

BOOK REVIEW

Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life. By John F. Haught. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. 184 pp. \$20.00. ISBN 978-0-664-23285-6.

Ever since its proposal by Charles Darwin in 1872, the theory of evolution has been controversial, both in respect to how some Christian believers have received it and how some scientists have exploited it. Charles Hodge, the influential 19th century Princeton theologian, equated *The Origin of Species* with atheism a mere two years after it appeared. Today, militant atheists like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, writing as scientists but thinking as strict materialists, use the theory as a justification that natural causality is sufficient to explain all there is. As a scientific account of how the diversity of species originated by natural processes, the theory of evolution has always functioned, even with Darwin, as a replacement of the theological account of creation. Until natural selection, the explanation for every creature's nature was the action of God, who was credited with either directly forming every animal according to His wisdom and good purpose, or planting the 'seeds' from which the final forms of animals would organically develop. There was no fully formulated scientific account of life's diversity before Darwin's hypothesis, nor has a scientific alternative emerged since then. [I would say that the theory of 'intelligent design' falls more under natural philosophy than modern science for arguing that the emergence of life cannot be attributed to material mechanisms.] As a consequence, proponents have always argued *for* the scientific theory of evolution by arguing *against* the theological doctrine of divine creation.

For this reason it is not surprising that the theory of evolution has proven to be an issue generating such conflict between religious believers and scientific rationalists, for its explanatory success in the field of biology (which cannot be discounted) has consistently been augmented with a power to explain everything else once attributed to God. The theory of evolution is lauded—and feared—as a meta-theory. Somehow a similar truth in physics—that all the elements beyond hydrogen and helium were not made initially by the Creator but developed by a natural process in the core of stars—has never been such a line in the sand for denying or upholding God's creative role in the universe. Apparently for many contemporary thinkers, Christian or atheistic, when it comes to the making of animals, but not the making of what the animals themselves are made, either the Creator receives direct attribution or else He can be dismissed as a discarded, no longer tenable, hypothesis.

In his latest book, John F. Haught, Senior Research Fellow at the Woodstock Center of Georgetown University, is critical of both responses to the theory of evolution. He argues that those who see a conflict between the theory of evolution and faith in the Creator are not doing justice both to the science of evolution and to the theology of God. This is his seventh book in the area of science and religion, and the third specifically on the clash between evolutionary and theological accounts of nature. As a consequence this work manifests a honed alacrity in addressing this question along with a felicity in expressing succinctly the issues at stake. However, there is repetition of arguments from *God after Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (2007) and *Responses to 101 Questions on God and Evolution* (2001). Perhaps to help distinguish this book from his earlier ones the author begins every chapter's title with a single word beginning with "D": "Darwin" and "Descent" and "Deity", etc. Many of these designations are apropos, but the restriction to the alphabet's fourth letter leaves out many more appropriate topics, such as "Contingency" and "Causality" and "Order." They also have the effect of constricting the dialogue between science and theology to one in which science sets the parameters. Like his other books, this one pays almost no attention to the history of the relation between science and religion, and sustained consideration of the philosophical issues that overlap and unite the two disciplines is notably absent.

Haught argues that both the atheistic proponents of evolution as a theory of ultimate explanation (Dawkins, et al), and those who reject evolution—either scientific creationists who deny evolution because it contradicts the biblical account in Genesis, or intelligent design theorists who attribute the irreducible complexity of life forms to the direct creative action of God—make the same mistake of pitting a biological explanation against a theological one. There is no reason why both explanations cannot be true in their respective disciplines. Haught uses the notion of "layered explanation" to argue that the same phenomenon can be explained from a number of different causal actions that are not mutually exclusive. For example, he points out that the existence of the printed page of any own book can be attributed to at least three distinct and non-competing causes: the author, the publisher, and the printing press. To argue that the scientific account of the evolution of life is a complete and exclusive explanation, making any attribution to God unnecessary, is equivalent to claiming that the letters on a page are solely a matter of the process of making ink chemically adhere to paper, with no further explanations needed in attributing the words and their meaning to the author or the whole book to the publisher. This concept of "layered explanation"—that "everything in our experience can be explained at multiple levels of understanding, in distinct and noncompeting ways" (23)—is highly useful for avoiding the conflict model in

which scientific and theological explanations of nature are opposed and mutually exclusive.

Much of the contention between the evolution and Christian faith in the past has arisen over the issue of design. Darwin published *The Origin of Species* at a time when William Paley's watchmaker argument for the existence of God had become the popular and standard work in natural theology. Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), which Darwin himself had read, reasoned that the intricate complexity of living things is proof that God designed all living things directly. With its mechanism of natural selection, Darwin's theory of evolution undermined Paley's argument by providing a natural cause for biological order; the elaborate functional organization of living things is not evidence of a divine designer and Genesis 2:19 ("Out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air...") can no longer be interpreted literally. Scientific research has confirmed that many biological features in the animal kingdom are not perfectly engineered for a specific function but gradual adaptations to fit changing environments. Over time Paley's argument became the anti-hypothesis to Darwin's theory. The rationalistic, anti-theological argument is that if God were the Creator one would expect optimal designs for each animal and for every organ, reflective of His intelligence and freedom. Since the evidence shows that the relation between form and function is not ideal, God cannot be credited with fashioning life or guided its development without serious discredit to his intelligence. Even the recent idea of "intelligent design," based on the idea that biological cells are irreducibly complex (every part must be present and contributive for the whole cell to function) is dismissed as a retread of Paley's watchmaker argument.

Haught criticizes both the scientific rationalists and advocates of intelligent design for basing theological claims upon *design*, when it is the *drama* of evolution that indicates the mystery of the Creator. For him it is an impoverished and mistaken theology that insists the Creator design everything to perfection or equates divine action with "direct divine manipulation" of nature (26). The evolutionary process is characterized by randomness, accidents, and extended periods of time, and while these characteristics are antithetical to claims for divine design, they are features necessary for good drama: the narrative of life gradually evolving towards greater complexity. "Viewed from a dramatic perspective, Darwin's impact on religious thought is by no means as corrosive as design-obsessed scientists, philosophers, and creationists have assumed. Instead, the dramatic character of evolution is a wholesome stimulus to theology" (58).

Haught never quite states that God is the author of the drama of evolution, presumably because that would seem to imply an intentional, guiding

action on the part of the Author of creation, a theological claim that would be seemingly incompatible with the random nature of the evolutionary process. He uses the word “purpose” only to “mean that something of undeniable value or significance is coming into being” (81). The drama of evolution does have meaning beyond scientific explanation, but Haught is cautious to strictly identify or predetermine what that meaning might be, on account of our being in the midst of an unfinished and open-ended narrative, whose ‘plot lines’ are not direct but haphazard. “Evolution’s meaning, we may surmise at least in a vague and general way, somehow consists of its adventurous aim to intensify *beauty* or what Darwin called ‘grandeur’ in the universe” (81). Here he relies upon the thought of Alfred Whitehead to give some sense to the “Direction” of the “Drama” of evolution, and in the next chapter (7) he borrows from Paul Tillich to speak of its “Depth.” However, what the story of evolution ultimately means is never really explained beyond that it is more wonderful and deeper than either scientific materialists or believers in an ‘interventionist’ God imagine. It seems that often when the reader might expect a more detailed explanation of the direction and depth of evolution the author instead returns to a criticism of those he labels as design obsessed.

In the last chapter, he relies upon the theology of Teilhard de Chardin to depict the “Deity” who calls the world forward from the future. The world “continues to be drawn toward an unpredictable and open future by the attractive power of a God who creates the world by offering it new possibilities for it becoming *more*—opportunities of more intense and valuable modes of being” (138). The chapter is a distillation of the theology of evolution he offered more fully in *God after Darwin*. Teilhard is Haught’s model for the theological engagement of modern science because he moves beyond the premise of materialism in much of modern scientific thinking, towards a perspective that unites the scientific and religious views of the world. Unfortunately like his mentor, Haught offers a theology of evolution that really conflates the scientific and religious spheres, tending to treat the dynamic of biological evolution as the template, if not the engine, for God’s perfecting of the world. At one point Haught claims: “So what is needed theologically is a thoroughgoing reinterpretation of Christian teaching about God, Christ, creation, incarnation, redemption, and eschatology in keeping with Darwin’s unveiling of life’s long evolution and contemporary cosmology’s disclosure of the ongoing expansion of the heavens” (142). To call for such a wide-ranging revision of theology is to confound the disciplines and their sources; even evolution’s impact on the theology of creation is rather limited since the doctrine is much more about the world’s relation to God than how God made life. Nor it is the case that the theory of evolution was the first time Christian theology had to account for

chance. Theologians like Aquinas, who properly distinguished between divine and natural causality, were able to explain how even chance events and accidents fall under the providence of God long before Paley mistakenly portrayed God as the Grand Designer.

Making Sense of Evolution is a worthy read for its defense against the claims against faith and religion based on scientific reductionism. Notable in this regard are his chapters of “Duty” and “Devotion” that dismantle the claim that evolutionary theory can fully explain human moral and religious behavior. In his body of work Haught has done commendable work in showing that modern science and religious faith are not in conflict, even regarding such a historically contentious issue as evolution. While the theology of evolution that the book offers may have appeal for those who seek a contemporary reconciliation between faith and science, it tends toward a conflation of the science of evolution with the theology of God and creation, as if what is true biologically is the best model for understanding what is true spiritually about God, the human person and the destiny of the world. As is typical of Haught’s other work (and true, alas, of too much contemporary theology), this is not a book that draws from the riches of the Christian tradition or even realizes the proper role philosophy in understanding our existence so that its conditions and dynamics are not projected onto the transcendent mystery of God. A proper epistemology and metaphysics would alleviate many of the supposed contentions between the scientific and religious accounts of nature and thus obviate the need to reconcile science and theology by collapsing them into one meta-theory.

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