

Darwin: His Life and His Doctrine

Excerpt: “Darwin’s Loss of Faith”

(*Darwin's Life*, pp. 38–45)

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Darwin does not believe that religious feeling was ever strongly developed in him. Yet it was not infrequent and could become vivid: he himself says that there were times when life came into it. “The state of mind,” he says, “that grand scenes used to awaken in me, and which was very intimately connected with a belief in God, differed in no essential respect from what is usually called the feeling of the sublime”; and he compares this state of mind with “the powerful and somewhat indefinite but analogous feelings excited by music.” In other words, his religious ideas were associated with, and sustained by, a peculiar kind of poetry that was in him: his capacity for enthusiasm, for being absorbed, seized, gliding into wondering, admiring self-surrender.¹

“But now”—he adds, and this “now” would seem to refer already to the final portion of the voyage—“now the most sublime scenes could not produce in my mind any of those strong and inwardly connected feelings with God.” No: “grand scenes” simply no longer existed for him; he no longer experienced them as grand. Only once more, in May of 1838, did he seem to himself, during a church concert, to hear a choir that “actually made the walls shake”; otherwise, in all his letters from after the voyage, one finds no preserved impression that is wholly “sublime,” only idyllic ones. A certain driving force in him had, as noted, gone slack. Previously, under tremendous pressure, it had driven his mood like a rainbow-glittering fountain jet high, high into the blue of the ether: and on the topmost pearls there had trembled

¹See G. Brandes, *Naturalism in England*, p. 60 ff.

in the sunlight a golden glimmer—a star—the star that led wise men to the East. Now this driving force, when set in motion, could only propel his mood a little way into the air, and what had once seemed a heavenly star was seen instead as a golden apple, wrought of human thought.

But what human beings have wrought, human beings reason about. —“On board the *Beagle* I was quite orthodox . . . and quoted the Bible as an unanswerable authority on points of morality . . . But at this time, from 1836 to 1839, I gradually came to see that the Old Testament was no more to be trusted than the sacred books of the Hindoos . . . By further reflexion I was gradually led to see that circumstances compelled me to abandon my belief in Christianity as a divine revelation.”

In his mind he turned over possible proofs of the truth of the Bible; but once Christianity no longer stood beyond refutation, these artificial supports could not hold the conviction in place. “The rate of disbelief crept on very slowly,” he writes, “and was at last complete. The disbelief came over me without any stormlike suddenness or particular violence.”

With this there fell away as well a conception that, though not logically necessary, was and is habitually bound up with conventional Christian belief in God: the conception of God as the direct producer of all the forms of organic life. In a letter from somewhat later (1859), Darwin rightly observes that just as the notion that thunder and lightning are the effects of secondary causes has caused many to grieve—as requiring them to give up the idea of direct divine agency—so now many grieve to give up the idea of God as the immediate author of the organic forms. For the phenomena of the cosmos and the inorganic world, the majority of nineteenth-century Christians had already ceased to believe that God was the direct cause; but with respect to the phenomena of organic life, they believed—and believe—that he is. The conventional Christian belief in God was and is habitually bound up with faith in the divine “purposiveness” of organic nature: and with that no thoroughgoing hypothesis of evolution can be reconciled. Only when Darwin had definitively departed—not precisely from belief in a God, but from the conventional God-concept—only then was it possible for him to conceive of species as produced by the selection of chance variations realized through the struggle for existence. For both with the words “struggle for existence” and “natural selection” and with the word “chance,” a long chain of natural causes is inserted between the phenomena and God—with the word “chance” a chain so long that the human eye cannot trace more than its uttermost link. . .

Perhaps one further circumstance deserves to be drawn out in explanation of the coming-to-be of “Darwinism.” There is no direct statement in Darwin’s letters and notebooks about the emotional condition in which his rationalist critique was born. But whenever he doubted the existence of God—and he never went further than doubt, not even at his furthest extreme!—he always supported himself upon this, and only this, objection: “there is so much suffering in the world!” That must have been the most original and deepest motive for unbelief in his consciousness.

His compassion for all that suffers likewise furnished him with this weapon in the struggle against the doctrine of Providence. His illness and his at times bitter revulsion at the injustice of things sharpened the weapon. It must, of course, have been most effective at those times when he “looked darkly” on life, when his mood was such that the suffering of this world seemed to him the prevailing thing, joy the vanishing exception. But—had this mood fixed itself in him, had he, that is, become a “pessimist,” he could not possibly have appropriated and created the guiding idea that came to him through reading Malthus’s book. For it is not enough that the drive to investigate is strong in a man, if he is to appropriate and create guiding ideas from what he reads or encounters on his way: there must also be, between what he sits with and what he takes in, that mysterious affinity which chemistry, speaking of substances, calls “chemical kinship.” And the idea he received was a fortunate one—a deliberately optimistic idea.

He had mixed much with breeders and heard of their work: he now conceived, to put it briefly, the struggle for existence as the vast and patient “breeder” of the forms of organic life! But already the very idea of “breeding” has something festive about it. It calls to mind, it is true, toil and disappointed hopes and failed attempts and sacrifices of many kinds; but far, far more brightly does it illuminate the joy of observation and experiment, and point towards the happily attained goal: that a new variety is formed, useful and satisfying to the one who formed it! In reality: behind the Darwinian concept of “natural selection” (natural selection, natural breeding) there glimmers a presentiment of Something or Someone—“Nature,” “God,” something Unfathomable and Nameless!—that rejoices in the fact that the forms of life change and are perfected to fit the shifting conditions of existence. This concept carries with it a satisfaction in an infinite and universal progress of utility. . . . And now with respect to individuals—with respect to each single being in the swarm of life that passes through the breeding-process of the struggle for existence? Yes, for individuals as well—or for the great preponderance of them—Darwin’s idea

of “breeding” presupposes a surplus of happiness. For the breeding process would quickly come to an end if the bred beings were more sick than healthy, felt more aversion than appetite for food, were more unwilling than willing to reproduce, and so forth.

One has, in fact, observed that just in the half-year during which his central theory took shape, Darwin himself was, as it were, in a state of deep and steady happiness. And it is easy to guess the reason. It was in October 1838 that he read Malthus’s book,—and on the 29th of January 1839 his marriage took place with his cousin, the admirable daughter of the admirable Josiah Wedgwood, Emma Wedgwood! So far, then, has Eros had a hand in the *Origin of Species*. Without Darwin’s happy love, “Darwin’s theory” would not have come to be.