

Does Evolution Disprove God?

Darwin, Design, and the Question No Fossil Can Settle

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I. The Strongest Card in Either Hand

No scientific idea has done more work for atheism than evolution. Before Darwin, even skeptics conceded that the living world looked designed; David Hume could pick the design argument apart philosophically, but he had nothing to put in its place, and the argument kept its grip. After Darwin there was a mechanism—heritable variation sifted by natural selection—that could produce the appearance of design with no designer anywhere in it. Richard Dawkins put the cultural verdict in a sentence: “Although atheism might have been logically tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.”¹

This essay takes that claim seriously, because it deserves to be taken seriously. It will not defend a young earth, dispute common descent, or pick a quarrel with any finding of biology. The question it presses is different: granting the science in full, what exactly has been proved about God? The answer, I will argue, is: nothing—and the appearance that something has been proved depends on a picture of God that classical Christianity never held. Darwin defeated a particular eighteenth-century deity. The God of Augustine, Aquinas, and the Catholic creeds was never in the duel.

II. What the Church Actually Teaches

Start with the record, because most readers on both sides have it wrong. The Catholic Church has never condemned the theory of evolution. In 1950, in the encyclical *Humani Generis*, Pius XII declared that the Church's teaching authority "does not forbid" research and discussion "with regard to the doctrine of evolution, in as far as it inquires into the origin of the human body as coming from pre-existent and living matter"—adding the one reservation on which everything in this essay will finally turn: "the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God."²

In 1996 John Paul II went further, telling the Pontifical Academy of Sciences that "new knowledge has led to the recognition of the theory of evolution as more than a hypothesis," and observing that the theory's progressive acceptance by researchers, following a series of discoveries in different fields, "is in itself a significant argument in favor of this theory."³ And the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, addressing the age of the cosmos and the development of life-forms directly, says that these discoveries "invite us to even greater admiration for the greatness of the Creator."⁴ Admiration, not alarm. Whatever the reader has absorbed from the American culture war, the Catholic Church is not, and has never been, committed to reading Genesis as a laboratory report. Augustine warned Christians in the fifth century against talking nonsense about the natural world in the name of Scripture, precisely because it discredits the faith before those who know better.⁵

III. What Darwin Actually Showed

And the science should be stated at its full strength, because the case made here does not need it weakened. The evidence for common descent is overwhelming and convergent. The fossil record orders life through deep time. Comparative anatomy finds one skeletal plan repurposed from whale flipper to bat wing to human hand. Biogeography puts related species where branching descent would put them. And molecular biology confirmed it all in an independent archive: the family trees written in DNA match the trees drawn from bones, down to shared broken genes and the residue of ancient viral infections inherited in common by humans and the other primates. Natural selection,

acting on variation over immense stretches of time, is a real process with observed instances, and there is no honest way around it: the diversity of living things on this planet has a natural history.⁶

What must be noticed is the shape of what has been explained. Evolution is a theory of *diversification*: given living, reproducing, varying things, in a lawful universe, over time, it explains how they branch, adapt, and speciate. Every word of that sentence before “it explains” is a precondition the theory consumes, not a product it delivers. Keep that in view; section V returns to it.

IV. Paley’s God and Augustine’s

The blind watchmaker argument defeats a particular deity. William Paley’s famous watch, found on a heath, demanded a watchmaker; the eye, incomparably more intricate, demanded one more loudly; and so God was inferred as the celestial engineer who assembles each organism at a bench, organ by organ. Darwin showed that no such engineer is needed for the eye, and Paley’s God—an eighteenth-century English invention, a tinkering craftsman inside nature—died of it, fairly and permanently.⁷

But he was never the God of classical Christianity. Fourteen centuries before Darwin, Augustine read the words of Genesis 1:24—“Let the earth bring forth living creatures”—and noticed what they actually say: God does not fabricate the animals; He commands the *earth* to produce them. Augustine developed the thought into his doctrine of the *rationes seminales*, the seed-principles: God, he taught, endowed creation at its origin with powers that would unfold into living things in their courses through time. Aquinas made the underlying metaphysics precise: God is not one cause among the causes inside the world, competing with them for room; He is the first cause who works *through* the whole order of secondary causes, giving them their being and their efficacy. “God works in every worker,” as the *Summa* has it—which means a complete natural explanation of some process is not a subtraction from God’s agency but a description of it.⁸

On that older and deeper view, a natural process producing the diversity of life is not a rival explanation to God. It is what creation by the God of Genesis 1:24 would be expected to look like from the inside. The dichotomy “either nature did it or God did it” is the one assumption Paley and Dawkins share—and the one assumption the Catholic tradition, at its most rigorous, has always denied.

V. What the Theory Presupposes

Natural selection explains how living forms diversify. It explains nothing else, and its founders never claimed otherwise. Run the explanation backward and watch what it consumes. Selection requires reproducing entities that vary heritably: it therefore

presupposes life, and the origin of life is a problem evolution does not address, since selection cannot begin until replication has. Replication requires a chemistry capable of molecules that copy themselves: it therefore presupposes physical laws and constants tuned so that such chemistry is possible at all. Laws require a universe in which they hold: the theory therefore presupposes that there is something rather than nothing. And the whole structure presupposes that nature is intelligible—orderly enough to be described by the very theory in question.⁹

None of this is a God-of-the-gaps argument, and the distinction matters. A gaps argument says: science has not yet explained X, therefore God. This argument says: these are not gaps in the theory but premises of it—questions of a different logical kind, which no future biology can reach because biology begins downstream of them. Evolution answers “how does life vary and branch?” It cannot, even in principle, answer “why is there a lawful, life-permitting universe in which things evolve?” Retiring God because Darwin explained speciation is like retiring the author because the plot explains the characters. The prior questions—contingency, fine-tuning, intelligibility—are the subject of the arguments examined elsewhere on this site, and evolution does not answer them. It stands on top of them.

VI. Chance, from the Inside and the Outside

The sharpest form of the objection says: the variations are *random*, so a guided unguided process is a contradiction, and the believer must choose between the science being wrong and the theology being empty. The dilemma trades on an ambiguity in the word “random.” When biology calls mutations random, it means they arise without regard to the needs of the organism—copying errors are not biased toward what would help. That is a claim about the process seen from inside nature, it is testable, and the Catholic has no quarrel with it.

Whether the whole natural order—its laws, its initial conditions, its contingencies included—is providentially ordained is not a biological claim at all, and no experiment on finch beaks or fruit flies touches it. Aquinas held both truths together centuries before the objection was framed: what is chance with respect to secondary causes may be intended with respect to the first cause. A dice roll is genuinely random to the dice; the casino’s books still balance by design. God does not need to nudge mutations, because He is not one more force inside the system, adjusting outcomes the way a breeder culls a litter. He is the reason there is a system—sustaining law, chance, and time together in being, and ordaining the whole toward His ends.¹⁰ The Catechism says it without embarrassment: God grants His creatures “the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other,” and carries out His plan through their actions.¹¹ The believer is

not asked to choose between the science being wrong and the theology being empty, because the two claims never meet on the same level.

VII. The Bad-Design Argument Is Theology

The catalogue of nature's clumsy engineering—the recurrent laryngeal nerve looping under the aorta on its way back up to the larynx, the backward-wired vertebrate retina, the perilous human birth canal—is offered as evidence against a designer, and against Paley it is. But notice what kind of argument it is. “God would not have done it this way” is not a biological claim; it is a theological one, and it borrows its premise from the very theology it means to refute: that each organism ought to look individually engineered, fresh from the bench.

Drop the premise and the same evidence reads differently. A God who creates through an evolving nature is a gardener, not a machinist. What grows carries its history in its structure—the laryngeal nerve included—precisely because it really grew. The believer who accepts evolution expects living things to look like modified inheritances, because that is what they are. The nerve that loops is evidence against a God who never existed, and silent about the One who does.

VIII. The Waste of Deep Time

The moral objection cuts deeper than the engineering one, and it deserves to be stated in Darwin's own words rather than paraphrased into something weaker. “I cannot persuade myself,” he wrote to his friend Asa Gray in 1860, “that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars.” Hundreds of millions of years of predation, parasitism, and extinction before any human existed to sin: what kind of Creator chooses *that* as His method?¹²

Two things should be said, and the first is that this is a real difficulty and the honest name for it is the problem of evil—wearing a biological costume, but the same problem, and it is faced squarely in this site's essay on suffering rather than waved away here. The second is that the objection has quietly changed subjects. Cruelty, waste, and the claim that things ought to be otherwise are moral categories, and on a strictly materialist reading of evolution there is no “ought”—there is only what survives. The wasp's larva refutes a good God only if there is a standard of goodness that the universe fails; and if there is such a standard, materialism has already been left behind. Darwin himself did not press his wasp to an atheist conclusion. In the same letter he confessed himself unable to be content “to view this wonderful universe” and “to conclude that everything is the result of brute

force,” and ended: “I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton.”¹³

IX. The Horrid Doubt

The deepest problem in the skeptic’s case is the one it saves for last: the extension of the process to the human mind. If reasoning is nothing but a survival adaptation of an enlarged primate brain, then the reliability of reasoning extends exactly as far as survival required—and grand metaphysical conclusions, atheism included, were never on the savannah’s syllabus. Natural selection rewards useful behavior, not true belief; where the two come apart, selection cannot tell the difference.

Darwin saw this himself, and it haunted him to the end of his life. “With me,” he wrote to William Graham in 1881, “the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man’s mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would any one trust in the convictions of a monkey’s mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?”¹⁴ The philosopher Alvin Plantinga has made the point rigorous: the real conflict is not between evolution and theism, which cohabit without strain, but between evolution and *naturalism*—because a naturalist who accepts that his cognitive faculties were shaped only for fitness has acquired a reason to distrust every deliverance of those faculties, including naturalism itself.¹⁵ The argument that evolution explains away the mind is an argument conducted *by* that mind, and it sits at the branch it sits on.

X. The Soul, and Where the Line Runs

Here, finally, is the one line the Catholic Church has drawn through this entire subject, and it is drawn exactly where the previous section found the cliff. The human body may indeed come by way of the long road from other living things; that is the question Pius XII opened to research. But the rational soul—the thing in you that can weigh a sentence for truth rather than survival value, bind itself by a promise, and stand under a moral law—is not a secretion of matter, and the Church stakes everything on the distinction: “the Catholic faith obliges us to hold that souls are immediately created by God.” John Paul II repeated the boundary in the same message that accepted the science: “theories of evolution which, in accordance with the philosophies inspiring them, consider the spirit as emerging from the forces of living matter or as a mere epiphenomenon of this matter, are incompatible with the truth about man.”¹⁶

Notice what kind of claim this is. It is not a claim about fossils, and no fossil can settle it; the difference between a brain that processes and a person who understands does not leave a skeleton. The Church’s teaching that every spiritual soul is created immediately by

God is not a retreat from the science.¹⁷ It is the one account on the table that leaves human reason standing—including the reason that does science, follows an argument against its own interests, and cares whether evolution is *true* rather than merely whether believing it helps us breed. The skeptic’s picture cannot explain the skeptic. The Catholic picture explains both the long road and the creature at the end of it who can look back down the road and ask what it means.

XI. The Long Road Home

So: does evolution disprove God? It disproves a god—the watchmaker of eighteenth-century apologetics, who was always too small. It leaves untouched, and at every deep point presupposes, the God of classical Christianity: the reason there is a universe, the ground of the laws by which the earth brought forth living creatures, the first cause working through every natural cause, the Creator of each rational soul. The Church that reads Genesis 1:24 was not waiting for Darwin’s permission to believe in a God who creates through nature; her greatest minds had described such a creation centuries before the *Beagle* sailed. And the history of the supposed war between her and science—Galileo included, honestly told—is examined in this site’s companion essay on science and faith, which this one leans on rather than repeats.¹⁸

The reader who came to this essay an atheist is owed a closing word without a trap in it. Nothing here has argued that evolution is false; everything here has argued that it is true and that it changes less than you were told. The four-billion-year road from the first replicator to you is real. The question is whether the road explains the traveler—whether the taste for truth that made you read this far is only the savannah talking, or evidence of something in you that the road alone cannot account for. Darwin’s horrid doubt is the honest end of the first answer. The second answer is the faith of the Church: that the God who said “let the earth bring forth” also, at the end of the bringing-forth, breathed into the dust a living soul—and that He has been doing so, one person at a time, ever since.

Endnotes

1. Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (Norton, 1986), p. 6.
2. Pius XII, *Humani Generis* (12 August 1950), §36.
3. John Paul II, Message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 22 October 1996 (“Truth Cannot Contradict Truth”), §4. The official French text reads *plus qu’une hypothèse*, “more than a hypothesis”; an early English rendering, “more than one hypothesis,” was corrected.
4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §283.

5. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* (On the Literal Meaning of Genesis) 1.19, warning against Christians speaking ignorantly about the natural world as if from Scripture, to the scandal of unbelievers who know the subject.
6. For the converging lines of evidence presented for a general readership, see Jerry Coyne, *Why Evolution Is True* (Viking, 2009); the argument of this essay concedes the book's science entire.
7. William Paley, *Natural Theology* (1802), ch. 1.
8. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, esp. bks. 4–6, on the *rationes seminales*; Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 105, a. 5 (“God works in every worker”).
9. On fine-tuning and the intelligibility of nature as premises rather than products of evolutionary explanation, see Stephen M. Barr, *Modern Physics and Ancient Faith* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).
10. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III, ch. 74, on providence and contingent causes; cf. *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 22, a. 4.
11. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §§302–308, at §306.
12. Darwin to Asa Gray, 22 May 1860 (Darwin Correspondence Project, letter 2814; ampersands expanded).
13. *Ibid.*
14. Darwin to William Graham, 3 July 1881 (Darwin Correspondence Project, letter 13230).
15. Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford, 2011), ch. 10, the “evolutionary argument against naturalism.”
16. *Humani Generis*, §36; John Paul II, Message of 22 October 1996, §5.
17. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §366.
18. See the essay accompanying the page “Are Science and Faith Enemies?” on this site, which treats the Galileo affair, the warfare thesis of Draper and White, and the Church’s scientific record, Lemaître and Mendel included.

For Further Reading

Modern Physics and Ancient Faith, by Stephen M. Barr—a particle physicist on what modern science does and does not imply for belief.

Where the Conflict Really Lies, by Alvin Plantinga—the argument that the real conflict is between evolution and naturalism, not evolution and theism.

Humani Generis, by Pius XII (1950)—the encyclical that set the Catholic terms for the evolution question. Free online at https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis.html.

Truth Cannot Contradict Truth, by John Paul II (1996)—the message to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Free online at https://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_jp02tc.htm.

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“And God said, ‘Let the earth bring forth living creatures according to their kinds’ ... And it was so.” — Genesis 1:24

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic understanding of creation and evolution*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church’s teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author’s alone.