

FROM BELIEF TO UNBELIEF—AND HALFWAY BACK

by *Michael Ruse*

Abstract. Through autobiography, I explain why I cannot accept conventional Christianity or any other form of religious belief. I sketch how, through modern evolutionary theory, I try to find an alternative world-picture, one which is, however, essentially agnostic about ultimate meanings. I characterize my position as being that of “David Hume brought up-to-date by Charles Darwin.” I express sad skepticism about ever realizing the hopes on which *Zygon* was founded.

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I was born in England, early in the Second World War, on June 21, 1940. My father was very left-wing and was a conscientious objector. He thus fell naturally among the Quakers, and by the time I came to reasoned awareness he and my mother had themselves joined the Society of Friends. This was terribly important to them both, at the spiritual level and as a mark of the fact that (my father left school at fourteen) they were moving up into middle-class intellectual circles. Thus, I grew up in a household for which religion was an all-important factor, although in no sense oppressive. Socially, the case was made complete when, in my teens, my father got a job at one Quaker boarding school and I was sent to another.

Yet, by the time I was twenty-two, the age at which I emigrated to Canada, my faith had fallen into virtual nonbeing. In part this was exposure to the cult of Rudolph Steiner, an import into our family when my mother died and my father married again, to a German woman whose family was deep into anthroposophy and the Christian Community (respectively, the philosophy and the Church based on Steiner’s teachings). Apart from the English prejudice

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against things German, Steiner's views struck me then—as they still strike me—as being just this side of certifiable. More than that, I found deeply offensive—as I still do—the way in which his followers gave themselves so absolutely and uncritically to his teachings. Perhaps I have an unresolved Oedipus complex (I do not say this entirely facetiously), but I have never been able to handle discipleship—Dr. Steiner, Jesus Christ, or Michael Ruse.

In part, my unbelief came more positively, for I had discovered philosophy. At university, literally on my first day in the subject, I realized that this was the only discipline for me. I may be odd, but I am not alone! People other than myself wonder if they are awake or asleep, and if objects exist when they are not looking at them. Gradually but firmly the skepticism of the empiricists did their work. John Stuart Mill, a man of transcendent moral worth, so obviously good, was a great influence. The problem of evil, especially, seemed insurmountable.

Paradoxically, however, I am sure that my Quaker background prepared me for philosophy and its cleansing actions, for from a tender age I had been used to argument rather than faith. No doubt this unique version of Christianity which has no creed or ritual or any of the other paraphernalia associated with most religions made the slide to skepticism and atheism fairly easy. Although, unlike many of my friends, neither then nor now did/do I develop a passionate hatred of Christianity. Rationally, I see much that is wrong; but, I still have a strong emotional pull toward belief. Quite apart from the fact that I have an equally strong urge toward salvation and eternal life, the thought of nonbeing terrifies me.

It is probably because I do have an intensely religious nature—using this term in a secular sense, as one might apply it to other nonbelievers like Thomas Henry Huxley—that I was attracted toward evolution. Speaking in an entirely secular manner, I do not believe that people come to evolution by chance. From Herbert Spencer (1892) to Edward O. Wilson (1978), it has functioned as a kind of *Weltanschauung*, a world picture which gives meaning to life. It is something that acts as a foundation for the big questions which we humans face. Yet, in those early years, this was not apparent to me—at least, it was not a matter of great interest to me. Evolution was rather a source of technical problems in the history and philosophy of science.

And things continued this way for me, through the writing of a basic text, *The Philosophy of Biology* (1973) (essentially, the philosophy of evolutionary biology), and an equally basic history *The Darwinian Revolution* (1979a). Things started to change only around 1980, with

the rise of the creationist movement and the subsequent controversy. There is a side to me which regrets the sheltered and sedentary life of the academic—in another incarnation I would like to be a fireman or a brain surgeon. For this reason, I was drawn happily into the dispute, debating creationists, penning fiery polemics, and at the climax appearing for the ACLU in Arkansas against the creationist law that that state had adopted. (See my *But Is It Science? The Philosophical Question in the Creation/Evolution Controversy* (1988a) for full details.)

At the same time there was, for me, a growing moral dimension to the struggle. Individually, I have rather liked the creationists I have met—I certainly admire their dedication. But I think there to be something deeply wrong with their position. It represents an abrogation of our power of reason, and were I a Christian I would find grossly heretical this spurning of God's greatest gift to us humans. It cannot be God's will that we should spend our lives, ostrichlike, with our heads stuck in the comforting but arid sands of Genesis taken absolutely literally. The discovery of evolution is a wonderful testament to the strength of the human intellect and a knockdown proof that we are more than just hairless primates. Fighting creationists, therefore, spelled the satisfaction of a long-held moral need. As a Quaker, I had grown up issue-oriented—the evils of nuclear weapons, of homosexual repression, of capital punishment—and this was just such an issue calling for action. (Around this time, although it was not published until somewhat later, I wrote a book on homosexuality, primarily because I thought my fellow philosophers were ignoring—generally too scared—to examine some of the issues around the phenomenon. [See my *Homosexuality: A Philosophical Analysis* (1988b)].)

I do not know if it was my plunging into the creationist controversy which, unaided, led to a midlife crisis. Perhaps, entering my mid-forties, my concerns were more a function of biology. Although I would not discount the fact that I had just entered into a relationship with my present wife—a source of intense joy that brought a personal peace I had not known since my mother died—but about ten years ago, increasingly, I felt the need to rise above the purely technical and to formulate and express a personal philosophy of my own. I knew (what proved to be true) that this would bring sneers from one segment of professional philosophy; but if a full professor with tenure cannot do what he or she thinks important, who can?!

Having grown up in England, I had never regarded attempts to put human nature on a biological basis as something morally offensive or a reactionary move by crypto-fascists. There can be no

surprise, therefore, that in the 1970s I had been much impressed by the work of the so-called sociobiologists, students of the evolution of social behavior. (Another book! *Sociobiology: Sense or Nonsense?* [1979b]) Especially significant to me were the attempts of the sociobiologists to bring our knowledge of Darwinian biology to bear on human nature. When I came to formulate my own life picture, this forward-looking branch of science seemed therefore to be the right place to start.

Above all, dealing with creationists had convinced me that it simply and absolutely has to matter that we humans are the end-products of a long, slow process of evolution rather than the creation, in His image, of a Good God, on the Sixth Day. Yet while I have never felt contempt for mainstream Christianity, secular humanism has always sent shivers of embarrassment down my philosophical spine. And no version more so than the evolutionary version. Even as a schoolboy, Julian Huxley, who would bray on pompously every Sunday afternoon on a popular television show (the “Brainstrust”), had failed to impress. In any case, does not every beginning philosophy student learn that the cardinal sin is to believe that one can derive morality from brute nature, evolutionary or no? There are certain moves almost unclean in their falsity, and at the top of the list comes the “naturalistic fallacy” generated when one tries to go from Darwinism to duty (Moore 1903).

The prospects for an evolution-based philosophy of life did not seem promising. Fortunately, however, I was not alone in my quest. Other people were also looking for ways to bring the biology of human nature to bear fruitfully on the great problems of philosophy: epistemology—What do I know?—and ethics—What should I do? (Particularly influential were the writings of the philosopher, the late John Mackie [1978, 1979]. Also Murphy [1982].)

We who were searching in this manner realized that the mistake of the traditional humanist is to believe that biology can offer a justification in the way attempted by Plato’s Forms or Descartes’s God. In that direction lies nothing but fallacy. True insight comes only after one appreciates that, once one has made a commitment to naturalism, the call for justification is itself mistaken. One must rather be a philosophical skeptic—not in the sense of denying knowledge or morality, but in the sense of denying the usual foundations.

It is this philosophy that I expressed in my most intensely personal book, *Taking Darwin Seriously* (1986b), written in the mid-1980s. I argued that the key to philosophical insight lies in knowing we humans are the product of the natural process of evolution fueled

by natural selection. Most significant is the consequence that our thinking is constrained by innate dispositions to reason and to believe in certain ways—constraints rooted in their adaptive advantage to our ancestors.

In epistemology, this insight led me to adopt a form of pragmatism, endorsing a coherence theory of truth rather than a correspondence theory. There is no mind-independent anchor for belief. It is rather all a matter of getting things, as we know them, to hang together. We can do no more than try for consistency of the evidence of our senses, without hoping for insight into some Absolute behind and underlying what we can experience or construct through theory. Critics would say this means that one is pitch-forked into idealism; but while I would certainly deny “metaphysical realism” (where one believes that trees in the forest fall and make a sound, even when no one is around), I prefer to say one can still be a realist of a “commonsense” kind. One is still faced with the success of prediction and the threat of anomaly, neither of which would seem very likely if everything were simply the product of a dream or a self-induced internal picture-show. (Apart from *Taking Darwin Seriously*, you might look at some of the essays in *The Darwinian Paradigm: Essays on Its History, Philosophy and Religious Implications* [1989]. Especially important is the essay “Is Rape Wrong on Andromeda?”)

In ethics, this insight about the mistaken search for justification led to an analogous position. I would deny that there are any ultimate, mind-independent moral facts—or, at least, I would deny that we can ever know such facts or that they influence the way we think morally (a consequence which I take to be a refutation of moral facts as generally understood). This does not mean there is no morality or that might is right or some such thing. I think the sociobiologists are absolutely correct in arguing that human relations demand some kind of reciprocation. Human nature is not purely nature red in tooth and claw. (See especially two *Zygon* articles, “Evolutionary Ethics: A Phoenix Arisen” [1986a] and “Darwinism and Determinism” [1987]. Also look at the more historically oriented essay “Evolutionary Ethics and the Search for Predecessors” [1990].)

Because of the need for reciprocation, my position does not plunge one into the dreadful moral relativism that students seem to imbibe from introductory sociology courses. We are all humans with a common evolutionary history, and moral capacities are like speech capacities—unless there is a basic sharing and uniformity, the adaptation will not work. Of course, there are different languages as there are different moral systems, but in both cases there is a shared “deep structure.”

I like to describe my position as “David Hume brought up-to-date by Charles Darwin,” and I think this is correct both in intent and execution. I am Humean also in that, for me, it is the dog of ethics which wags the tail of epistemology. The former is my real passion, and indeed I would like at some point to write a book just on ethics, developing some of my ideas and exploring consequences. But my schedule in recent years has been slowed significantly by the writing of a massive work, only now nearing completion, on the history of the relationship between the scientific idea of evolution and the cultural notion of progress.

I think and hope this study will prove to be my major contribution to scholarship, but I do not write it just for its intrinsic interest. Probably the strongest challenge which has come in recent years to traditional philosophy of science—the philosophy that sees science as the triumph of reason’s move to knowledge of reality—has been that of the “social constructivists,” who argue there is no such thing as objectivity, even in science, and that all is just a creation of cultural norms and desires. (For an excellent example of this philosophy in action, embedded in an absolutely first-class history of science, see Adrian Desmond’s *The Politics of Evolution* [1989].)

If this be so, and if the thesis applies to biology—as many believe it does—then any naturalistic philosophy such as mine, depending so crucially on the findings of biologists, seems doomed to that very subjectivity I try to escape in ethics (and epistemology also). Through a detailed and technical case-study, I think I can show—and think I will show—that although there is undoubted truth in the social constructivists’ position, it is so far from fatal to my philosophy that, properly understood, it confirms it. As a coherent theorist, one can have one’s truth and ride with the values also.

In order to understand my position on this issue, one must distinguish between “epistemic values” and “nonepistemic values.” The former are those generally considered truth-preserving, like consistency, simplicity, and unificatory and predictive powers. The latter are cultural values, like cherishing or denigrating women or blacks (Mc Mullin 1983). At first, about twenty-five years ago, I thought—with most other people—that epistemic values are important in science, that nonepistemic values are unimportant and generally nonexistent, and that this is not a very exciting issue. Basically, the hard-line distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification separates out the epistemic wheat from the nonepistemic chaff.

Then, thanks particularly to the sociobiology controversy, I realized that nonepistemic values are much more significant and

pervasive than I thought. I inclined toward a position, articulated by the philosopher/priest Ernan Mc Mullin (1983), that although nonepistemic values figure large in immature science, as time progresses and more facts come in, the epistemic values start to expel the nonepistemic values. Most recently, much influenced by work on metaphor—especially by the claim that metaphors incorporate nonepistemic values and that one can never say completely literally what one says metaphorically—and by the realization that science is inherently metaphorical, I have come to feel that even the most mature of sciences contain nonepistemic values that cannot be eliminated. Indeed, I would argue that such values are a crucial part of any heuristically fertile/predictively active science. (The crucial work on metaphor is *Metaphors We Live By* [Lakoff and Johnson 1980]. See also George Lakoff's *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things* [1989].)

I would argue, however, that the epistemic values continue to be no less important than before and that, through their satisfaction, one can still hope for progress toward truth of a coherence kind. One has all of the objectivity—at least, flight from subjectivity—that one needs. In crucial respects, I believe my thinking is close to that of Mary Hesse. (See especially her lectures, given jointly with the computer scientist Michael Arbib [1986]). I have certainly been influenced by her, as well as by Hilary Putnam's [1981] thoughts on “internal realism”—what I prefer to call “commonsense realism.”)

Enough of my work and hopes. What of religion? It still seems to me that all of my earlier worries about traditional religion, even the nicest varieties, continue to cut as deeply as ever. The problem of evil is the most troubling of all. Frankly the free-will defense seems to me just not to wash, logically. If God be all-powerful, why did He not simply make us to do good freely? Far worse than the logic, however, is the dreadful implication of the free-will defense. God, this all-loving father, is prepared to let small children suffer in agony to satisfy the freedom of monsters like Hitler. As one of the Brothers Karamazov says, I simply do not want salvation at that price. How can one enjoy eternity, if it be bought by the blood of innocents?

Some of the problems of Christianity strike me as being so blatantly rational-belief-destroying that there is almost a sense of farce in seeing its devotees trying to wriggle from under them. Chief among these is the problem of explaining how somebody's death two thousand years ago can wash away my sins. When you combine this with the doctrine of the Trinity and the implication that the sacrificial lamb is God Himself (or Itself) and that this therefore makes things

all right with this self-same God, the rational mind boggles. Nor am I myself swayed by the Kierkegaardian suggestion that it is precisely because Christian belief is irrational that it is it made meaningful through a “leap of faith”—although I say, with some admiration, that that seems to me to be a pretty neat theological gambit.

Additionally, making belief difficult, there are the problems which have arisen as humans have simply learned more about their world. A good example here is the issue of anthropocentrism: How is it that I am so lucky, Western-born, to hit on just the uniquely true religion of Christianity? It seems to me just plain daft (or dishonest) to say that one can find a compromise position, ecumenically blending all of the insights of all religions. For a start, either Jesus Christ was truly the son of God, or he was not. If he was, then Christianity is true and Judaism and Islam are false. If he was not, then Christianity is false.

Backing all of these worries is the fact that religion tends not to be value-neutral. Christianity is paradigmatic in this respect, with the anti-Semitism, the homophobia, the twisted stand on women. Of course, as is traditionally done in these cases, you can put all of the blame on Saint Paul. But this just raises the question of why God put such a burden on such a broken vessel. Did God just not care about the evil effects that this man would have? How many twisted lives have been produced, even to this day, by the Roman Catholic Church’s stand on celibacy? With Mill I say that if there be such a God as is cherished by the multitude, then to hell will I gladly go.

Yet today I can be no atheist, if by this is meant that I deny absolutely that the world has ultimate meaning or that we humans have a significant role to play. I am truly agnostic—a skeptic—here. It seems to me most of the basic questions of metaphysics remain unsolved—ultimate origins, body/mind, human/independent reality, and the like. Moreover, without wanting to end the questioning, it is by no means obvious to me that we humans—primates with adaptations to get out of the jungle—will ever have the tools to solve them. As proto-humans, we needed ethics, not a solution to the problem of induction. I think it very naive to think our logic and our mathematics and our science is all that there is or all that there could be—although there are good biological reasons why we would think them unique and totally binding. (I am therefore an intergalactic relativist, even if I am not a relativist about relations between humans. Recently, I have been interested to find that the great British biologist J. B. S. Haldane speculated in ways akin to mine. [See especially Haldane 1927].)

Perhaps therefore there are worlds of rationality beyond ours and perhaps I shall enjoy eternal life after all—something I imagine as being in a state of perpetual climax, with lots of fish and chips on

the side and no exam papers to mark. Although, of course, this has to be a joke because my whole point is that beyond skepticism has to be the unknowable—not the knowable-but-as-yet-unknown. Which, of course, starts to raise all sorts of questions about personal identity and how one could ever know the unknowable, even beyond the grave. Apart from finding the idea attractive, I am doubly suspicious.

My own personal beliefs aside, what of the kinds of sentiments to be found in the “Statement of Perspectives” appearing at the masthead of *Zygon*? I have a feeling that by now people may be wanting to cut off my buttons and break my sword, forever banning me from Star Island. I have a lot of trouble talking about the “received wisdom” of anything. Although I am not a scientist, I am a naturalist and enough of a Popperian to want to knock down anything with pretensions to wisdom—including, I rush to add, myself and my own ideas. In any case, as you must by now realize, I have a deeply ambivalent attitude toward religion. It has given me much, and I can certainly see how it has added immeasurably to our culture and to good things in human society. On the other hand, I think (in the sense discussed above) that many of its major claims are false, and one would have to be blind to miss the fact that many (perhaps most) of life’s major conflicts have, all too depressingly often, a significant religious element.

And if this were not enough, I have a loathing of attempts to meld science and religion which entail the trimming of religion in such a way that it fits with science, but at the cost of gelding it of real content and mystery—attempts which include the traditional varieties of evolutionary humanism, based all too often on so-called “noble lies” or just plain bad arguments. A religion which is essentially Rotary on Sundays is not for me. This is part of my paradox, or schizophrenia. If I am to have a religion, something which part of me does want, I want it to be a genuine religion.

As a not-entirely-irrelevant aside, let me mention that although mine was a Quaker school, it was in York, literally a stone’s throw from the Minster. We were encouraged to go to choral performances, and I have grown up with a great love for the major works in the repertoire, most particularly the Bach *Passions*. Listening to these can produce almost a mystical experience. Is it strange to say that, at such times, our human desires seem supremely unimportant, just at the very moment that these most Christian of works are affirming a belief in the Creator? For me, for a few moments, Bach and Mozart make the existence of a God and of eternal life unimportant. Even if God does not exist, we have won. Even though winning is not the name of the game.

Yet, quite apart from my own religious concerns, which may be agnostic but are not nonexistent, I am at one with Edward O. Wilson (1978) in thinking that religion is very much part of the human condition. It is part of our biology and will not go away with just a little clear thinking along lines shown by David Hume in his *Dialogues*. I do not think we can ignore religion, nor can we easily dismiss it. It is for this reason that I want to engage with people like the editor of *Zygon*, even though I think him wrong—and he *knows* that I am wrong!

I fear—and let me be honest here, rather than tactful—that this engagement may prove a fruitless task. In a sense, I am profoundly pessimistic about human nature and its future. I cannot believe that before the passage of (say) ten thousand years—a mere blink in evolutionary terms—we will not have destroyed ourselves with nuclear weapons. And I am almost sure that religion will be a contributing factor.

Yet by nature I am an optimist, and I cannot just sit by and do nothing. If we talk about these things, we may not find a way forward. If we do not talk about them, we will not find a way forward. It seems to me that so many of our problems, driven by religion or otherwise, stem from the fact that we humans have (to quote Wilson, and Teilhard de Chardin before him) twenty-first century technology and Stone Age emotions. Perhaps the first step out of this dilemma is by looking fearlessly, as best we can, at our science and our religion and all else, without prejudice—at least as much without prejudice as is possible for us poor mortals in this vale of tears.

In a famous passage, David Hume (1978) remarked that philosophy leads to skepticism and doubt and fears, but that the emotions—a good game of backgammon with friends—rescue one. I am sensitive to the charge that I may just be exemplifying the philosophy to which I subscribe. I can only say that as an agnostic and a skeptic—but also as one who cares desperately about these matters—I try to remain open to proof that my philosophy is wrong. Or if not wrong, lays itself open to augmentation by the insights of religion.

Many who have influenced me, people who respect and admire science as much as I do—most particularly Mc Mullin, Hesse, and Putnam—have religious faith. I myself doubt that we can ever meaningfully augment science with religion, or conversely. But then, I used to doubt that evolution can provide the basis of an adequate philosophical approach to the problems of philosophy. So, who knows?

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