

Why Theistic Evolution Does Nothing to Mitigate the Problem of Evil

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For creationists, whether young-earth or old-earth, humans bearing the divine image were created from scratch. On this view, fully functioning hominids that had fully human bodies but lacked the divine image never existed. For theistic evolutionists, by contrast, primate ancestors evolved over several million years into hominids with fully human bodies. What happened next? Physician Paul Brand finds an answer in Genesis 2:7, which reads, “And the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” In reflecting on this passage, Brand writes,

When I heard that verse as a child, I imagined Adam lying on the ground, perfectly formed but not yet alive, with God leaning over him and performing a sort of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Now I picture that scene differently. I assume that Adam was already biologically alive—the other animals needed no special puff of oxygen, nitrogen, and carbon dioxide to start them breathing, so why should man? The breath of God now symbolizes for me a spiritual reality. I see Adam as alive, but possessing only an animal vitality. Then God breathes into him a new spirit, and infills him with His own image. Adam becomes a living soul, not just a living body. God’s image is not an arrangement of skin cells or a physical shape, but rather an inbreathed spirit.¹

Accordingly, hominids that evolved from primate ancestors initially lacked the cognitive and moral capacities required to bear the image of God.² Then, at some particular moment, they received God’s image and became fully human.

On the assumption that humans evolved under divine guidance, God must at some point transform their consciousness so that they become rational moral agents made in God’s image. Yet, is such a transformation of consciousness compatible with biological evolution as it is understood by the scientific world? Yes and no. Evolutionary geneticist Jerry Coyne defines biological evolution as follows:

There is only one going theory of evolution, and it is this: organisms evolved gradually over time and split into different species, and the main engine of

¹Philip Yancey and Paul Brand, *In His Image* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984), 22.

²Denis Alexander writes, “Being an anatomically modern human was necessary but not sufficient for being spiritually alive.” Quoted from *Creation or Evolution: Do We Have to Choose?* (Oxford: Monarch Books, 2008), 237.

evolutionary change was natural selection. Sure, some details of these processes are unsettled, but there is no argument among biologists about the main claims.³

This is the standard definition of biological evolution—it is textbook orthodoxy. According to it, biological evolution rests on two pillars: *common descent*, the historical claim that all organisms trace their lineage back to a common ancestor; and the *Darwinian mechanism*, the theoretical claim that natural selection acting on random variations accounts for biological diversification.

Nothing about biological evolution, as characterized by Coyne, prevents God from endowing hominids with the cognitive and moral capacities required to bear the image of God. Nor does this transformation of consciousness necessarily require a miracle in the traditional sense. For instance, the image of God might be an emergent property of human brains that attain a certain level of complexity. This assumes a monism in which the human is viewed as essentially material (though also as a creature of God).⁴ Alternatively, a dualism in which the human is viewed as essentially a union of matter and spirit is also compatible with Coyne's characterization of biological evolution.⁵ In this case, spirit would be added to the human body to impress on it the image of God. Nancey Murphy is a proponent of the monistic view;⁶ Francis Collins is a proponent of the dualistic view.⁷ Each confidently affirms both evolution and Christian faith.

Coyne's textbook definition of biological evolution gives God plenty of room to maneuver in endowing humans with the divine image. Nonetheless, many evolutionists resist any fundamental discontinuity between the consciousness of humans and the consciousness of presumed primate ancestors. Charles Darwin himself rejected a fundamental divide between human cognitive and moral capacities and those of the rest of the animal world. In *The Descent of Man*, he wrote,

The difference in mind between man and the higher animals, great as it is, certainly is one of degree and not of kind. We have seen that the senses and intuitions, the various emotions and faculties, such as love, memory, attention,

³Jerry Coyne, "Don't Know Much Biology," June 6, 2007, available online at http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/coyne07/coyne07_index.html (last accessed November 13, 2008).

⁴See the articles in Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy, and H. Newton Malony, *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1998). Compare Peter Van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁵Mario Beauregard and Denyse O'Leary, *The Spiritual Brain: A Neuroscientist's Case for the Existence of the Soul* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2007). Jeffrey Schwartz and Sharon Begley, *The Mind and the Brain: Neuroplasticity and the Power of Mental Force* (New York: Regan Books, 2002).

⁶See Nancey Murphy, "Nonreductive Physicalism: Philosophical Issues," in Brown et al., *Whatever Happened to the Soul?*, 127–148.

⁷"Humans are also unique in ways that defy evolutionary explanation and point to our spiritual nature. This includes the existence of the Moral Law (the knowledge of right and wrong) and the search for God that characterizes all human cultures throughout history." Francis Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 200.

curiosity, imitation, reason, etc., of which man boasts, may be found in an incipient, or even sometimes in a well-developed condition, in the lower animals.⁸

Many theistic evolutionists now agree with Darwin that humans are in every way continuous with the rest of the animal world. For instance, Karl Giberson writes in a book titled *Saving Darwin* in which he states,

Once we accept the full evolutionary picture of human origins, we face the problem of human uniqueness. The picture of natural history disclosed by modern science reveals human beings evolving slowly and imperceptibly from earlier, simpler creatures. None of our attributes—intelligence, upright posture, moral sense, opposable thumbs, language capacity—emerged suddenly. Every one of our remarkable capacities must have appeared gradually and been present in some partial, anticipatory way in our primate ancestors. This provocatively suggests that animals, especially the higher primates, ought to possess an identifiable moral sense that is only *quantitatively* different from that of humans. Not surprisingly, current research supports this notion.⁹

Unfortunately, as the recent Climategate scandal underscores,¹⁰ scientific research can be suitably manipulated to support just about any conclusion. Giberson goes on to make a case against human exceptionalism based on primate research. In *The Design of Life*, Jonathan Wells and I make a case for human exceptionalism based on linguistics, mathematics, and cognitive psychology.¹¹ Let the reader decide who has the better argument.¹² Human exceptionalism acknowledges that important similarities exist between humans and primates. But it insists that far-reaching differences also exist, especially differences in cognitive and moral capacities, and that these represent a difference in kind and not, as Darwin and many contemporary evolutionists hold, merely a difference in degree.¹³

⁸Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2nd ed. (London: John Murray, 1882), 126.

⁹Karl W. Giberson, *Saving Darwin: How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2008), 13. Emphasis in the original.

¹⁰A. W. Montford, *The Hockey Stick Illusion: Climategate and the Corruption of Science* (London: Stacey, 2010).

¹¹William Dembski and Jonathan Wells, *The Design of Life: Discovering Signs of Intelligence in Biological Systems* (Dallas: Foundation for Thought and Ethics, 2008), ch. 1, which is on human origins.

¹²This is, of course, a vast topic, and the references to Giberson's and my own work only scratch the surface. The evolutionary literature overwhelmingly argues against human uniqueness. For the other side, see Mortimer Adler's book cited in the next note as well as the following: Benjamin Wiker, *Moral Darwinism: How We Became Hedonists* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2002); C. Stephen Evans, *Preserving the Person: A Look at Human Sciences* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 1994); David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions* (New York: Crown Forum, 2008).

¹³For the distinction between a difference in kind and a difference in degree, especially as it applies to human uniqueness, see Mortimer Adler, *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993). This book, though originally published in 1967, is must-reading for

Giberson's hardcore Darwinism leads him to reject that evolving hominids might suddenly have had their consciousness transformed into the divine image: "One could believe, for example, that at some point in evolutionary history God 'chose' two people from a group of evolving 'humans,' gave them his image, and then put them in Eden, which they promptly corrupted by sinning. But this solution is unsatisfactory, artificial, and certainly not what the writer of Genesis intended."¹⁴ But if our concern is with what the writer of Genesis intended, then we probably shouldn't be trying to graft a theory of evolution onto it. When the writer of Genesis 1:21 and 1:25 stated that organisms were created "after their kind," it's hard to imagine that he intended the fluidity of all species as required by evolution. Nonetheless, as soon as one decides to read Genesis from an evolutionary perspective, a sudden transformation of consciousness into the divine image becomes mandatory—provided, that is, one is serious about preserving the Fall.

Giberson, unfortunately, is not serious about preserving the Fall. The very passage just quoted from *Saving Darwin* occurs in a section titled "Dissolving the Fall." Giberson rejects any traditional conception of the Fall.¹⁵ Indeed, his understanding of sin is simplistic and heterodox. He sees the essence of sin as selfishness. And coincidentally, "selfishness," for Giberson, "drives the evolutionary process."¹⁶ Simply put, we are selfish because evolution is selfish, and we are a product of evolution. Salvation for him, then, is transcending our evolutionary past. By contrast, in a traditional view of the Fall, we are saved not from what evolution has produced in us but from what we have done to ourselves in willfully sinning against a holy God. In the traditional view, the evil humanity experiences is the evil it has brought on itself.

anyone concerned with the problem of human uniqueness. It opens with a thought experiment about what would happen if it were possible to cross a human and an ape.

Forty years later, Richard Dawkins proposed breaking the species barrier with "a successful hybridization between a human and a chimpanzee." (See his brief article "Breaking the Species Barrier," January 2009, at http://www.edge.org/q2009/q09_16.html, last accessed January 17, 2009.) Dawkins continues, "Even if the hybrid were infertile like a mule, the shock waves that would be sent through society would be salutary. This is why a distinguished biologist described this possibility as the most immoral scientific experiment he could imagine: it would change everything!"

Dawkins views such an experiment not as immoral but, if successful, as liberating: "Our ethics and our politics assume, largely without question or serious discussion, that the division between human and 'animal' is absolute." A "humanzee" would, for Dawkins, refute human uniqueness and thereby destroy the entire Judeo-Christian ethical system based on it—a prospect he relishes. Are theistic evolutionists like Giberson prepared to follow Dawkins down this path? Absent human uniqueness, why not?

¹⁴Giberson, *Saving Darwin*, 12. C. S. Lewis appreciated—and rejected—Giberson's point. According to Lewis, the skeptic of traditional theological doctrines "naturally listens with impatience to our solutions of particular difficulties and our defences against particular objections. The more ingenious we are in such solutions and defences the more perverse we seem to him.... I have come to regard that attitude as a total misunderstanding." C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*, rev. ed. (1960; reprinted San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 109–110.

¹⁵Giberson might demur that he is merely redefining or reconceptualizing the Fall in a way that preserves what historically has been most important about it. But Christian orthodoxy's understanding of the Fall is unrecognizable in his reconceptualization of it.

¹⁶Giberson, *Saving Darwin*, 12.

I want next to turn to the charge made increasingly by theistic evolutionists that Christian theism requires God to create indirectly by evolution rather than directly by intervention (as in special creation). Theistic evolutionists worry that a God who creates by direct intervention renders the problem of evil insoluble. Such a God would be responsible for all the botched and malevolent designs we find in nature. By letting Darwinian natural selection serve as a designer substitute, theistic evolutionists can refer all those botched and malevolent designs to evolution. This, in their view, is supposed to resolve the problem of natural evil and thereby help validate Christian theism.¹⁷

Well-known evolutionist and former Catholic priest Francisco Ayala makes precisely such an argument: “A major burden was removed from the shoulders of believers when convincing evidence was advanced that the design of organisms need not be attributed to the immediate agency of the Creator, but rather is an outcome of natural processes.” According to Ayala, “if we claim that organisms and their parts have been specifically designed by God, we have to account for the incompetent design of the human jaw, the narrowness of the birth canal, and our poorly designed backbone, less than fittingly suited for walking upright.”

In Ayala’s view, right-thinking Christians need to “acknowledge Darwin’s revolution and accept natural selection as the process that accounts for the design of organisms, as well as for the dysfunctions, oddities, cruelties, and sadism that pervade the world of life. Attributing these to specific agency by the Creator amounts to blasphemy.” Charging Christian opponents of evolution with blasphemy may seem unduly harsh. Ayala therefore attempts to soften this charge by granting that those who oppose evolution and support special creation “are surely well-meaning people who do not intend such blasphemy.” Ayala’s concession (and condescension) here is to the intellectual feebleness, as he sees it, of those who cling to the old naive creationist outlook and have yet to wrap their minds around the stark truth of evolution. In any case, he doesn’t retract the charge of blasphemy: “this is how matters appear to a biologist concerned that God not be slandered with the imputation of incompetent design.”¹⁸

In turning the table on special creation, Ayala has in fact turned it 360 degrees. The table is therefore back to where it was originally, and the problem he meant to shift to special creation confronts him still. Ayala worries that a God who creates by direct intervention must be held accountable for all the bad designs in the world. Ayala’s proposed solution is therefore to have God set up a world in which evolution (by natural selection) brings about bad designs. But how does this address the underlying difficulty, which is that a creator God has set up the conditions under which bad designs emerge? In

¹⁷For this line of reasoning taken to its logical conclusion, see Gaymon Bennett, Martinez J. Hewlett, Ted Peters, and Robert John Russell, eds., *The Evolution of Evil* (Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

¹⁸Ayala seems concerned to preserve God’s honor only when promoting Darwinian evolution. All quotes in this and the previous paragraph are from Francisco Ayala, *Darwin’s Gift to Science and Religion* (Washington, D.C.: Joseph Henry Press, 2007), 159–160.

the one case, God acts directly; in the other, indirectly. But a creator God, as the source of all being, is as responsible in the one case as in the other.

We never accept such shifting of responsibility in any other important matter, so why here? What difference does it make if a mugger brutalizes someone with his own hands (i.e., uses direct means) or employs a vicious dog on a leash (i.e., uses indirect means) to do the same? The mugger is equally responsible in both cases. The same holds for a creator God who creates directly by intervening or indirectly by evolution. Creation entails responsibility. The buck always stops with the Creator. That's why so much of contemporary theology has a problem not just with God intervening in nature but also with the traditional doctrine of creation ex nihilo, which makes God the source of nature.

The rage in theology these days is to diminish the power and ultimacy of God so that God is fundamentally constrained by the world and thus cannot be held responsible for the world's evil. Process theology, which sees God as evolving with the world and the world as having an autonomy beyond God's reach (thereby enabling God to shed responsibility for evil), is a case in point. Process theologian Robert Mesle elaborates,

[S]ince God cannot control the evolutionary process, there is no reason even to assume that God was aiming that process specifically at us. The history of evolution has been filled with more crucial events than we can dream of, and God could not control them. God and the world have been involved in a continuous dance in which God must continually take the decisions of the creatures and work with them—whatever they may be. For better or worse, each decision of each creature plays some role in the world's process of becoming. And God works to create something good out of what the world makes possible. Evolution, then, is an ongoing adventure for God, as it is for the world.¹⁹

In my view, process theology unleashes a raging pack of new problems and thus is not a suitable replacement for the traditional doctrines of God and creation. But let's grant, for the sake of argument, that it resolves the problem of dysteleology (bad designs) resulting from natural selection. The problem is that Ayala and fellow theistic evolutionists are not arguing for process theology (or some other diminished deity) but for the compatibility of evolution with classical Christian theism. We are told, "Embrace evolution and you can still be a good Christian."²⁰

Ayala is therefore in no position to require that Christian believers revise their doctrine of God in light of evolution. In particular, he cannot require that believers in divine omnipotence and creation ex nihilo revise these beliefs to suit a more evolution-friendly theology. Christians who hold to a traditional doctrine of creation and accept natural selection as God's method of creating organisms therefore confront the problem of evil with the same force as believers who hold the identical doctrine of God but reject natural selection and accept special creation. Indeed, for the Christian it does nothing to

¹⁹C. Robert Mesle, *Process Theology: A Basic Introduction* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993), 62.

²⁰The subtitle of Giberson's *Saving Darwin* makes precisely this point: *How to Be a Christian and Believe in Evolution*.

resolve the problem of evil by passing the buck to a naturalistic evolutionary process (a process, in that case, created by God). This is filling one hole by digging another.

Theistic evolutionists deny this conclusion. Responding to my mugger/attack-dog analogy, Giberson remarks,

The contribution evolution makes to this discussion ... is the remarkable discovery that nature has built-in creative powers. As Christians we affirm that these powers—which include the power to create both wonderful and terrible things—come from God, but they are wielded by nature. This is a traditional theological concept that understands that God works through *secondary* as well as *primary* causes ... [T]he gift of creativity that God bestowed on the creation is theologically analogous to the gift of freedom God bestowed on us. Both we *and* the creation have freedom. Our freedom comes with a moral responsibility to use it properly. But that does not prevent us from doing terrible things. The freedom God gave humans was exercised most effectively in the construction of gas chambers at Auschwitz and Dachau. But, because humans have freedom, we do not say that God created those gas chambers. God is, so to speak, off the hook for that evil. In exactly the same way, less the moral dimension, when nature's freedom leads to the evolution of a pernicious killing machine, God is "off the hook." Unless God micromanages nature so as to destroy its autonomy, such things occur. Likewise, unless God coercively micromanages human decision making, we will often abuse our freedom ... When God grants freedom to creatures this means, in ways often difficult to understand, that those creatures can act *independently* of God, to not be robotic automatons or trained attack dogs. In the case of the holocaust, we *always* do exactly what Dembski says we *never* do: we shift the responsibility from God to the Nazis. Such reflections have long characterized Christian thinking about the problem of evil.²¹

In reply to this objection, let us first acknowledge that invoking God's permissive will in allowing the creation to proceed with a measure of autonomy or freedom can never fully eliminate divine responsibility for evil (at least not if one's conception of God is classical and thus includes omnipotence as one of his attributes). As philosopher John Lucas notes, "No theist would want to deny that God is omnipotent, and that he could intervene to prevent any particular event's occurring, and therefore his non-intervention is a necessary condition for each event."²² It may be painful to accept that God bears at least some responsibility for evil, but classical theism demands it. Theological alternatives, such as process or open theism, may avoid this stark aspect of classical theism, yet at the expense of creating other difficulties.

But to return to Giberson, he suggests that by looking to evolution and the freedom it confers on nature, it is possible to dissolve longstanding problems concerning evil (especially natural evil) that confront classical theism with its teachings about special creation. Giberson's argument, however, turns on an equivocation. It is one thing to

²¹Karl Giberson, "Evolution and the Problem of Evil," *Beliefnet* (September 28, 2009): available online at <http://blog.beliefnet.com/scienceandthesacred/2009/09/evolution-and-the-problem-of-evil.html> (last accessed January 27, 2010).

²²John R. Lucas, *Freedom and Grace* (London: SPCK, 1976), 9.

ascribe freedom to humans created in God's image. Our freedom carries with it moral responsibility. But what moral responsibility attaches to nature's freedom? Does it make any sense to say that nature *does* this but *ought to* do that? Giberson admits that nature's freedom operates "less a moral dimension." Such an admission, however, defeats the whole enterprise of using evolution to mitigate the problem of evil. Nature simply does what it does and cannot embark on a course of self-improvement to do what it ought to do. Moreover, what nature does results entirely from the capacities that God has given it. Giberson conflates two radically different forms of freedom. As Clive Harden notes in a reply to Giberson,

Why would God be off the hook for creating a mechanism (evolution) that kills and destroys the way it does? For in Giberson's theodicy, not only did God make the process of evolution, He set it in place and started it. This would be like me letting a bunch of mice, some infected with a plague, loose into a town. The mice have their own freedom to do whatever they want and go wherever they want, and do it all without a "moral dimension." This does nothing to get me "off the hook" for whoever as a result dies.²³

Invoking the freedom of nature to mitigate the problem of evil is a longstanding theme among theistic evolutionists. John Polkinghorne, for instance, sees a certain inevitability to sin and evil, regarding them as a necessary cost of God bestowing freedom on nature. Thus, in coming to terms with natural evil, Polkinghorne will recount the following anecdote:

Austin Farrer once asked himself what was God's will in the Lisbon earthquake (that terrible disaster of 1755, when 50,000 people were killed in one day). Farrer's answer was this—and it's a hard answer, but I think a true answer—that God's will was that the elements of the earth's crust should behave in accordance with their nature. God has given them freedom to be, just as he has given us freedom to be."²⁴

Farrer would presumably have given the same rationalization for the Asian tsunami of 2004 and the Haitian earthquake of 2010.

In any case, invoking the freedom of nature does little to answer the worries raised by such evils. We can imagine a world far more violent than ours in which many more people die annually of natural disasters. Alternatively, we can imagine a world far more halcyon than ours in which no one dies of natural disasters because the whole world is a serene tropical paradise. Ascribing natural evil to the freedom of nature does nothing to address the amount of natural evil in the world or whether the freedom of nature could have taken a different form so that there would be less of it (or perhaps none at all).

²³Clive Hayden, "Karl Giberson Responds to William Dembski," *Uncommon Descent* (September 29, 2009): available online at <http://www.uncommondescent.com/evolution/karl-giberson-responds-to-dr-dembski> (last accessed January 27, 2010).

²⁴John Polkinghorne, "God's Action in the World," 1990 J. K. Russell Fellowship Lecture, available online at <http://www.starcourse.org/jcp/action.html> (last accessed 18 November 2008). Polkinghorne repeated this anecdote in the fall of 2002 at the Parchman Lectures, sponsored by Baylor University's Truett Seminary (September 30 and October 1, 2002).

Was the Lisbon or Haitian earthquake really nothing more than a consequence of the freedom of the earth's crust? How does such an answer comfort the victims and survivors? Why, as just remarked, didn't God simply place us on a less dangerous planet where earthquakes don't ravage human life? Or was this not an option for the Creator, and if not, why not? What are we to make of divine providence in a world with the freedom to crush us? Why, in most classical liturgies of the Christian churches, do we pray for favorable seasons and good crops if the freedom of nature means that the land is going to do whatever it will regardless of our wishes? Or does God constrain the freedom of nature? But, if so, why doesn't God place tighter constraints on this freedom in relation to evil?

An irony gets lost in many of these discussions about the world's freedom: How can the freedom of creation, which results from a freely acting God who freely bestows freedom on creation, *force* the world to be a dangerous place full of evil? Shouldn't the freedom of creation rather give us freedom *not* to sin? And shouldn't it be possible for God to create a world whose freedom is not destructive and does not entail evil? Invoking nature's freedom in an attempt to avert the problem of (natural) evil requires at crucial points sacrificing God's freedom in creation.

Although many theistic evolutionists see evolution as helping to resolve the problem of evil, many agnostic and atheistic evolutionists see it as undercutting that task. What sort of God, they ask, would create life by so brutal and wasteful a process as evolution? Darwin himself continually referred to evolution as "the great battle of life" and "the war of nature."²⁵ He elaborated: "From the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows."²⁶ The struggle for life is absolutely central to evolution—herein lies evolution's creative potential.

Darwin's most famous work is his *Origin of Species*, often simply called the *Origin*. Few remember the full title: *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. Favored races? Doesn't that mean superior races? And don't superior races imply inferior races? Within evolutionary theory, it is the destiny of inferior races to be rooted out and destroyed. Thus, in *The Descent of Man*, the sequel to the *Origin*, Darwin noted,

At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world.... The break between man and his nearest allies will then be wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilised state, as we may hope, even than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of as now between the negro or Australian and the gorilla.²⁷

²⁵Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species*, facsimile 1st ed. (1859; reprinted Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964), 76, 79, 129, 490.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 490.

²⁷Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 156. This passage is identical in both the 1871 first edition and the 1882 second edition of *The Descent of Man*.

Just so there is no doubt, Darwin saw, as a consequence of his theory, that whites (whom he regarded as “superior”) would exterminate blacks (whom he regarded as “inferior”).

To soften evolution’s harshness, Denis Alexander asks us to imagine that God, when creating by evolution, is a “great artist in the studio, with energy, creativity and paint flying in all directions, out of which process emerges the richness and diversity of the created order.”²⁸ It hardly follows from this analogy to an artist’s studio that creativity must, as a matter of course, be messy and wasteful. Having at one point in my career been an art dealer (the family business consisted in buying and selling oil paintings), I can testify that the studios of artists can be reasonably neat and that neatness seems not to have impaired their creativity. Nor does history bear out that great artists have tended to be slob. Even so, it’s not clear what waste or mess would mean to an omnipotent God of unlimited resources. Let’s therefore grant, for the sake of argument, that Alexander is correct in not faulting God for any presumed waste or mess in the evolutionary process.

The charge that evolution is inherently cruel now poses a more difficult problem for reconciling theism and evolution. Some evolutionists have tried to soft-pedal the cruelty inherent in evolution by suggesting that cooperation plays as important a role in it as competition.²⁹ But cooperation, far from eliminating or mitigating evolution’s cruelty, is merely an outgrowth of it. That’s because organisms tend to cooperate when other organisms are competing against and trying to destroy them—in other words, they cooperate when a competitor is being cruel to them. Cruelty from an out-group is, we might say, evolution’s way of making us nice to our in-group.³⁰

The preferred way that theistic evolutionists deal with nature’s cruelty, however, is denial and rationalization. Sure, natural selection involves pain, but, as Darwin stressed, the pain is worth it: “As natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.”³¹ Thus Darwin sanctified evolution and deified natural selection. It’s just too bad that natural history had to be littered with casualties “from the war of nature, from famine and death.”³² But to make an omelet, you have to break a few eggs, and evolution certainly knows how to break eggs.

Besides rationalization, there’s denial. Thus we are told that cruelty is not really cruel unless conscious moral agents (like us) are suffering it: “Whilst cruel rats and malevolent weasels might exercise such wicked designs in the pages of children’s books,” writes Denis Alexander, “to the best of our knowledge the real animal world is amoral and has

²⁸Alexander, *Creation or Evolution*, 282.

²⁹Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Pantheon, 2000).

³⁰Cooperation can also be against the cruelties of inanimate nature, as when a fungus and an alga cooperate to produce a lichen, the first stage of plant colonization of a rock face. See Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origins of Species* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 13–14.

³¹Darwin, *Origin of Species*, 489.

³²*Ibid.*, 490.

no ethics.”³³ But Alexander here fails to distinguish between cruelty as a conscious motivation (which is culpable in us but lacking in other animals) and cruelty as it is experienced by us (such cruelty comes against us as much from nature as from the malevolent intentions of fellow humans). The fossil record—as a history of predation, parasitism, disease, death, and extinction—is seen by us as cruel even if the animals in it cannot properly be said to have cruel motivations. In any case, ask yourself which requires rationalization: affirming nature’s cruelty or denying it. Clearly, denying it.³⁴

Bottom line: Evolution, with or without God, does nothing to mitigate the problem of evil.

³³Alexander, *Creation or Evolution*, 282.

³⁴Unlike Darwin, who tried to minimize evolution’s cruelty, some Darwinists positively revel in it. Take the annual Darwin Awards. According to Wendy Northcutt, author of the Darwin Award books, these are given posthumously to individuals who “ensure the long-term survival of our species by removing themselves from the gene pool in a sublimely idiotic fashion.” (Quoted from the front cover of her book *The Darwin Awards II: Unnatural Selection* [New York: Plume, 2003]). In these books, Northcutt details in case after case the misfortunes of people who died. Yes, the circumstances of their deaths are ridiculous. But I know of no other view, religious or secular, that inspires its adherents to celebrate the deaths of people they regard as stupid. Why is Darwin’s name associated with these awards? Could it be because the name fits? Can anyone imagine Albert Einstein or Martin Luther King Jr. or Michelangelo lending their names to such an award?

Traditional religious believers are not alone in faulting evolution for cruelty. Take New Age writer Lynne McTaggart: “Our self-image grew even bleaker with the work of Charles Darwin. His theory of evolution—tweaked slightly now by the neo-Darwinists—is of a life that is random, predatory, purposeless and solitary. Be the best or don’t survive. You are no more than an evolutionary accident. The vast checkerboard biological heritage of your ancestors is stripped down to one central facet: survival. Eat or be eaten. The essence of your humanity is a genetic terrorist, efficiently disposing of any weaker links. Life is not about sharing and interdependence. Life is about winning, getting there first. And if you do manage to survive, you are on your own at the top of the evolutionary tree.” Quoted from *The Field: The Quest for the Secret Force of the Universe*, updated edition (New York: HarperCollins 2008), xxiv–xxv. Granted, this statement is a bit of a caricature. But why does evolution inspire such caricatures?