the wake of Darwin's theory of evolution, were drawn into the naturalist mode.

We may here consult *Britannica* (2025), not as the last word on the matter but as the succinct voice of conventional academic wisdom on the subject. Naturalism, according to Britannica, "was inspired by adaptation of the principles and methods of natural science, especially the Darwinian view of nature," and it emphasized "man's accidental, physiological nature rather than his moral or rational qualities. Individual characters were seen as helpless products of heredity and environment, motivated by strong instinctual drives from within and harassed by social and economic pressures from without. As such, they had little will or responsibility for their fates, and the prognosis for their 'cases' was pessimistic at the outset."

Evolutionary thinking's influence on the narrative arts isn't, of course, restricted to literary naturalism. Robert Louis Stevenson's (1886) genre-mixing *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* is all but explicitly indebted to the idea of humans descending from ape-like creatures, with Hyde in the story understood as Dr. Jekyll devolved back into something approaching a savage, amoral ape. In Wells' (1895) *The Time Machine*, the protagonist of this science fiction novel travels first into the primordial past and then hundreds of thousands of years into the future, where he discovers that humans have evolved into two separate races. One is a thuggish underworld group. The other lives above ground and has all the ambition

of domesticated sheep. The inventor-protagonist then travels further into the future and finds all traces of humanity gone. The sun is burning out and life on Earth is heading for extinction. Enlightenment optimism, born of the scientific and industrial revolutions' many successes, gives way to Darwinian materialism's vision of a meaningless universe freewheeling pointlessly toward a meaningless end.

In a similarly cheerless vein, Bowles' (1949) novel *The Sheltering Sky* depicts the blue sky as a façade protecting us from the reality of a dark, meaningless universe, with human civilization serving a similar function. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Bowles (1981) commented: "If I'm persuaded that our life is predicated upon violence, that the entire structure of what we call civilization, the scaffolding that we've built up over the millennia, can collapse at any moment, then whatever I write is going to be affected by that assumption. The process of life presupposes violence, in the plant world the same as the animal world."

Why does he assume life is predicated on nothing grander than violence? World War II, concluded only four years before the novel's completion, likely cast a long shadow over Bowles' thinking; but notice that the picture Bowles sketches in the interview is Darwin's, with humans and all other animals understood as having evolved through a pitiless, dog-eat-dog process of natural selection—survival of the fittest.

Darwinism's influence spilled over from literature to cinema. This is most obvious where novels influenced by Darwinism were adapted to film, but we also find the theory directly influencing screenwriters and directors. In the 1960s, screenwriter Robert Ardrey pulled Hollywood in a Darwinian direction through two of his non-fiction books, *African Genesis* and *The Territorial Imperative*. Ardrey pressed the idea that humans evolved to be violent—that we're the vicious descendants of vicious apes. Stanley Kubrick (*A Clockwork Orange*, *2001: A Space Odyssey*) named Ardrey as an influence, but even without such acknowledgments it is easy enough to trace the violence and nihilistic tone of much modern cinema, from Sam Peckinpah's 1969 western *The Wild Bunch* forward.

5. The Sublime Subverted

In Darwin's (1958, p. 91) *Autobiography*, the gentleman of Down House described how his sensitivity to "grandeur" had atrophied in the years since he propounded his evolutionary theory. He said that as a young man on the voyage of the *Beagle* around the world, before he had seized on his theory of evolution, "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."

Elsewhere he observed that he had likewise lost his appreciation for poetry, plays, art, and music: "Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Shelley, gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare, especially in the historical plays. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry. . . My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts. . . The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect" (Darwin 1958, pp. 138–39).

In the Brazilian rain forest, the young Darwin still believed that nature was the work of divine design. But then he embraced his theory of evolution and pushed the divine

artificer offstage. In time he lost his capacity to experience the sublime. Correlation is not causation, but the connection here seems more than incidental. Darwinian materialism does an awkward job of explaining our sense of the grandeur of life—our sense of the sublime. At best it only explains away such feelings.

Also, by regarding the world of life as the work of a mindless watchmaker, Darwinism encourages the evolutionist to see dysfunction where another might see a mystery to be explored. Consider, as an example, Darwinist Richard Dawkins's critique of the mammalian eye: "Each photocell is, in effect, wired in backwards, with its wire sticking out on the side nearest the light. . . This means that the light, instead of being granted an unrestricted passage to the photocells, has to pass through a forest of connecting wires, presumably suffering at least some attenuation and distortion (actually probably not much but, still, it is the *principle* of the thing that would offend any tidy-minded engineer!)" (Dawkins 1986, p. 93, emphasis in original).

However, it has been demonstrated that this curious backward wiring of the vertebrate eye actually confers a distinct advantage by dramatically increasingly oxygen flow (Denton 1999). Later it was also found that Müller cells function as fiber-optic cables to transfer light in a high-fidelity manner that improves eye resolution (Wells 2017, p. 146). Two Israeli scientists, among those publishing on this startling discovery, described the retina as "an optimal structure for improving the sharpness of images" (Labin and Ribak 2010).

Thus we find that as regards investigation of the eye, Darwinism proved itself the science-stopper by encouraging evolutionists to infer bad design instead of keeping an open mind and seeking to better understand the complex engineering demands of the vertebrate vision system.

Darwinists have made similar errors by writing off various once-mysterious parts of the body as vestiges of the evolutionary process, only to later learn that these "vestigial organs" (e.g., the appendix) actually serve valuable roles. Darwinists also erroneously concluded that the regions of our DNA that do not code for proteins are junk created by evolution's blind trial-and-error process. But scientists are now finding all kinds of functional uses for non-coding DNA, just as some intelligent design theorists predicted would happen (Mims 1994; Dembski 1998; Luskin 2004).

I should clarify here what is meant by intelligent design, since the term will recur several more times in this paper. The term may simply refer to the activity of a mind in designing something—e.g., a cart, a tree house, a birthday cake, the first living cell, the laws and constants of nature fine-tuned for life. Or it may refer to the contemporary movement of scientists and philosophers making a scientific case that some features of the natural world are best explained by reference to an intelligent cause rather than to some purely blind material process.

The movement is differentiated from older design arguments in availing itself of evidence unavailable even a century ago, including discovery of the software-like digital code in living cells, intricate molecular machines such as ATP synthase or the bacterial flagellum, and the aforementioned fine-tuning of the laws and constants of nature for life.

At the same time, the term in its strict sense, as employed by its leading proponents, may refers to any argument based on physical evidence and that makes an inference to a designing intelligence as the uniquely adequate cause of some feature or features of the natural world. Thus, by this definition, the co-founder of the theory of evolution by natural selection, Alfred Russel Wallace, made intelligent design arguments, since he modified his view about the creative powers of random variation and natural selection and argued, based on scientific evidence, that a designing intelligence was a better explanation for certain things in the biosphere. By the strict definition of intelligent design by its leading contemporary proponents (e.g., Michael Behe, William Dembski, Stephen Meyer), Wallace

was making an intelligent design argument. Many other such cases could be put forward, of leading scientists before and outside the contemporary intelligent design movement making intelligent design arguments so defined.

Additionally, the theory of intelligent design does not rule out evolutionary common descent. Illustrating this is the fact that two leading figures in the movement hold to evolutionary common descent, Michael Behe and Michael Denton.

The theory of intelligent design, I should also clarify, is distinct from creationism as the latter term is widely understood today. Creationist arguments are rooted in particular interpretations of the book of Genesis. Intelligent design arguments may be in harmony with this or that reading of Genesis, but the arguments are always made from scientific evidence and philosophical reasoning, not appeals to this or that interpretation of Genesis. Nor is the theory of intelligent design restricted to some particular religious outlook. There are proponents of intelligent design from a wide spectrum of religious and metaphysical positions, including non-religious scientists such as Australian geneticist Michael Denton. At the same time, the minimal nature of intelligent design reasoning does not prevent it from serving as a steppingstone to faith in the God of the Bible, when joined to other lines of evidence and arguments.

6. Against Theme

The Darwinist's criticism of any would-be designer of life moves to the positively odd in an even stranger assumption: that in the history of life on earth, no all-knowing and all-powerful designer would restrict himself to the biological materials at hand or re-use a particular design theme, even when they are clearly superb. I was confronted with an instance of such thinking when I attended a debate between Darwinist James Carr and Lehigh University biologist and intelligent design proponent Michael Behe at Texas Tech University. In Carr's rebuttal, he pointed to similarities in the genetic code of chimps and humans as an example of bad design. What all-powerful creator would stoop to recycling his materials like this, argued Carr.

Gould (1982, p. 20) employed the same argument. "Orchids manufacture their intricate devices from the common components of ordinary flowers, parts usually fitted for very different functions," he wrote. "If God had designed a beautiful machine to reflect his wisdom and power, surely he would not have used a collection of parts generally fashioned for other purposes. Orchids were not made by an ideal engineer; they are jury-rigged from a limited set of available components."

These aesthetic presuppositions, however, are discredited by the history of great art and by the widely held truisms about sound aesthetic practice derived from that history. Few students of Shakespeare would take a critic seriously who accused Shakespeare of bad art on the grounds that *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Othello* share virtually the same plot, creatively altered to produce radically different plays. Few if any object to Shakespeare's repetition of motherless girls as heroines, or to his girls-disguised-as-boys device, or to his repeated use of the English sonnet form in his shorter poetry.

In music, imagine theme and variation without the theme. Imagine any melody without a theme on which to work variations. Or think of Monet and his penchant for poplars and haystacks. Far from wishing to censure him, students of Monet instead marvel at the fecundity of an imagination that allowed him to do so much with these narrow subjects.

The misguided argument that no all-wise cosmic designer would creatively rework his themes to such a degree as we find in the world of life (which, keep in mind, nevertheless runs riot with prodigal variety) is not a new one. Darwin (1861, letter no. 3256) himself employed it. In a letter to Asa Gray, he wrote, "Your question what would convince me

of Design is a poser. . . If man was made of brass or iron and no way connected with any other organism which had ever lived, I should perhaps be convinced."

Set aside the fact that iron and brass are woefully unsuitable materials for fashioning the complex and adaptable chemistry necessary for the information-intensive processing that is indispensable to living things. We can at least agree that if humans were made of iron or brass, this would create enormous difficulties for the idea that humankind evolved from lower creatures made mostly of carbon and water. However, the tenor of Darwin's comment dovetails with his attitude about the various similarities among the species. In all such cases of similarity, the unstated implication appears to be that the similarities are not merely one missed opportunity for the natural world to falsify Darwin's theory, but also a positive argument against a cosmic designer. And the only way to make such a deduction is to assume that some pre-established and undeniable rule of aesthetics is violated by the creator's reusing the ho-hum motifs at hand instead of his constructing the new form of life using wholly novel parts and patterns. "Why," Darwin (1859), p. 437) asks in *The Origin of Species*, "should the sepals, petals, stamens, and pistils in any individual flower, though fitted for such widely different purposes, be all constructed on the same pattern?"

He attributed this result to natural selection, but he unwittingly suggested a very un-Darwinian answer in an earlier letter to his sister. Expressing his admiration for Alnwick Castle in the English county of Northumberland, he wrote that the structure "was very grand; much more so than the other great nobility, & in much better taste" (Darwin 1831, letter no. 122). The young Darwin attributed the house's nobility and beauty not to a prodigal use of variously distinct materials or motifs. Just the opposite. "Every window in his house was full of straight lines of brilliant lights," he explained, "& from their extreme regularity & number had a beautiful effect—The paucity of invention very striking, crowns, anchors, and W.R.s were repeated in endless succession" (Darwin 1831, letter no. 122).

So why should Darwin doubt that a master architect of the world might wish to design in a similar fashion? Common wisdom in the field of aesthetics practically demands such a method, since it allows the artist to cultivate variety without sacrificing aesthetic harmony and unity, a conclusion corroborated by the great works of music, literature, and the visual arts that have endured through the centuries. And if there is a master artist behind this astonishingly complex work of art we call the world, surely we could expect him to be at least as artistically astute as the better artists among his creatures, so we could expect him to cultivate harmony and unity through the creative reuse of common materials.

7. The Turn in Architecture

Denying as much in a misguided effort to exclude from nature the activity of a divine artist—and undermining the ground of truth, goodness, and beauty into the bargain—has had no small role in degrading aesthetic practice in the century after Darwin. This reality is glaringly apparent in much modernist and postmodernist architecture, with its descent into the graceless, banal, and willfully ugly, and in its concomitant denial of the transcendent, the sublime, and the humane (with *humane* understood as rooted in a vision of the human person as a unity of matter and spirit, body and soul). In Chapter 9 of *Darwin Day in America*, John West connects the dots from this descent back to the rise of a Darwinian worldview. As West notes, the father of modernist architecture, Louis Sullivan, was explicit about his debt to evolutionary theory:

> Sullivan gleaned special insights from the theory of evolution. Retelling the story of his life in the third person for *The Autobiography of an Idea* (Sullivan 1924, pp. 254–55), Sullivan observed that "in Darwin he Found much food. The Theory of Evolution seemed stupendous." The importance of evolution on Sullivan's thinking can be seen in his account of the development of man's mental and

> spiritual qualities, which could have come straight from Darwin's *Descent of Man*. According to Sullivan, man's "highest thoughts, his most delicate yearnings," developed "through an imperceptible birth and growth, from the material sense of touch." Likewise, "from [physical] hunger arose the cravings of his soul." And "from urgent [sexual] passions have the sweetest vows of his heart arisen." Finally (Sullivan 1947, p. 45) "from savage instincts came the force and powers of his mind." The development of man's spiritual nature he thus ascribed to an evolutionary process originating in man's physical cravings for touch, food, sex, and "savage instincts" that presumably included self-preservation. (West 2007, p. 191)

That so much of modern architecture has been characterized as "soul-crushing" by its many critics will not seem inexplicable when we understand Sullivan's anthropology. West continues:

> Lashing out at various manifestations of dualism, Sullivan wrote that "it is assumed the day is passing, wherein men seriously believe. . . in the fetish of mind as an active something apart from another passive fetish called Nature; in the fetish of soul as apart from a fetish called body." To Sullivan, "such conceptions are but survivals. . . of the feudal notions of good and evil, of the phantasmal notions of sin and redemption—Survivals of the notion of an external God—as though there could be anything external." (West 2007, p. 193)

Sullivan's outlook was passed down to his most famous disciple, Frank Lloyd Wright, and to many a less talented modern architect. Our cities' monotonous public housing and cube-shaped skyscrapers also stand in this aesthetic tradition. The modern style went by different names, writes West, "but its attributes were the same: Flat roofs. Bare walls shorn of ornamentation. Buildings designed as cubes. Exposed concrete. Steel cages enclosed by glass. . . Most followed Sullivan in viewing architecture as an evolutionary discipline as well as embracing a reductionist view of buildings as the sum of their functions and building materials" (West 2007, p. 195). I would only add—and this is implicit in West's analysis—that for such architects their understanding of the function of these buildings was impoverished by an impoverished anthropology, one that denies the reality of the human soul and, with it, the Imago Dei.

West highlights pioneering modernist architect Adolf Loos, whose musings on the subject make the connection to Darwinism especially clear:

> According to Loos (1908, p. 19), "when man is born, his sensory impressions are like those of a newborn puppy. His childhood takes him through all the metamorphoses of human history." Loos then claimed that ornamentation—whether it be tattooing one's skin, or painting a complicated design on the surface of a piece of china—is a throwback to a previous chapter in human evolution. The urge for such ornamentation is essentially erotic, and while the practice might be understandable in savage cultures, the civilized artist or architect who pursues ornamentation today is akin to "a criminal or a degenerate" who "smears the walls" of a lavatory "with erotic symbols." (West 2007, p. 195)

One may wonder where, in all this modern rage for tossing out the old and bringing in the "world of tomorrow," is the gradualistic component of Darwinian thinking? If these modernists are truly as indebted to evolutionary theory as they claim, why not advocate for a gradual evolution of traditional architectural principles and methods, building on the past even as evolutionary mutations are said to gradually revise genetic blueprints over countless generations?

One explanation would be that these architects were playing fast and loose with evolutionary theory, opportunistically piggybacking on the prestige of a scientific theory that had conquered historical biology, much as various non-scientific fields have attempted to rebrand themselves as science to draft off the prestige of modern science (e.g., "social science"). There may be some of that going on with these pioneers of modernist architecture, but then one is left to wonder about the cause of its descent into sterility and ugliness. The explanation, I want to suggest, rests in a driving purpose of Darwinism. It was always meant as a designer substitute, as a way of denying, or at least sidelining, the transcendent—a divine Creator, a human soul, heaven and hell.

True, Darwin remained intermittently open to the possibility of God, but only to that of a distant and deistic cosmic architect, one who, in the words of modernist Irish novelist Joyce (1916, p. 252), "remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." The deistic strain in much Enlightenment thinking, particularly but not restricted to the sciences, remained very much in the air during Darwin's academic training and, apart from that, was passed down through his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, and Darwin's father. For Darwin, God's absence or indifference is preferable to the alternative. As he explained in his autobiography, "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my Father, Brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine." (Darwin 1958, p. 87)

Darwin's evolutionary theory got the Creator, if any such existed, out of the business of fashioning life, including human life, and out of the business of governing humanity entirely. That Darwin aimed to do precisely this, and to discredit Christianity into the bargain, is suggested by a comment he made in a letter to his son George in 1873: "I have lately read Morley's Life of Voltaire & he insists strongly that direct attacks on Christianity (even when written with wonderful force & vigour of Voltaire) produce little permanent effect: real good seems only to follow from slow & silent side attacks" (Darwin 1873, letter no. 9105).

8. Kicking Away the Pillars

If modern Darwinism is true and demonstrable, then any lover of truth apprised of the relevant facts has no choice but to accept the theory and work out from the theory to a consistent and coherent theory of life, one involving a steely eyed look at one's prior faith in such notions as a transcendent father God, the Imago Dei, and good and evil as immaterial realities—at least until one gets far enough along in the exercise of worldview realignment to realize that Darwinism taken to its logical extreme may vitiate the ground for supposing that we can reason our way to truth, or that there is a moral calling to pursue truth in the first place. But before undertaking such a wholesale realignment of one's basic beliefs, it would be prudent to make sure that modern Darwinism has indeed been definitively shown to be a more-or-less true description of the history of life on earth.

Many take this as settled fact and therefore consider weighing the evidence a waste of time. And for those with a glimmering of doubt, there is enormous social pressure to ignore such doubts and embrace evolutionary theory as settled fact. This pressure is acute for those in the academy, and especially for those in the biological sciences. But if despite the pressure, we attempt to follow the evidence, what then? Other works have explored the scientific evidence that seems to be accumulating against modern evolutionary theory. These include Michael Denton's (1985) *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, Michael Behe's (1996, 2019) *Darwin's Black Box* and *Darwin Devolves*, Jonathan Wells's (2002) *Icons of Evolution*, and Stephen Meyer's (2013) *Darwin's Doubt*. This body of work extend to

books outside the intelligent design movement, such as the aforementioned *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* by New York University philosopher Thomas Nagel (2012). In what follows I will not attempt to summarize the critique found in those works, beyond a few brief remarks. Instead, we will consider a key historiographic pillar of Darwinian materialism.

A little context first. Many Darwinists are wont to appeal to an investigative rule touched on above, methodological naturalism. As we saw, this principle has deep historical roots, but it did not achieve the status of conventional wisdom in the scientific community until the latter half of the nineteenth century. Darwin, Darwinism, and modern Darwinists frequently make recourse to this methodological rule when fending off cogent challenges from proponents of intelligent design. Thus we can rightly regard methodological naturalism as a crucial pillar of Darwinism. Interestingly, that pillar itself depends on another pillar—scientism's grand progress narrative. I want to suggest that this narrative is a distortion of the historical record and that, where widely embraced, has pernicious cultural effects.

9. The Icon of Materialism

Rather than simply summarizing the progress narrative, allow me to relate an incident where an evolutionist, Steve Matheson, employed the narrative in the heat of battle, in a debate with Stephen Meyer, a proponent of intelligent design.[7]

Meyer, a former geologist with a PhD in the history and philosophy of science from the University of Cambridge, notes that the historical sciences reason using the principle of *causal adequacy*—looking for causes active in the present with the demonstrated capacity to cause the set of clues under investigation. Historical scientists proceed like detectives at a crime scene. They identify any causes "now in operation" known from observation to be capable of producing the clues under investigation. Then they accumulate additional clues in order to narrow the field of viable causal explanations. If, after patient study, they can narrow the field to only one type of cause with the demonstrated ability to have produced the various clues, the scientists can identify that cause as the best explanation (Meyer 2009, chap. 15). So, for instance, careful study of the channeled scablands in Western Washington has led geologists to dismiss as causally inadequate all other possible explanations for this geological formation and to conclude that this geological feature was caused by an enormous rush of water when an ice dam broke, unleashing a massive flood from an ice-age lake in northern Idaho on the Clear Fork river.

This mode of reasoning, common to the historical sciences, has been described by philosophers of science as *inference to the best explanation* (IBE), and Meyer argues that IBE reasoning points decisively to the work of a creative intelligence in the origin of the information-rich code we find in DNA and proteins. Meyer further insists that, contra a common objection from design opponents, this mode of reasoning employed by design theorists is not an argument from ignorance, but rather an argument from our shared knowledge of the cause-and-effect structure of the universe, including our knowledge of presently acting causes. It's a uniformitarian argument, one based on what we know from uniform and repeated experience is the one sort of cause—purposive intelligence—with the demonstrated capacity to generate reams of novel information such as we find in DNA (Meyer 2009, chaps. 18 and 19).

In the debate between Meyer and Matheson, Matheson actually agreed with Meyer's argument up to a point. "You said that we reason backwards from what we know works, which is that intelligence makes codes," he said. "I'll agree... We reason back and say, therefore, this is the one explanation we know that can do this. I buy that. I get it. It's obvious" (Matheson 2010, 44:35ff). But then Matheson pointed to something he insisted

neutralizes Meyer's argument. "Everywhere I look, and every time I look," Matheson said, "if I wait long enough, there is a natural and even materialistic explanation to things" (Matheson 2010, 45:12ff). This strong historical trend, he insisted, decisively councils against embracing Meyer's design inference or, for that matter, any intelligent design argument in the natural sciences.

In essence, Matheson was trumping the lower-level historical pattern Meyer had highlighted (i.e., in all cases where we can reliably trace information back to a source, we arrive at an intelligent agent or agents) with what Matheson sees as a higher level historical pattern, materialistic science's grand progress narrative, given formal structure by nineteenth-century French philosopher Auguste Comte, the founder of positivism. Comte proposed that science has evolved through three stages. In the theological phase, mysterious natural phenomena, such as floods or plagues, are attributed to the mischief of the gods. In the metaphysical stage, they're attributed to abstract entities such as the forms of Plato or the final causes of Aristotle. In the third and mature phase, natural phenomena are explained strictly by reference to natural laws or material processes (Comte's framework appears to have exerted a powerful influence on the young Charles Darwin[8]).

Comte and Matheson were each telling a version of the same grand narrative. Distilled, the story runs like this: *We humans used to attribute practically every mysterious force in nature to the doings of the gods. We stuffed a god into any gap in our knowledge of nature and moved on. But over time, the gap continues to shrink, with solid natural explanations repeatedly cropping up for everything from lightning bolts to romantic love. This trend is unflagging, and runs in just one direction—toward a fully materialistic understanding of nature and its origin.* The moral of the story: Always hold out for the purely material explanation, even when the evidence seems to point in the other direction. Otherwise, you will find yourself on the dreaded wrong side of history.

It's important to be aware of just how much is entailed in embracing this narrative. It means that one has no principled reason for making exceptions. So for instance, it's not enough to say that evolution is how biological diversity arose, but allow that scientific evidence points to a master designer as the cause for the origin of the first life or for, say, the origin of the universe. Inferring a designer would be verboten, period.

One might believe in certain miracles (e.g., the ex nihilo creation of the universe in the Big Bang, the origin of life, the Resurrection), but anyone embracing such beliefs would be understood as doing so purely as a leap-of-faith commitment without rational foundation—fideism. Atheistic scientists would be happy for Christians to defend belief in God on such grounds—the easier to dismiss such a view as belief without rational grounding, unfit for the public square. And this indeed has been a winning strategy for materialists in pushing religious practice and the case for a divine architect out of public spaces, allowing materialists to dominate worldview instruction outside the home and houses of worship.

10. Fact Checking the Grand Narrative

None of the above is meant as a council of despair for those who prize the core commitments of the Judeo-Christian framework. The icon of materialism outlined above, the grand progress narrative that evolutionist Steve Matheson summarized in his debate with design theorist Stephen Meyer, has a superficial plausibility, but it claims an unbroken trend in the history of discovery, and in reality that trend is far from unbroken. Although the grand narrative is regularly employed with great confidence to trump intelligent design and buttress Darwinian materialism, it is spectacularly contradicted by major developments in the physical and life sciences.

So for instance, through much of the nineteenth century, the scientific consensus was that microscopic life was relatively simple, little more than microscopic sacks of undifferentiated protoplasm. The scientific community also accepted the idea of spontaneous generation—that creatures sprang into existence spontaneously out of things like dew and rotting meat. Taken together, these articles of conventional scientific wisdom suggested that the origin of the first living cell deep in the past could be easily accounted for in purely materialistic terms.

But in 1861 Louis Pasteur conducted a series of experiments that put the final nail in the coffin of spontaneous generation. And in the next century scientists began amassing evidence of just how complex even the simplest cell is. Now we know they are microminiaturized factories of astonishing sophistication and, more than this, that such sophistication is essential to their capacity to survive and reproduce. This poses a monumental challenge to materialists. Matheson conceded in his debate with Meyer that no adequate material explanation has been found for their origin. And as world-leading synthetic organic chemist James Tour explains, it isn't as if origin-of-life scientists are inching toward the goal line of a fully material explanation for the first life. Rather, the goal line is rapidly receding from them as new tracts of cellular complexity are discovered every decade (Tour 2022, 5.42ff).[9]

So, (A) the only cause we have ever witnessed actually producing novel information is intelligent design. (B) We have come to learn that spontaneous generation was a fantasy. And (C) we have discovered that even the simplest cells are highly sophisticated, information-rich organisms. Thus scientific observations collapsed a long-standing materialistic story of the origin of life and simultaneously strengthened the competing design explanation. This development runs directly counter to scientism's grand progress narrative.

A common rejoinder is that inferring design in such cases amounts to "giving up on science," and that science should always hold out for a purely material explanation, since one always shows up if one is patient enough. But this begs the question. Invoking the narrative to deny that the evidence has broken in favor of intelligent design and from this to argue that the grand progress narrative has therefore not been contradicted by an important exception is to argue in a circle. What if the first living cell really was the work of intelligent design? Being open to that possibility and following the evidence isn't giving up on science but on scientism, a dogma resting on a progress narrative flatly contradicted by the historical record.

Cosmology and physics provide another counterexample to the grand progress narrative. In Darwin's time conventional scientific wisdom held that the universe was eternal. Given this, it was assumed there could hardly be any mystery about its origin, for it hadn't originated; rather, it had always existed. But developments in physics and astronomy overturned the notion of an eternal cosmos, and scientists are now in broad agreement that our universe came into being. What many had imagined never happened and so required no explanation—the origin of the universe—suddenly cried out for an explanation.

On the heels of this discovery, there was a growing awareness of what cosmologists refer to as the fine-tuning problem: The laws and constants of physics and chemistry are finely tuned to allow for life in the universe. To grasp just how fine-tuned, consider a fanciful what-if: If at the beginning of the universe a mischievous super-being (envision Q from Star Trek) were to have altered even one of these parameters very modestly, then no stars, planets, or complex chemistry would emerge, and no life.

Fine-tuning is, of course, only a problem for materialists. For theists, it is readily explained as the product of a cosmic designer. To explain away the problem, materialists have to resort to saying there must be countless other universes, with our universe simply being one of the lucky ones with the right configuration to allow for intelligent life to evolve.

Not every physicist has played along. Several, including some Nobel Laureates, have assessed the growing body of evidence for fine tuning and pointed to intelligent design as the most reasonable explanation. Physicist and Nobel Laureate Charles Townes (Powell 2005) put it this way: "Intelligent design, as one sees it from a scientific point of view, seems to be quite real. This is a very special universe: it's remarkable that it came out just this way. If the laws of physics weren't just the way they are, we couldn't be here at all. The sun couldn't be there, the laws of gravity and nuclear laws and magnetic theory, quantum mechanics, and so on have to be just the way they are for us to be here."

The grand progress narrative that Matheson evoked holds that as we learn more and more about the world, purely natural or material explanations inevitably arise and grow stronger, while design arguments inevitably collapse under the weight of new discoveries. But the opposite has happened in cosmology and origin-of-life studies. Despite all this, the disciples of scientism (distinct from science proper) go right on recycling their grand narrative as if it were the whole truth and nothing but the truth. In reality it airbrushes into oblivion important counterexamples.

Certainly, researchers continue to gain new insights into how material forces cause various things in nature, but the idea that we live in a world characterized by various underlying laws and constants that we can profitably investigate has long been non-controversial. In fact, the belief that nature is the rational and orderly work of the rational God described in the Bible encouraged Christian theists such as Robert Boyle, Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler to go looking for the underlying order of nature and, in the process, to launch the scientific revolution.

This, we should pause to note, is another important historical thread that pulls against Auguste Comte's notion of three stages of history. The theological, and specifically theistic, commitments of the early men of science were crucial in the birth of modern science. Dennis Danielson's (2001) *The Book of the Cosmos* tells the story well, as do Nancy Pearcey and Charles Thaxton's (1994) *The Soul of Science*, Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richard's (2024) *The Privileged Planet*, and Rodney Stark's (2007) *The Victory of Reason*. It's well-established among historians of science (both secular and religious ones) that modern science, while drawing inspiration from ancient Greek philosophy, is largely the invention of Christendom, and one fired by theological ideas. In this we have perhaps the most obvious contradiction to scientism's cherished progress narrative, since on their telling, Comte's "theological stage" of science is supposed to be the most primitive and useless.

Today, researchers guided by an intelligent design framework are making advances on several fronts, much of the work under the aegis of what has been dubbed ID 3.0. The research, and a growing list of peer-reviewed scientific papers generated by the work, cover an array of topics, from bacterial adaption, brain blood flow, and cancer research to "junk DNA," orphan genes, and protein origins.[10]

The part of the framework perhaps most likely to lead from scientific insights to technological advances intersects the burgeoning field known as biomimetics. Darwinism in its original and modern forms tends to anticipate suboptimal and even poor design, due to the limitations of the evolutionary mechanism. Leading French biologist Jacob (1977) noted that the mechanism was less an engineer than a tinkerer, "a tinkerer who does not know exactly what he is going to produce but uses whatever he finds around him." In contrast, the theory of intelligent design allows for, and even comes to anticipate, the discovery of optimal and near-optimal engineering in the biological realm because it is open to the possibility that the designer of nature is not only better than a blind tinkerer but better than any human engineer [11].

To be sure, there are biologists active in the field of biomimetics that hold to modern evolutionary theory, while others in the field may think very little about origins biology one

way or the other. The argument here isn't that evolutionary theory makes fruitful research in biomimetics impossible, much less that one must be a proponent of intelligent design to make progress in the field. It's rather the more modest claim that the intelligent design framework better primes the investigator to seek out and discover instances of optimal engineering in biology, which in turn better situates him or her to copy such designs in the work of invention. Leading British biomimetics engineer Stuart Burgess, a proponent of intelligent design, credits his intelligent design perspective with many of his patented breakthroughs. He explains:

> I have had the honor of receiving many national awards for engineering and bioengineering design in the UK. I can state categorically that my intelligent design framework was crucial to my success in all these projects. If I had followed the evolutionary paradigm, I doubt I would have won any of those prizes, because it would have stifled my research. I have met many researchers around the world, including biologists, who have also been inspired by an intelligent design perspective and owe their success to it.
>
> My ID perspective led me to anticipate that the human foot would have a very sophisticated arched design superior to any human prosthetic, and this was found to be correct. I went on to develop an advanced bioinspired arched robotic foot. Had I believed [evolutionists] Nathan Lents and Jeremy de Silva that the human foot is a poor design, I would have been put off even investigating the human foot and lost that research opportunity.
>
> My intelligent design perspective also led me to think the knee likely had a sophisticated linkage design, and that too proved correct. I went on to spend twenty- five years researching advanced bioinspired knees for robotics, overseeing PhD students in the work and funded by various grants. If I had believed Lents that the knee is a bad design, I might never have bothered to investigate the knee joint and would have missed this great research opportunity. (Burgess 2026, pp. 316–17)

11. A Method's Descent

Many later scientists in the Western tradition abandoned science's fertile theological resources, opting to restrict themselves to purely material explanations and insisting that science should trade only in hypotheses consistent with materialism. They sought "to create," in the approving words of Harvard geneticist Lewontin (1997, p. 31), "an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive," even to the point of tolerating "unsubstantiated just-so stories" if necessary.

Today, materialism's story of everything begins with the mother of all unsubstantiated just-so stories: the invocation of untold billions of unseen and, in principle, undetectable universes to argue that our universe is just one of the lucky habitable universes among all these untold universes. A neat solution, and never mind that the idea is unfalsifiable, or that the multiverse itself would have to be exquisitely fine-tuned in order to generate even one life-sustaining universe (Gordon 2014, p. 581; Meyer 2021, pp. 339–43).

This mother of all just-so stories is not only unsubstantiated and unsubstantiable, but it also does nothing more than shuffle the fine-tuning problem back a step, since for it to work it requires a universe-generating mechanism that itself must be exquisitely fine-tuned to ever produce one or more habitable universes (Meyer 2021, pp. 339–43). And yet the idea is tolerated and even embraced because, as Lewontin (1997) further insists in the same essay, "we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door."

12. Opening a Door

Yes, one could embrace evolution and its story of universal common descent but reject methodological naturalism and, with it, the belief that the evolutionary process that generated all of life's diversity is a purely material and unguided process. But then one is no longer embracing Darwinism. One isn't even embracing the most prominent contemporary form of what goes variously by the names theistic evolution or evolutionary creationism, advocated by such figures as biologists Miller (1999) and Collins (2006). Instead one would be much closer to an intelligent design proponent such as Lehigh University biologist Michael Behe, who holds to universal common descent even as he sees the evidence strongly pointing to the need for a designing intelligence to explain the diversification of life over the hundreds of millions of years of evolutionary development.

Additionally, and to move from scientific and philosophical considerations to theological ones, to remain open to the possibility that nature provides clear signs of the work of a designing intelligence places one on ground more congenial to the longstanding Judeo-Christian idea that God's eternal power and divine nature can be clearly seen and understood from what has been made, that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God" (Hopkins 1918), and that humans, far from being the product of "a purposeless and materialistic process that did not have him in mind" (Simpson 1949, p. 344), are instead made in the very image of God, with unalienable dignity and purpose. As Pope Benedict XVI (2005) said in his installation address, "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary." Our culture turns its back on that ancient truth at its own peril.

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Notes

[1] Ruse and Wilson (1993, p. 310) put it this way: "As evolutionists, we see that no justification of the traditional kind is possible. Morality, or more strictly our belief in morality, is merely an adaptation put in place to further our reproductive ends. Hence the basis of ethics does not lie in God's will. . . In an important sense, ethics as we understand it is an illusion fobbed off on us by our genes to get us to cooperate. It is without external grounding."

[2] The Galileo affair was more complex and nuanced than popular accounts generally allow. (1) It was primarily the natural philosophers (scientists) who led the way in opposing Galileo, due to their allegiance to Aristotelian physics. (2) As historian of science Michael Keas explained in private correspondence, a leading inquisition official who dialogued with Galileo voiced a willingness to follow the science and recognized that, if heliocentrism were proven scientifically, then of course certain confident interpretations of relevant scripture would need to be reconsidered. (3) Galileo resisted Kepler's elliptical orbits, weakening his own empirical case for heliocentrism. Only after the Galileo affair, after Kepler's three laws of planetary motion had been more widely embraced by the astronomers of the day, and especially after those three laws were subsumed under Newton's later and more general laws of motion, did the scientific case for heliocentrism become unassailably stronger than its competitor models. (4) Galileo was extraordinarily tactless, placing the pope's arguments in the mouth of the foolish character Simplicio. And (5) Galileo was not tortured. Instead, he was restricted to a beautiful villa and allowed a stream of guests and the freedom to continue his scientific writings. For a more detailed summary of the clash, see Keas (2019, chap. 5). For a deeper investigation, see Finocchiaro (2005).

[3] Dilley (2007, pp. 2–3) comments, "Bacon thought deeply and wrote extensively about the nature of science and its relationship to religious claims in *Great Instauration*, *Novum Organon*, and *The Advancement of Learning*, works which collectively advocated methodological naturalism."

[4] Boethius of Dacia should not be confused with the sixth-century Roman Christian scholar Boethius, author of *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

[5] For the Buridan and Oresme quotations, Dilley cites Grant (2001, pp. 198–99). It should be acknowledged, as well, that many of the classical natural philosophers strove to identify natural explanations over against the mythological explanations current in their time.

[6] For an overview of the sea change in the intellectual climate of England and Europe in the generation or two leading up to the publication of the *Origin* in 1859, one favorable to the book's reception, see Thomas (2025, pp. 111–24).

[7] This section and the following two borrow significantly from my article, "The Icon of Materialism," *Touchstone*, March/April 2015 (Witt 2015), https://touchstonemag.com/archives/article.php?id=28-02-040-f, accessed on 21 October 2025.

[8] Brown (1986, p. 12) writes that we learn from Darwin's notebooks from the late 1830s and from, "the uncensored version of the autobiography. . . that Darwin was reading Hume on epistemology and religion, as well as pondering at least secondary literature on the positivist Auguste Comte. Simultaneously, he was developing an increasingly materialist theory of mind and emotion. Upon coming across an anonymous review of Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*, Darwin was particularly taken with Comte's thesis that every branch of science progresses through three stages: the theological, the metaphysical, and the lawful. 'Zoology itself is now purely theological,' Darwin remarked, meaning that zoologists still saw the providential hand of God intervening in the natural order. With Comte, Darwin rejected this theological state of current science."

[9] For more in-depth analysis from Tour, see his series of articles at the journal *Inference* on the growing challenges facing the idea of a purely materialistic origin of life, available at https://inference-review.com/contributor/james-tour, accessed on 24 October 2026.

[10] For more on the ID 3.0 research program, including links to various peer-reviewed papers that it has helped to generate, see "ID 3.0 Research Program," Discovery Institute, https://www.discovery.org/id/research/, accessed on 18 November 2025.

[11] The ID framework sees instances of dysfunction in the biosphere not as canonical designs but as the result of degradation over time, something that confronts even the best engineered systems.

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