
Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology by Alister E. McGrath

Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pp. xiv + 298. ISBN 978-1-4443-3344-2. Paper \$34.95

Reviewed by
Lily Huang
University of Chicago
lilyx@uchicago.edu

The title of Alister E. McGrath's book, *Darwinism and the Divine: Evolutionary Thought and Natural Theology* suggests a balance scale or two sides of a mirror: it does not contain a thesis but is rather a distillation of McGrath's premise, which is to do some rearranging of colossal, accepted ideas. His clear, well-paced argument demonstrates why Darwinian evolution and natural theology are not necessary antagonists—nor, in fact, historical ones. These are rarefied categories of thought; their actual contents are more eclectic and more mutually permeable than usually supposed. Natural theology is a generic name for a variety of traditions, some of which have opposing ideological commitments. 'Darwinism', too, has stood for widely different accounts of the nature of life, some of which have had the very character of dogma commonly associated with religious faith. McGrath's book, an expansion of the the Hulsean Lectures that he gave at the University of Cambridge in 2009, is a methodical repositioning of these two bodies of thought with respect to each other, starting with properly historicized definitions of the terms. This is followed by a close look at the development of Darwin's ideas in the particular context of English natural theology. The book concludes with the author's vision for a contemporary natural theology that offers answers that the science of evolution cannot.

A telling feature of McGrath's book is that the ideas of natural theology are always presented as belonging to *a* natural theology: there is no single natural theology that Darwinism would come to rival but a number of distinct theological interpretations of nature that included, but were not limited to, the ideas of the English Romantic period. Some of their sources were Cicero, Bonaventura of

Bagnoregio, Augustine of Hippo, Francis Bacon, Sir Thomas Browne, John Ray, Thomas Sprat, and Aubrey Moore. Sprat had an interesting theory about miracles: he believed them to be, as McGrath writes with a certain deliberate mildness, ‘a divine prerogative to be exercised only in situations of exceptional human dullness’, that is, when people were hopelessly incurious about the world and God had to make an effort to be noticed. For McGrath, these different interpretations of the divine in nature are not only important parts of natural theology’s larger historical context but also offer possibilities for a contemporary Christian understanding of the natural world. Saint Augustine’s concept of divine creation, for instance, in which God created the world’s potentialities, is something that McGrath believes could greatly inform a contemporary natural theology which can coexist with a faith in scientific investigation.

McGrath, who was trained in theology and molecular biology, is also versed in science studies and the language of scientific revolutions. This does not give him opportunity to dismiss scientific paradigms as truth alloyed with historical errors; rather, he is so receptive of ideas from the philosophy of science that he imports them to an understanding of religious thought. ‘Every style of “natural theology” is embedded in a social matrix’, he writes, ‘consisting of a series of assumptions.’ He shows English natural theology to be the product of English natural philosophy: its key revelations came not from religious quarters but rather from what we would now call science. Newton’s discovery of mechanical regularities was strong evidence for order in the physical world—namely, God. ‘Physico-theology’ was an active field of serious speculation well before the arrival of William Paley.

Now, if any historical figure emerges from this book a little worse for scrutiny, it is Paley: McGrath—though never accusatory—portrays him as a great popularizer with few original ideas, including the famous analogy of the watch on the heath, which Paley took from the work of the Dutch writer Bernard Nieuwentyt. And if any natural theology really became outmoded after the publication of *The Origin of Species*, it was Paley’s. It was the idea of contrivance, illustrated by the watch analogy, that became Darwin’s foil. McGrath distinguishes this kind of natural theological argument, which he calls ‘an argument from design’, from another kind, ‘an argument to design’. The first is based on the principle that, in McGrath’s paraphrase, ‘Order implies an orderer’; whereas the principle of the second is, ‘There

is no purpose without a purposer.’ Even before Darwin’s writing, Paley’s natural theology had been criticized on theological grounds. Here McGrath gives a clear explanation of why Paley’s doctrine was deficient in the view of theologians like Cardinal John Henry Newman: it did not touch on the significance of morality and it gave up spirituality in its appreciation of celestial orderliness and regularity. Later, McGrath explains how the idea that ‘contrivance proves design’ involves a confounding of evidence and inference. Design, if it exists, cannot be observed; it can only be inferred. Altogether, McGrath shows Paley’s natural theology—which both later Darwin scholars and history-conscious evolution theorists have tended to take as *the* natural theology—to be both pseudo-scientific and soulless.

Darwinism and the Divine is an account of two sets of ideas with a nuanced, entangled past. In the opening of part 3 of the book, McGrath argues for ‘a wider teleology’ to make room for design alongside a thoroughly Darwinian view of evolution. The surprise champion that he chooses for this idea is none other than Thomas Henry Huxley, Darwin’s most loyal and articulate defender. But what makes the book even more interesting is the wider teleology that McGrath himself has given to these ideas. The story of these ideas also touches on other ideas in the philosophy of science—on the nature of inference, for instance, and the nature of belief—that give a richer texture to the book’s argument. The names of some of the book’s secondary cast will already give you an idea: they include Charles Peirce, William James, Iris Murdoch, Stanley Fish, and Simone Weil. Two primary characters are, of course, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, prominent and militant Darwinian atheists. McGrath is admiring even of his adversaries: they are ‘distinguished’ and ‘brilliant’; he calls Dawkins’ book *The Selfish Gene* [1976] an ‘early masterpiece’. But the concluding sections of the book take Dawkins’ and Dennett’s doctrinal rejection of all metaphysical speculation to task as both spiritually impoverishing and logically untenable. ‘The declaration that “all metaphysical statements are meaningless”’, McGrath writes, ‘turns out to be self-referential and potentially self-refuting.’ His own conclusion recognizes science and natural theology as two enterprises that attempt to answer two manifestly different sets of questions. One interprets evidence for processes; the other offers an interpretation of how humans can relate to a world that works by such processes. This, at least, is McGrath’s

vision of an enduring natural theology: 'A Christian natural theology', he writes, 'holds that the true meaning of nature is indeed capable of being unlocked; but this requires us to use a hermeneutical key that nature itself cannot provide.'

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dawkins, R. 1976. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford/New York.