

EVOLUTION: SCIENCE AND HISTORY

NEIL BROWN

MODERN SCIENCE'S account of our origins adds a whole new dimension to our self-understanding: a universe bio-friendly within nano seconds of the big bang or bounce or fluctuation, through its thirteen and a half billion year passage, from quarks to atoms to galaxies to solar systems, to our own planet, some nine billion years in the making, born in the Goldilocks region of a small star among hundreds of billions of others. Another three quarters of a billion years were to pass before the first microscopic sparks of life appeared; it took this spark another two and a half billion years to form multicellular life until five hundred and fifty million years ago this life suddenly burgeons with species evolving and adapting amid huge geological shifts, extreme climate changes, mass extinctions and cataclysmic events, culminating in the appearance of the first human beings possibly only some one hundred and fifty thousand years ago.

The New Atheism unilaterally states that there is only one way to read all these facts, that they can all be explained in terms of physics and chemistry, mathematical equations, and the evolutionary struggle for survival, as Richard Dawkins confidently asserts:

Human thoughts and emotions emerge from exceeding complex interconnections of physical entities within the brain. An atheist in this sense of philosophical naturalism is somebody who believes there is nothing beyond the natural physical world, no supernatural creature intelligence lurking behind the observable universe, no soul outlasts the body and no miracles—except in the sense of natural phenomenon that we don't yet understand.¹

The purpose of science is to determine and analyse the facts of our material world, to devise theories, to explain them mathematically, and to discover the laws that govern them.

Dawkins' statement is itself an interpretation of the scientific facts, going far beyond what the methods and purposes of science themselves warrant, to assert that there is no other way to read them.

It is, however, possible to examine those facts with a different purpose in mind, to discover what they may say about ourselves, about who and what we might be in our vast universe, a question of value rather than scientific fact.

Any such reinterpretation must stay true to those facts, respecting the methods and findings of science, if there is to be genuine complementarity, rather than conflict, between the stories. Reinterpreting facts from different points of view, as for example in a detective story, is always possible, because facts are always open to being arranged in a different way to discover any new meanings they may contain—it wasn't the butler after all!

When it comes to human 'value', Paul Davies argues that we need to take 'mind' seriously when looking at the scientific facts: its 'characteristic qualities are even more distinctive and totally unlike anything else found in nature... thoughts, purposes, feelings, beliefs—the inner subjective world of the observer... they are a class apart.'²

If you insert this qualitative note into the array of facts, which, of course, the New Atheists won't allow, the emergence of the human in the aeon long process of evolution becomes more than a study in physics and chemistry, but also a history, a possible different telling of the story—it becomes our story.

The introduction of 'mind' and its 'history' brings with it self-consciousness, sophisticated language, culture and society, interpersonal relationships, critical thinking, value, agency, and a whole host of human purposes, into the story. Here we are talking of subjects, centres

of activity and purpose, the beings who do science among many other things and who, inescapably, seek meaning for themselves and their world, as Michael Polanyi shows:

These personal powers include the capacity for understanding a meaning, for believing a factual statement, for interpreting a mechanism in relation to its purpose, and on a higher level, for reflecting on problems and exercising originality in solving them. They include, indeed, every manner of reaching convictions by an act of personal judgement. The neurologist exercises these powers to the highest degree in constructing the neurological model of a man—to whom he denies in this very act any similar powers.³

The New Atheists will have none of this. Their view of the ‘human’ remains always tightly tethered to biology. For Colin Hewson ‘consciousness is an emergent property of sufficiently complex systems, and therefore that it is the brain’s complexity that generates consciousness.’⁴ For Richard Dawkins, our brains are an ‘unexpected bonus’ given the ‘mediocre utilitarian devices necessary for survival.’⁵

In this view, there are no breaks in the story line, no place for ‘value’ to reside. Luckily, morality is hardwired into our brains as a mix of altruism, natural feelings, and group threats and benefits⁶; while, ‘unluckily’, religion is also present as a ‘misfiring’ of gene clusters⁷. Nothing is allowed to gate crash this gathering, even the ‘spiritual’ and ‘mystery’ are neuro-psychological phenomena that point beyond themselves’ but never ‘beyond’ the physical world.⁸

The crucial question is: What are we losing when we reduce, without residue, our vast array of human characteristics to the biological level of adaptation and survival? For the New Atheist, as for example, A.C. Grayling, it is all physics and chemistry, but this leads to some disturbing results.

First, the best option on offer for human living seems to be a series of conditionals and exclusions, for example:

- to live and be responsible as if one were free, which one is not, we just ‘feel’ as if we were;
- to choose values to live by as if life matters, even if the universe is ultimately pointless, which it is;



Fr. Neil Brown taught at the Catholic Institute of Sydney for thirty-four years. He is currently the Parish Priest of Bondi Beach in the Sydney Archdiocese.

- think only within the square, rule out the bigger questions like ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’;

- if you accept your finitude, death will lose it sting;

- if we come to realise ‘our own insignificance in the face of the universe,’ it will enlarge our soul.

Secondly, to make sense of things a whole series of very fragile assumptions have to be made, all with little visible support other than the ‘fact’ that human beings are more complex than other species, assumptions made even more precarious by the determinism of the evolutionary red tooth and claw struggle for survival which is their ever present backdrop. For example:

- human beings have ‘inherent dignity’;

- ethical reflection must start off from the ‘more generous and sympathetic understanding of human nature and the human condition’;

- natural feelings will prompt us to be moral;

- the value of responsibility, generosity, care and sympathy can be seen in themselves;

- murder, rape, torture, oppression, injustice, ‘are not to be tolerated anywhere at any time’ (even though killing, lying and cheating, all have evolutionary advantages);

- life is ‘never lost to human history.’⁹

These values seem to appear from nowhere and hang in mid air desperately looking for ‘facts’ to support them. They hang suspended because they are leftovers from previous religious thinking shown to be ‘illusory’ by the New Atheism. In an age of conspicuous consumption, competitiveness, an overriding focus on wealth accumulation, and a utilitarian mindset, those ‘relic’ assumptions appear more and more ‘illusory’ themselves.

This reduction of everything human to biol-

ogy erodes the foundations of the value and meaning of the lives we lead. This is not to deny, however, that we are products of an evolutionary process, where laws, algorithms, physics and chemistry, still operate in the way we function as embodied beings. But it is not all of who and what we are and we are still a work in progress.

This work in progress is now a work of civilization and culture as much as biology. The biology remains; we are not, however, its prisoners. Culture, through our powers of critical thinking and creative agency, is able to remake what nature has produced to discover and create meaning and value, and to change for better or worse the conditions of our lives. Biology may be the first word, but it is not the last word.

Civilization and culture over time enrich language and give rise to communities, traditions and skills, which create structures of interpretation and value, by means of which we experience, interpret, judge and act within our world. Adaptation and the struggle for survival have given us much, but are not capable of providing ‘truth’, ‘goodness’ and the appreciation of ‘beauty’. John Haught, for example, points out the contradiction involved in trying to put everything into the evolutionary basket:

The question I have for you, then, is this: Given the avowedly exhaustive explanation of your intelligence in terms of purely unintelligent causes, why should I, or anybody else including you, take seriously the claims that this purely adaptive instrument is now making? Why should I assume that this adaptive instrument (your mind) is able to discover truth? Obviously, you want me to accept your mind’s evolutionary explanation of intelligence as true... But how can I accept this as true if, at the same time, your own intelligence may simply be engaging in one adaptive—and that means possibly deceptive—exercise?¹⁰

Science itself is a product of culture, not biology, and it draws its confidence in its reasoning and investigative powers from deep resources in mind and human agency.

Faith also has its roots in this level of being, in our uniqueness, our deep questioning, our restlessness, and our sense of how much depends on our agency. Unlike science, faith is about

value. If faith is to relate its story to the account of science, it will do so from the point of view of the inherent worth and potential it discovers and affirms in human beings in their openness to the future, as John Haught again explains:

I would submit here that the novel informational possibilities that evolution has available to it arise from the always dawning future. It is the arrival of the future, and not the grinding onward of an algorithmic past, that accounts for the novelty in evolution. Without the persistent coming of an unrehearsed future, the present and the past would have no opening onto the path of transformation. Evolution is rendered possible only because of the temporal clearing made available when the future faithfully introduces relevant new possibilities.¹¹

Retelling the story of evolution from a faith perspective does not necessarily mean that we do so with ‘design’ in mind. Science vehemently rejects any suggestion of ‘design’, as do the New Atheists. Some authors, such as the distinguished philosopher Alvin Plantinga, continue to argue cogently for the presence of design.¹² Whatever the outcome of the debate, perhaps faith might learn that reticence is better than impulsive conjecture when it comes to determining what God might or might not be doing. In this case particularly we may do well to keep God’s rejoinder to Job from the whirlwind before us: ‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?’ (Jb 38:4)

Rather than ‘design’, John Haught suggests that faith has other ways of approaching the scientific account:

My thesis, however, is that cosmic purpose lies deeper than either Darwin or design. Cosmic purpose is more appropriately thought of in terms of nature’s promise than of the ‘design’ that appears on the surface of this great text. The idea of ‘design’ in any case, is too brittle to represent the richness, subtlety and depth of the life-process and its raw openness to the future. Life is more than ‘order’. Life requires also the continual admittance of disruptive ‘novelty’, and so the idea of ‘promise’ serves more suitably than ‘design’ to indicate life’s and the universe’s inherent meaning.¹³

Faith’s interpretation of our prehistory discovers and affirms ‘subjectivity’, the ‘intelli-

gibility', the 'unexpected', the 'surprising', the 'novel', and the 'openness to the future' of the whole aeon long process. We are reading backwards as well as forwards. Science shows us the laws, numbers, chance, events, algorithms and survival strategies involved. Yet here we are! We can stay with the bare scientific facts, but the most wondrous new fact of all is that we exist with all our potentiality and possibilities. Faith's explanation of this fact is that there is 'presence', 'gift', 'promise', 'blessing' and 'hope' embedded in our history.

Our Scriptures deal, not with great heroes and world shattering events, but with the way, for the most part, ordinary human beings, rich and poor, amid their striving and strife, success and failure, their human vulnerability and fragility, are given to see a 'love' beyond all telling in their creation. Ultimately it is from this vantage point that Christian faith tells our story and discovers meaning.

For A.C. Grayling the most important question we can ask ourselves is, 'Do I or do I not wish to commit suicide?' That way we can find out, he says, whether or not we have 'reasons for living'.¹⁴ The answer to such a test is, however, totally unpredictable—a bad hair day could easily do us in!

The inherent dignity of human beings and their strivings is embedded in the whole faith project: it discovers new 'facts' and provides support for all our 'assumptions' about what is worthwhile in our lives. It enables us to sur-

vive, not just bad hair days, but all the challenges and difficulties of our lives, even the most calamitous.

With the hindsight of history we can now understand that the Marxist attempt to see all culture as just superstructure and so to reduce everything to economics and the class struggle was a disaster. So too are all other modern attempts to reduce the human to some material basis, such as instinct, the will to power - or, with the New Atheism, biology. The outcome of losing our fundamental beliefs, Michael Polanyi warns, is that:

Then man dominates a world in which he himself does not exist. For with his obligations he has lost his voice and his hope, and been left behind meaningless to himself.¹⁵

This faith story we tell is crucial, because we don't just discover the richness of our inner lives, we create it through our culture, our history, our values, and our individual striving. The beliefs, values, truths, and ideas forged in our experience define who we are as individuals and communities. In faith, this striving is affirmed in God's original blessing of creation.

Our new modern story shows us to be not just isolated individuals, but as beings who have emerged with other creatures from elements formed in the burning of stars and from the nurture of our own planet. Our lives have untold depths. And our possibilities remain unimaginable. Preserving and fostering 'humanity' into the future will be one of the chief tasks of faith.

NOTES

1. *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 14.
2. *The Goldilocks Enigma* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006) 228.
3. *Personal Knowledge* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1974) 263.
4. *Objecting to God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 181.
5. *The God Delusion*, 361-2.
6. See *Objecting to God*, 136-170; *The God Delusion*, 163-207; 211-33.
7. Kerry Walters, *Atheism: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010) 157-77.

8. *ibid.*, 39-52; 138-77.
9. See A. C. Grayling, *The God Argument* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013) 131-236.
10. *Deeper than Darwin* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2003) 97-8; See also, Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 307-50.
11. *God After Darwin* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2008) 94.
12. *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 225-64.
13. *Deeper than Darwin*, 25.
14. *The God Argument*, 163.
15. *Personal Knowledge*, 380.