

## ***Does Life Have Meaning? Or is it Self-Deception at Best and Terrifyingly Absurd at Worst? #***

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***A few words of explanation.*** In 1981, I was an expert witness for the ACLU in a case it brought, successfully, in Arkansas against a new law that -- in the science classes of publicly funded schools in the state -- mandated the “balanced treatment” of Darwinian evolutionary theory and so-called “Creation Science.” After it was all over, I continued to worry about why exactly it is that Darwinism causes such angst in the breasts of evangelical Christians.



I knew that, for all of the talk about taking the bible absolutely literally, this could not be the whole story. No one takes literally the claims in Revelation about the Whore of Babylon. She is always the Pope or the Catholic Church generally, or someone further east like Saladin or Osama Bin Laden. There has never been any doubt in my mind that the Whore of Babylon refers to my late headmaster.

I took note of what these critics themselves said, namely that their big objection is that Darwinian theory is itself a religion, a religion that rivals Christianity. For many years, I pooh-poohed this idea. There is – as I still very much believe – a fully functioning genuine science of evolutionary biology, with Darwin’s natural selection as the core causal force. It was, after all, to defend this idea that I was called down to Arkansas. But, gradually, I came to see the truth in the charge. Alongside the genuine science, there is a body of claims that truly functions as a religion. I make no claims about a hierarchy, even though there are days when Richard Dawkins, as people charged Thomas Henry Huxley many years ago, does somewhat resemble a high priest, even Pope. If you prefer, speak of a secular religious perspective. Either way, there is truly something more than pure science that challenges Christianity.

I have continued to explore this insight in a number of books. In *The Evolution-Creation Struggle* (2005), I analyzed matters in apocalyptic terms, arguing that Creationists tend to premillennial thinking and Darwinians to postmillennial thinking. In *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us about Evolution* (2017), I explore these insights through the writings of poets and novelists. My next book, *The Problem of War: Darwinism, Christianity, and Their Battle to Understand Human Conflict* (2018), uses war as a case study to explore the thinking of Christians and Darwinians on so important and fraught a topic. Through the Christian adhesion to Providence and original sin and through the Darwinian adhesion to progress and the virtues of struggle, I show that the differences are properly described as religious.

Now, in a proposed book, I want to pull back a little and ask some bigger questions. Agree that the Darwinian Revolution was a watershed in Christian-Science dealings. Agree that Darwinism was in important respects turned into a religious rival to Christianity. What next? Is the Darwinian, accepting fully Darwin's theory including its application to our own species, committed then to a religious perspective? Having given up one religion, Christianity, is one now committed to accepting another religion, Darwinism? Or, is there a third way, one that takes Darwinian theory as a true foundation but that does not thereby embrace a religious perspective?

In another recent book, *On Purpose* (2017), I began to explore what (somewhat pretentiously) I call "Darwinian Existentialism." Modifying my proposal for the press, I have put together the following short essay, expressing my thinking at present. The reader is warned that, in writing books, I rarely end with the picture I had when I started. Thank goodness! So, when my book appears, do not accuse me of *mauvais fois* – I am taking existentialism seriously! – if what you read here and what you read there are not identical. I shall be very disappointed if they are. What is the point of research if you end with exactly what you believed when you started?

Is there any meaning to life or is it all a cosmic joke? In the end, is Heinrich Himmler of no greater or less worth than Sophie Scholl, of the White Rose group that opposed the Nazis and whose life ended on the guillotine? Is life, as the existentialists christen it, "absurd"? Is nihilism the answer – the only answer?

### *Making sense of it all*

These are not idle questions because one possible answer is terrifying. The great American Pragmatist, William James (1902), knew the score. "Old age has the last word: the purely naturalistic look at life, however enthusiastically it may begin, is sure to end in sadness." He continues.

This sadness lies at the heart of every merely positivistic, agnostic, or naturalistic scheme of philosophy. Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet. In the practical life of the individual, we know how his whole gloom or glee about any present fact depends on the remoter schemes and hopes with which it stands related. Its significance and framing give it the chief part of its value. Let it be known to lead nowhere, and however agreeable it may be in its immediacy, its glow and gilding vanish. The old man, sick with an insidious internal disease, may laugh and quaff his wine at first as well as ever, but he knows his fate now, for the doctors have revealed it; and the knowledge knocks the satisfaction out of all these functions. They are partners of death and the worm is their brother, and they turn to a mere flatness.

It's all very well to say that we came from an eternity of non-existence, which wasn't all that bad, and we are returning to an eternity of non-existence, which presumably will continue to be not all that bad. It's terrifying just the same.

What's the answer, if there is an answer? Recently, the gloomy position has been promoted (if one might use so positive a description of one so pessimistic) by the South African philosopher David Benatar (2017). He concludes his nihilistic, mournful discussion, *The Human Predicament*, with: "If we take a cold, hard look at the human condition, we see

an unpleasant picture.” More than that. Even if we got our wish and achieved or were given immortality, it would become so tedious that we would be out of our minds before the first ten million years were over. All that we can hope for is a limited-length life on Planet Earth protected from reality by self-deception. “A life on Planet Earth protected from reality by self-deception”? Does this mean religion? William James (1902) rather suggests that it does and that religion does the trick.

And here religion comes to our rescue and takes our fate into her hands. There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday. The time for tension in our soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived. Fear is not held in abeyance as it is by mere morality, it is positively expunged and washed away.

### *The virtues and vices of self-deception*

Two questions come at once to mind. Is it self-deception to believe in religion – any religion? Even if it is, is this necessarily a bad thing? There are those, I would include myself, who say that it is self-deception to believe in religion (Ruse 2015). The more moderate of us, again I include myself, would say that some religions are more self-deceiving than others. I am inclined to think that being a Jehovah’s Witness or being a Mormon is more self-deceiving than being a Buddhist or an Episcopalian. This might be self-deception of its own, since I grew up on that sceptred isle and the Church of England was an ever-present, friendly part of culture. Beautiful old churches and Handel’s *Messiah*.

I appreciate however that there are people, whose intelligence and integrity I accept and admire, who think differently from me on these matters. I recently co-authored a book, *Science, Evolution, and Religion: A Debate about Atheism and Theism*, with Michael Peterson, a practicing Methodist. I regularly co-teach with a colleague in our Department of Religion, John Kelsay. He is the world-expert author of *Arguing the Just War in Islam*. John is an ordained Presbyterian minister and I regard him and Mike as two of the finest and most learned people I know. So, let me simply say here that this is a question I am going to leave hanging. Some reject religion and some accept it. You know where I stand and you know that others disagree.

What if you think that religion is self-deception? Notice that there is a lot more than “self” involved here because, if you do believe in religion, it is undoubtedly because others have encouraged you to do so. William James’s philosophical counter, the nineteenth-century mathematician and philosopher William Kingdom Clifford (1877), argued that such deception is always incorrect. “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.” Like Kant’s Categorical Imperative, which apparently tells you never to tell a lie, one can think of obvious counter examples. Suppose a small child dying of cancer says: “Mummy, am I going to Jesus?” I am not about to tell them otherwise – nor should you.

More generally, James (1896) has a point when he responds that, often in life, things are not clear-cut and in such circumstances of empirical agnosticism, it is legitimate to believe. For James, this is the opening to say that, if you cannot see any definitive counter examples to the God question, then, if you want to, go for it. To be honest, I am quite

sympathetic to this kind of thinking. If your religion is such that it is going to make life difficult for others – banning abortion, denying gays the right to marriage, disparaging blacks and Mexicans – then I am not keen on it. This said, when I am with my friends Mike and John, if theological issues come up we might talk about them, but I do not spend my life trying to convert them to atheism. Nor do they spend their lives trying to convert me to Christianity.

*Don't get born!*

Now the question becomes: “If you don't believe or if you can't believe, then what? Are you plunged into the maelstrom of fear that James talked of?” This seems to be the position of David Benatar. His best remedy is not to get into the fix in the first place. Don't get born! Benatar does not advocate mass suicide like the Jews in Clifford's Tower in York in 1190, but he certainly seems in favor of mass sterilization. We may all be bad mistakes but let us see that there are no more such mistakes. It would just be selfishness to demand in our dotage that more young humans be produced to change our diapers and empty our potties.

Are things quite this grim? I have five kids. Am I immoral? Am I five times over immoral? What if my five kids, unlike me, are all happy Christians and enjoy their lives? Since I don't believe in God or in His absolute values, it is not as if I am going against the proper ordering of things by being pleased that my self-deceived kids are happy, even if I am not. The big question however is whether I myself am necessarily plunged into the gloom and doom that James and Benatar seem to think is my lot. Am I really going to go through life – certainly the end of life – feeling that it is all worthless and frightening and better never to have been in the first place?

I am a Darwinian evolutionist and there is no doubt that this way of thinking has played a big role in getting us to where we are (Ruse 2012). It's not just that we humans are the products of a lawbound process of development, that -- what with the struggle for existence and natural selection -- was all so unpleasant along the way. It is, rather, that it was all so blind and uncaring. Thomas Hardy's poem “Hap,” written in the decade after the appearance of the *Origin of Species* in 1859, expresses this sense of angst and absurdity.

If but some vengeful god would call to me  
From up the sky, and laugh: “Thou suffering thing,  
Know that thy sorrow is my ecstasy,  
That thy love's loss is my hate's profiting!”

Then would I bear it, clench myself, and die,  
Steeled by the sense of ire unmerited;  
Half-eased in that a Powerfuller than I  
Had willed and meted me the tears I shed.

But not so. How arrives it joy lies slain,  
And why unblooms the best hope ever sown?  
—Crass Casualty obstructs the sun and rain,  
And dicing Time for gladness casts a moan. . . .  
These purblind Doomsters had as readily strown  
Blisses about my pilgrimage as pain

Richard Dawkins (1995) revels in this kind of stuff.

In a universe of blind physical forces and genetic replication, some people are going to get hurt, other people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it, nor any justice. The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind, pitiless indifference. As that unhappy poet A. E. Houseman put it:

For Nature, heartless, witless Nature  
Will neither know nor care.

DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.

### *False hopes*

Where do we go from here? One course of action is to make a virtue out of necessity. We could argue that, far from being entirely negative or without purpose, natural selection creates purpose! It promotes a progressivist process here on earth, we are not only part of this process but we are the winners – we came top – and we now have a commandment laid on us to further things, taking the process even higher. Nature itself gives meaning to existence, most especially to our existence. Hence, we can properly endorse some kind of “humanism,” where the world itself shows us that our species is the center of all that is of value.

The leading evolutionary biologist, Harvard ant specialist and sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson, is of this opinion. In his Pulitzer Prize winning *On Human Nature*, he talks happily of “evolutionary epics,” of humans achieving “pinnacles,” and forecasts only a good future, so long as philosophy is taken out of the hands of philosophers and “biologized.” More recently, at the age of 86, he has written: “Laid before us are new options scarcely dreamed of in earlier ages.” He adds: “If the heuristic and analytic power of science can be joined with the introspective creativity of the humanities, human existence will rise to an infinitely more productive and interesting meaning” (Wilson 2014).

Why or how would we get this kind of progress out of the selection process? The popular view is of some kind of “arms race,” where organisms compete against each other and improvement occurs – prey gets faster and so predator gets faster. Eventually intelligence is going to win out. Darwin thought something along these lines.

If we look at the differentiation and specialisation of the several organs of each being when adult (and this will include the advancement of the brain for intellectual purposes) as the best standard of highness of organisation, natural selection clearly leads towards highness; for all physiologists admit that the specialisation of organs, inasmuch as they perform in this state their functions better, is an advantage to each being; and hence the accumulation of variations tending towards specialisation is within the scope of natural selection. (Darwin 1861)

Today, Richard Dawkins (1986) has put this in terms of modern military advances, ending with electronics. Humans have won because they have the biggest on-board computers.

There are other proffered strategies for getting progress out of the Darwinian evolutionary process. One popular suggestion, from the paleontologist Simon Conway Morris (2003), is that there exist ecological niches into which organisms find their ways, and the niches are ordered with a cultural niche, that into which we have climbed, at the top. “If brains can get big independently and provide a neural machine capable of handling a highly complex environment, then perhaps there are other parallels, other convergences that drive some groups towards complexity.” Continuing: “We may be unique, but paradoxically those

properties that define our uniqueness can still be inherent in the evolutionary process. In other words, if we humans had not evolved then something more-or-less identical would have emerged sooner or later.”

Complementing this, another suggestion – as the authors acknowledge redolent of ideas to be found in Darwin’s fellow, English evolutionist, Herbert Spencer – finds progress to be a fact of nature. In the eyes of biologist Daniel McShea and philosopher Robert Brandon, “biology’s first law” -- the “zero-force evolutionary law” or ZFEL – can do it all: “In any evolutionary system in which there is variation and heredity, there is a tendency for diversity and complexity to increase, one that is always present but that may be opposed or augmented by natural selection, other forces, or constraints acting on diversity or complexity” (McShea and Brandon 2010).

I cannot say that any of these options excite me. As the paleontologist Jack Sepkoski Jnr pointed out colorfully, they couldn’t be valid because in the Darwinian world there simply is no absolute biological progress. “I see intelligence as just one of a variety of adaptations among tetrapods for survival. Running fast in a herd while being as dumb as shit, I think, is a very good adaptation for survival” (Ruse 1996). Arms races don’t necessarily lead to complexity and computers. Sometimes “keep it simple, stupid” is what works. Even if niches exist independently, an assumption many would question, there is no reason why we should find the culture niche or why indeed that should be superior. As for ZFEL? Well that is strictly for those who believe in the tooth fairy.

### *Darwinian existentialism*

I am just not convinced that, out of Darwinism, you are going to get humanism, a kind of ersatz-religion equivalent, yielding meaning. Another approach is demanded, one that is, in respects, significantly chillier, and yet in other respects is not just more honest but ennobling and comforting. In some ways, it is close to existentialism. Jean-Paul Sartre (1948) makes the point about the alienation from God:

Existentialism is not so much an atheism in the sense that it would exhaust itself attempting to demonstrate the nonexistence of God; rather, it affirms that even if God were to exist, it would make no difference—that is our point of view. It is not that we believe that God exists, but we think that the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God.

Then Sartre follows by trying to explain what this means for humankind:

My atheist existentialism ... declares that God does not exist, yet there is still a being in whom existence precedes essence, a being which exists before being defined by any concept, and this being is man or, as Heidegger puts it, human reality.

That means that man first exists, encounters himself and emerges in the world, to be defined afterwards. Thus, there is no human nature, since there is no God to conceive it. It is man who conceives himself, who propels himself towards existence. Man becomes nothing other than what is actually done, not what he will want to be.

No student of modern science is going to accept all of this. Even a half-baked knowledge of human biology shows that it just plain silly to say that there is no human

nature. Humans are bipedal and rational and warthogs are not. It is true that human nature is variable – although, apparently, genetically we are nothing like as variable as many species – but to distinguish humans from warthogs is not bad science or motivated by racism or sexism or any other ism. The claim is true. To take a more specific example, for all of John Locke’s horrendous stories about the ways in which people have treated their children, it is part of human nature to be loving towards children and especially so to one’s own children. Of course, culture is involved. Perhaps culture can override biology and some people really do geld their children to fatten them up before eating them. Nevertheless, biology is the foundation. It is genetic that we humans can speak and warthogs cannot. Then, we speak different languages because of culture.

Qualifications notwithstanding, this approach nevertheless says that Sartre is right. We start from where we are. It is just a matter of where we are. The Darwinian says no one is a blank slate – and one very much doubts that Sartre, the quintessential Frenchman, truly thought that, either. We start from where we are and have to create meaning in this unfeeling Darwinian world. There is no help from an external good God nor is there help from an external, progressive, value-increasing world process. Given this prospect, here too we can and must work through the items that give Christians and humanists meaning – family, friends, society, and more.

#### *Making the positive case*

Life has meaning. It starts with the love of family and friends. Then if you are lucky or have made the right choices, the worth of one’s work. For me, there has been the huge privilege of having been a college prof for over fifty years. Working with young people and engaging in scholarship, finding new ideas and connections and offering new perspectives. Following this there is obviously pride in (and sometimes sorrow about) about one’s country. You don’t have to be an intellectual to feel that. The great excitement that comes from traveling the world and meeting folk from other cultures and societies. We all find meaning in the transcendent goodness and bravery of some of our fellow humans. Not just the Sophie Scholl type of person but of our everyday fellows who spend that extra hour with worried students or who stand up against a bullying administrator. The people you are proud to call your friends.

Above all, one finds meaning in art, literature, and music. I wish so much that I could join Renoir’s young Parisians on a Sunday river excursion. I laugh (somewhat uneasily) at the misfortunes of Malvolio. I listen yet again to Joan Sutherland singing “Casta Diva.” At such times, I say: “God, I don’t care if you exist or not. I don’t care about eternity. We did or produced things of great meaning. We won!” I regard Darwinian existentialism as truly liberating, enabling one to live a life of great worth, for and of itself. There is nothing else, but nothing else is needed. In the terms of the philosophers, at a cosmic level, life may be absurd. At the human level, it can be deeply self-fulfilling. If *Così fan tutte* is not self-validating, then I do not know what is. God has nothing to do with it, and hope of eternity even less. I don’t need the deity or the thought of heaven to see what moral pigmies the rest of us are compared to Sophie Scholl and other saintly people.

#### *Self-deception again raises its ugly head*

To the nihilist who argues that this is all self-deception, my response is that I give to logical positivists who argue that moral claims are meaningless or their successors who say that

moral claims are all false. If rape isn't wrong and aiding the sick isn't right, then I don't know what is. I am with David Hume on free will and on being selfish – of course there is free will and of course not every action is selfish. The question is where do we go from there. Mozart is meaningful and Sophie Scholl is meaningful, just as watching nonstop porn or spending your days in a haze of drugs is not meaningful. That is what we mean by meaning. Talk of self-deception is as silly as saying every action is selfish.

Responds the nihilist, you get meaning only by making it so thin that it has little or no value. Your meanings are ephemeral. They have no cosmic significance. Mozart now and then poof! Surely though the response here is to turn on its head all of the nihilist's arguments about the tedium of immortality and so forth. I am not sure what cosmic meaning outside the human context really means. I joke that my idea of heaven is a new Mozart opera every night and fish chips in every intermission; but, truly, that is a joke. Five hours of *Meistersinger* is enough for any normal human being. More than enough. The thought of five hundred hours is daunting, and not even the music could compensate for five thousand hours of Wagner's idea of humor.

The point is that we are human beings and meaning only makes sense in the context of human beings and what they are. Darwinian evolution may have pointed to the absurd. It also points to what is self-fulfilling. A life well lived is not a life that goes on forever, but precisely a life of bounded time, that grows, is shaped, and winds down with a sense of completion and wholeness. It is the life of a being produced by evolution and shaped by natural selection.

This is not humanism in the sense endorsed by some, notably the Columbia University philosopher Philip Kitcher (2014), which seems a moral notion, but more ontological. Beating God at His job is by humans and for humans. If you go on objecting that it is still not objective, but subjective, then I agree. It is subjective, but it is not relative; and it is not non-existent, and it is not worthless. It is what you get and for us humans it is more than enough. It is a privilege to be alive. It is also a hell of a lot of fun. More than spending your days worrying that you will get to the Pearly Gates to find your score on the HAT (Heaven Admission Test) was just not high enough.

### *Time for Action*

We came from an eternity of oblivion. We return to an eternity of oblivion. Absurd perhaps. Demanding great humility, certainly. About ourselves and our powers of understanding. Why should modified apes be able to peer into the mysteries of meaning? To quote the population geneticist J. B. S. Haldane (1927).

I have no doubt that in reality the future will be vastly more surprising than anything I can imagine. Now my own suspicion is that the Universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we can suppose.

How exciting. Not the truth, as is offered and guaranteed by other approaches. Rather, the eternal search for truth. About which Madame de Stael wrote: "the search for the truth is the noblest occupation of man; its publication is a duty." Sounds good to me, so let's get on with it.



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