Darwin's Test of Faith:
Lessons from a Victorian Agnostic

Charles Darwin should have been a doctor. His father, Robert, was a doctor, and his father had been a doctor before him. Charles was expected intended to follow the family tradition, and at the age of sixteen he was sent to Edinburgh to study medicine.

He didn't like it. Medicine was certainly better than the classical education he had been subjected to back home, but even by his late teens Darwin was already too much in love with nature (not to mention hunting, shooting, playing cards . . .) to take his studies seriously.

The result was a fight with his father. Robert and Charles had been (and remained) close, but Darwin senior was worried that his son was turning into 'an idle sporting man' and insisted that if medicine didn't suit him then there was only one profession left: the church.

Darwin considered himself to be an 'orthodox' Christian at the time, but that 'orthodoxy' was of a particular kind. His Christianity was a bit like a scientific theory: logical, rational and verifiable. Christianity for Darwin was like a proof to be established.

In spite – or perhaps because – of this, Darwin doesn't seem to have been particularly keen on becoming a vicar. His friend J.M. Herbert, who was also training for ordination at the time, recalled 'an earnest conversation' with Darwin 'about going into Holy Orders'. During the ordination service the Bishop would ask candidates, 'Do you trust that you are inwardly moved by the Holy Spirit?' Herbert remembered Darwin asking him whether he could answer yes to the question. Herbert replied that he could not, to which Darwin replied, 'Neither can I, and therefore I cannot take orders.'[1]

Growing doubts

Darwin never did 'take orders'. When the opportunity came to travel the world on the Beagle, he seized it and spent five years collecting evidence from which he would develop his theory of evolution.

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That theory emerged after he returned to England in 1836. In his autobiography, written 40 years later, Darwin located his loss of Christian faith during these years and, although the reasons he gives are not always entirely convincing, there is no doubt that this was the period during which his faith began to slip away.

His new theory posed serious problems for his Christianity, and his notebooks from this period show him wrestling with these issues. Evolution destroyed 'special creation' – for example, the idea that God had made each species separately. But then, Darwin reasoned, was special creation such a great idea? How much more attractive was evolution than the idea 'that since the time of the Silurian [God] has made a long succession of vile molluscous animals'? Special creation was nothing to boast about. 'How beneath the dignity of him, who is supposed to have said let there be light & there was light.'[2]

1 Quoted in Adrian Desmond and James Moore, *Darwin* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 66

A bigger problem to Darwin's faith was suffering. The world in which Darwin had been brought up was peaceful, ordered and benign, a 'happy world . . . [of] delighted existence' in the words of William Paley, the theologian who had most influenced Darwin.[3] The world of evolution was much darker. This was a world in which a 'dreadful but quiet war of organic beings [was] going on in the peaceful woods & smiling fields'. Suffering was to be a serious problem for Darwin.

The death of a daughter

Darwin wrote two pencil sketches of this theory in the early 1840s and then turned to a huge study on barnacles. Towards the end of the decade his stomach problems got worse, as did the health of his eldest daughter, Annie. In 1851 Darwin took her to a water therapist in Malvern, in the hope that the treatment would help her as it had helped him.

It did not. Annie developed a fever and worsened. Darwin returned to her bedside (he had gone home to Downe in Kent to be with Emma, his wife, who was eight months pregnant). He wrote daily, sometimes hourly, reports on Annie's condition. 'You would not in the least recognize her,' he told Emma, 'with her poor hard, sharp pinched features; I could only bear to look at her by forgetting our former dear Annie.'[4]

The following week was the worst of his life. Annie rallied, then sank. She showed signs of recovery and then of fading fast. Unable to eat, she slowly wasted away. The doctors remained quietly confident. Darwin sat, holding her hand, alternately overjoyed and distraught. Eventually, she died, aged ten.

Most Victorian families lost children – Darwin himself lost two others in infancy – but Annie was his favourite and he had witnessed every last, painful moment of her short life. The experience nearly destroyed him. Many historians believe that it contributed to the destruction of his faith.

Darwin's theory of evolution had alerted him to the idea that the world was not as comfortable as he had been brought up to believe. But that remained a theory. At the end of his first sketch in 1842, Darwin had written, 'From death, famine, rapine, and the concealed war of nature we can see that the highest good, which we can conceive, the creation of the higher animals has directly come.'[5] The key question was this: did that 'highest good' justify 'the concealed war of nature'? Darwin's tentative answer, at least in 1842, was 'yes'. There was pain in the world, but there was also a great deal of joy, beauty and grandeur. As he wrote years later,

2 Charles Darwin, Notebook E
3 William Paley, *Natural Theology*, (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 456
4 Letter to Emma Darwin, 19 April 1851
5 Francis Darwin (ed.) *The foundations of The Origin of Species. Two essays written in 1842 and 1844* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909), p.52

> *Some writers indeed are so much impressed with the amount of suffering in the world, that they doubt, if we look to all sentient beings, whether there is more of misery or of happiness;—whether the world as a whole is a good or a bad one. According to my judgment happiness decidedly prevails.*[6]

But that was theory. With Annie's death, suffering moved from being a theory to being horribly, painfully real. By 1851, Darwin's Christian faith was already very weak. He was still a theist, a believer in God, but the distinctively Christian elements of that belief were very thin indeed. Whatever faith remained died with Annie in Malvern.

'A simple muddle'

Darwin remained a 'theist' (properly speaking a deist) for many years, and he became an agnostic in the final years of his life. 'The mind refuses to look at this universe, being what it is, without having been designed', he wrote to his cousin in 1861. 'Yet, where one would most expect design, viz. in the structure of a sentient being, the more I think on the subject, the less I can see proof of design.'[7] 'I am driven to two opposite conclusions', he admitted to Henry Acland.[8] 'My theology is a simple muddle', he told Joseph Hooker.[9]

Where you stand on the question of evolution and God will depend on how you answer the questions: 'How much suffering there is in the world?' What ends (if any) are there in suffering?', and, 'What kind of God do you envisage in the first place?'

He was, nevertheless, insistent that it was entirely possible to remain a believer and an evolutionist. 'It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist', he wrote to the sceptic John Fordyce a few years before he died.[10]

Learning from Darwin: The basis of belief

What can we learn from Darwin's test of faith? There are a number of things that could be said, but two areas stand out as particularly interesting.

The first relates to the kind of faith Darwin had in his early years. This faith was, as we have seen, rational and scientific. It was based on observation of the natural world rather than the Bible. Perhaps most significantly, it ignored personal experience altogether.

There were two problems with this. First, the 'nature study' of Darwin's early years was of a very particular kind. It saw the world through the eyes of comfortable, establishment clergymen who read into nature what they expected from it. When nature turned out to be not quite as ordered or happy as was assumed, Darwin's Christianity, based on these foundations, began to topple.

Second, the way in which Darwin discounted experience from having any importance in religious faith was always going to make serious faith difficult for him. His wife Emma, a devout and thoughtful Christian, realized this and wrote to him several times on the subject when they were first married.

> *May not the habit in scientific pursuits of believing nothing till it is proved, influence your mind too much in other things which cannot be proved in the same way, & which if true are likely to be above our comprehension.*[11]

It was perfectly legitimate to ask for evidence for religious faith. But Darwin, Emma, recognized, didn't want evidence. He wanted proof. And religion was simply too vast, too complex, too personal a subject to be proved.

To his credit, Darwin realized this. Years later he recalled in his autobiography how he had 'often invent[ed] day-dreams of old letters between distinguished Romans and manuscripts being discovered at Pompeii or elsewhere which confirmed in the most striking manner all that was written in the Gospels'. 'But,' he continued, 'I found it more and more difficult, with free scope given to my imagination, to invent evidence which would suffice to convince me.'[12] No evidence could be good enough. Religion was, by definition, false.

The first lesson from Darwin, therefore, relates to that on which we choose to base our religious faith. What constitutes evidence? Nature? Holy books? Experience? There is no easy answer to this question, but Darwin's story suggests that if we discount experience, or if we demand from history the same kind of evidence we get from biology, or if we base everything on nature alone, we are, by definition, going to be disappointed.

Learning from Darwin: Living with suffering

The second area to explore is linked to the first and relates to the way in which Darwin lost his faith. It was not so much the science of evolution that destroyed Darwin's faith (as we have seen, Darwin was adamant that you could be both a sincere believer and a serious evolutionist). It was the morality of evolution.

As we have seen, the world of Darwin's orthodox Christianity had been a happy, smiling one. The world of evolution was not. Nothing he had lived through, least of all his faith, had prepared him for the shock of a more brutal world.

Darwin tried to come to terms with this new vision of the world and, in some ways, he succeeded. He argued that maybe the grandeur of life, 'the highest good, which we can conceive, the creation of the higher animals' was enough to justify the suffering involved in evolution. Maybe life was worth it.

His thinking on the subject serves to remind us that it is not simply the case that suffering exists, end of (God's) story. Where you stand on the question of evolution and God will depend on how you answer the questions: 'How much suffering there is in the world?' What ends (if any) are there in suffering?', and, 'What kind of God do you envisage in the first place?' And however

6 Charles Darwin, *The autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809-1882* (London: Collins, 1958; repr. Penguin, 2002), p. 88
7 Letter to Frances Wedgwood, 11 July 1861
8 Letter to Henry Acland, 8 December 1865
9 Letter to Joseph Hooker, 12 July 1870
10 Letter to John Fordyce, 7 May 1879
11 Letter to Charles Darwin, c. February 1839
12 Darwin, *Autobiography*, p. 85-96

you answer these questions, you cannot decide them based on rationality alone.

Darwin may have thought that the balance weighed in favour of happiness over suffering, but that was not enough. Once he had lived through Annie's painful death, he could not reconcile the reality of suffering with his understanding of God.

Given the nature of the Christianity with which he grew up, that decision should not surprise us. The 'happy world' had little room for suffering, which offended its sense of order and harmony. More importantly, it offered no resources for dealing with pain and suffering.

The question of suffering is perhaps the most serious challenge to a Christian God. There are answers, but they must be tentative and humble. More importantly, they must start at the heart of the Christian faith, the cross.

The first Christians had seen people crucified. They realized how nasty the cross was. 'The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing', wrote Paul. Crucifixion was a scandalous form of execution for anyone, let alone someone who claimed to be the Messiah.[13]

13 1 Corinthians 1:18

But the first Christians also recognized that the cross spoke profoundly to the question of suffering and redemption. 'But to us who are being saved it is the power of God,' Paul went on to say. The cross revealed a God who was not aloof and detached but who was personal and immanent, present in moments of deepest loss. In so far as Christian thinking has anything to say about suffering, it begins with the cross.

Darwin's own theology never stood anywhere near the cross, even during his orthodox years. The church, and the theology into which he grew, never prepared or equipped him for suffering.

To be sure, a loss like the one Darwin experienced at Easter 1851 could destroy even the most cross-centred faith. But his largely Christ-less Christianity, of a secure, happy, natural order, offered no defence at all.

Overall, Darwin's religious journey was very much of its time. Darwin was a nineteenth-century man whose life and mind were shaped by nineteenth-century pressures. Yet his loss of faith and the reasons for this loss can still speak to us powerfully today.

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