

RESPONSE TO MY CRITICS

by Michael Ruse

Abstract. My critics make serious and sensible points, all of which are undoubtedly true but not all of which I feel that I can accept.

Keywords: Darwin; design; natural selection; teleology.

In the book symposium of which my latest book was the subject, the organizer, Bill Stone, approached his task by setting *Darwin and Design* in the context of earlier books that I have written and seeing a continuity and development of my thinking. Because of this I now see *Darwin and Design* as the third part of an (unplanned) trilogy, beginning with *Monad to Man: The Concept of Progress in Evolutionary Biology* (Ruse 1996), continuing with *Mystery of Mysteries: Is Evolution a Social Construction?* (Ruse 1999), and now finishing with this work (Ruse in press). This is the result of a long-term project, going back over fifteen years, in which I have been trying to assess the nature of values in science, and in particular the extent to which evolutionary biology, Darwinian evolutionary biology specifically, is a reflection of the culture in which it was and is produced and the extent to which such biology is a true and disinterested account of actual physical reality.

To quote the preface of this new work:

In *Monad to Man*, I followed the symbiotic relationship between evolutionary ideas and the cultural concept of progress. I wanted to see why so many have been attracted to evolutionary thinking, and also to see why, even to this day, so many find the whole mode of evolutionary thought—especially that centering on Darwinism—disturbing if not outrightly upsetting. In *Mystery of Mysteries*, rather reversing the approach, I used evolution's history to throw light on the much-discussed question about whether science is an objective reflection of disinterested

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reality or merely a subjective epiphenomenon on culture, a “social construction.” Now, here, in *Darwin and Design* I go back to the beginnings of Western civilization and look at a powerful mode of thinking—“teleological” thinking—that has traditionally been thought to have important implications, not just for our understanding of the world we inhabit, but also for the supposedly higher verities about the existence of a creator, a deity. Darwinism is generally believed to have disturbed if not destroyed this traditional mode of thought, and my aim is to see if there is indeed truth in this general belief. As in the earlier books, I hope that my findings will be of interest in themselves and, at a more abstract level, throw light on the overall relations between science and culture. (Ruse in press)

I hope I have been successful in what I have set out to do. I will say that I have had tremendous fun (and anxiety!) as I have worked on this project, and if I am to be judged by any one project, it is by this now nearly completed trilogy. (I have also written a more popular book for the high school student or young undergraduate: *The Evolution Wars* [Ruse 2001b]). I think it is true to say that, as I have worked down through the years, I have become more sensitive and sympathetic to issues on the science-religion interface, and this is reflected in the topics I consider worth discussing. It is really not chance that the trilogy comes to an end with some thoughts on the proper direction to be taken by anyone who is a believer both in the transcendent and in the power and worth of science. My many conversations and friendly quarrels over the years with Philip Hefner have much influenced my thinking—not so much the content, but the conviction that these are topics worth discussing even by (especially by) one such as myself who am a total skeptic about any and all of the big questions of religion (a skeptic, meaning that I simply do not know, not an atheist, meaning that I do not believe).

Michael Cavanaugh (2002) begins by praising me but then confesses that he has “reservations”! I think quite frankly that he is trying to push me into a position that I want to explicitly reject. I see natural theology as having taken an understandable but wrong turn after Darwin and the *Origin*. For the traditional natural theologian, like Archdeacon Paley, the proof of God came from the teleology of the organism, adaptations like the eye and the hand. Darwin shot the bottom out of this by showing that blind law can explain adaptation without the help of God. So natural theologians regrouped and tried again, this time—agreeing that evolution made the problem—making evolution itself part of the solution! In particular, the supposed progress of evolution from blobs up to humans was seen as something with a meaning, or more precisely a *meaning*. The teleology that proves God was seen in the upward rise of life from nothing to us. This position is still popular today in science-religion circles, as is shown by the ongoing enthusiasm for the thinking of archprogressionist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. It is the position that Cavanaugh would push me toward. But I think it is just not on. On the one hand, there is no reason to believe that the course of life’s history is progressive. I am not

generally an enthusiast for the thinking of Stephen Jay Gould, but I think in this (as expressed in his *Wonderful Life* [1989]) he is right. Evolution is a slow process, going nowhere. On the other hand, as I shall explain in a moment, I do not much care for the theological implications of progressionism. I do not believe that the world offers us proofs. Darwin closed that door. More than this, I do not like the idea of then thinking that science gives us an “affirmation of religion,” modern or otherwise. Which religion, for starters? Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism? And if you chose Christianity, in what possible sense can one say that science—Darwinism in particular—gives us an affirmation of transubstantiation, or justification by grace, or eternal salvation? You may believe any or all of these things, but not thanks to science.

I am not sure that Ward Goodenough and I have any real disagreements. He writes,

The idea that humans are the product of a godly Designer’s intention to develop something that will in time itself achieve godliness is akin to believing that we as individuals can achieve immortality, if not in the flesh, at least in spirit. It may be comforting to believe this, but everything we learn from science about our universe and ourselves in it points otherwise. For me, a challenging spiritual exercise is to come to terms with the transience of all things, including ourselves as individuals and as a species.” (Goodenough 2002, 449)

Basically, this is my position, although I would perhaps say rather than “points otherwise” that science tells us that the old ways (of comforting miracles and the like) are false and that science offers no definite proof of anything else. Whether science actually points away from belief entirely seems to me another matter. I will not conceal that, nonbeliever though I may be, I am much attracted to the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and others that simply refuses to look to nature for proof and support of belief. One has got to kill off natural theology. But then, with Wolfhart Pannenberg, I believe that this opens the way for a theology of nature, in which faith and belief are illuminated and made real by nature. The butterfly on the wing does not prove God, but for those who accept God the butterfly makes fuller and more rewarding one’s faith. (In *Can a Darwinian Be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion* [Ruse 2001a] I speak more to these issues, trying to show that Darwinism may cut off the old, natural theology but does not necessarily refute the new theology of nature. One may indeed find it all a rather liberating experience.)

I end *Darwin and Design* by quoting from the 1951 Gifford Lectures of Canon Charles Raven. He was no lover of Darwinism, but he was a keen naturalist as well as an Anglican priest, and he knew whereof I write. To quote myself yet again,

[Raven] wrote of how much time he had spent and the sheer pleasure he had derived from following and studying butterflies all over England and Scotland. “Every specimen differed from the rest, in detail from those of its own group, in

total effect from those of others. Each was in itself a perfect design, satisfying in whole and parts, inviting one to concentrate one's whole attention upon it. To move from one to another, to sense the difference of impact, to work out the quality of this difference in the detailed modifications of the general pattern, this was a profoundly moving experience." For Raven, this was the real edge of the science/religion encounter. This is what makes it all meaningful to the Believer. Not proof, but simply flooding, overwhelming experience, that could not be denied. "Here is beauty—whatever the philosophers and art critics who have never looked at a moth may say—beauty that rejoices and humbles, beauty remote from all that is meant by words like random or purposeless, utilitarian or materialistic, beauty in its impact and effects akin to the authentic encounter with God." (Ruse in press)

"Beauty that rejoices and humbles." I have nothing to add to this.

NOTE

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