

EVOLUTION - A DISTURBING IDEA

By

William Reville, University College, Cork.

Of all the topics that I write on, the one that arouses most reaction is evolution. Some people find the concept deeply disturbing. At the heart of this disturbance is the fear that, if evolution is true, everything in the world is devoid of higher meaning. That scenario is simply too bleak and barren for many people to accept, and, consequently, they are bitterly opposed to the theory of evolution. But, in my opinion, there is no need to take this pessimistic black and white approach to the matter.

Darwin's and Wallace's (1858) theory of evolution by natural selection did indeed change things utterly. Prior to that it was pretty much universally accepted that the totality of things could be arranged in a hierarchy from top to bottom in the order - God, Mind, Design, Order, Chaos, Nothingness. It was accepted that all movement of effect in that hierarchy was from higher elements downwards. Then, along came Darwin and Wallace to propose that things actually move in the opposite direction; order can arise out of chaos, design can arise out of order, mind can arise out of design. Darwin and Wallace further proposed a credible mechanism, natural selection, to explain how these changes occur.

Darwin set out to explain the relationship between the different species of life and how these species change over time. His conclusion was that existing forms of life have slowly arisen, through natural selection, from somewhat different forms by a process of gradual modification. Natural selection is the process whereby nature unconsciously favours the reproduction of those individuals who display characteristics that better suit them to their environment than their fellows who do not display these characteristics. In this way, slowly emerging changes in an organism are naturally selected and this unconscious process produces organisms 'designed' to live efficiently and effectively in the environment.

In his book 'The Descent of Man', Darwin makes it clear that humankind also arose through evolution. In other words, our most prized possession, the self-conscious mind, is the product of unconscious natural selection. This was the most radical proposal imaginable at the time, and, to this day, many people cannot accept it. Even Alfred Russell Wallace, who was the co-discoverer of the principle of evolution by natural selection, could not take matters this far, and, later in life, he exempted human consciousness from the general scheme of evolution.

I appreciate why many people find it instinctively unpalatable to think that the human mind arose out of the unconscious selection of random changes. Humans are part of nature, but are also obviously very different to the rest of nature. We are self-conscious, we can reason, we have language and culture. It is much more palatable to think that we have a spark of the Divine, that we are connected upwards rather than effected from below.

Many people fear and despise evolution because of its perceived knock-on implications. They feel that, if evolution is true, there is no place for God and there is no preordained purpose in the world; if evolution is true there are no absolute rights and wrongs, and codes of morality become, at best, guidelines to ensure efficient behaviour; if evolution is accepted, there is no compelling reason for people to be good; if evolution is accepted, codes of civilised behaviour will inevitably degenerate and civilisation will eventually fall into chaos.

Natural theology produced several ‘proofs’ for the existence of God. The best of these proofs was the argument from design. This pointed to the sophisticated design that is obvious in the biological world. Where design exists there must be a designer, and that designer is God. Before the theory of evolution, that argument made sense. However, Darwin and Wallace knocked the legs from under it by showing that natural selection can produce design. But, while this invalidates the traditional argument from design, it does not disprove the existence of God.

Is it possible to have it both ways, i.e. to believe both in evolution and in a God by whose will the world exists and operates? In my opinion, the answer is yes. I am a Christian and I also believe in evolution. My belief in God does not rest to any significant extent on identifying gaps in nature that science cannot explain, and invoking God to account for these gaps. I am content that science should go on uncovering mechanisms that explain the natural world. Nevertheless, I think that the basic material (quarks, electrons, etc.) of which the universe is made is so wonderful as to make it not unreasonable to think that it exists by the will of God.

According to the picture provided by science, the universe has bootstrapped its way by natural means all the way from hydrogen in the beginning to Einstein in the 20th century. It remains to be demonstrated that several huge steps along the way, such as the origin of life and the development of consciousness, occurred by purely natural means, but it is not unlikely that this will eventually be demonstrated. There is no objective evidence that God interferes with the natural unfolding of the world through the operation of the laws of nature. This would mean that the entire world developed naturally to its present state because of the nature of the basic fabric of the universe. In that event we must stand in awe at the amazing potential built into the basic stuff of the universe and ask how can this be so?

Science provides natural explanations for natural phenomena. It is not competent to investigate the supernatural. Neither should we look to science to provide us with moral or ethical codes, although science can provide information useful in part in forming such codes. God is, by definition, supernatural. Belief in God (faith) results from one’s response, as a whole human being, to religious teachings and to the experience of living in the world. Science and religion occupy different spheres, but there is no necessary conflict between the two.

It is very unwise to use gaps in existing understanding of the world as ‘proof’ of the existence of God. Such evidence can only stand until a natural explanation arises. It seems to me that the existence of God is not a thing that can ever be proved. If there is no God, this is obviously true. If there is a God, and if this ever became self-evident, it would remove the need for faith, and for the sensible exercise of free-will on our part to believe or to reject. The lack of objective rational certainty in this matter coupled with the existence of just enough evidence for God, when apprehended by the whole being, seems to be an essential element that validates the faith of humans, as free agents, in a God, whose nature we dimly reflect and in whose direction we aspire to move.

(This article first appeared in The Irish Times, October 13, 1997.)