

Trinity College Sermon, Sunday 19 October 2008

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Does Darwin lead us to the abyss?

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations?

Tell me, since you are so well-informed!

Who decided its dimensions, do you know? Job 38: 4-5

On Wednesday, May 13, 1942 a middle-aged German, who at one time had thought of becoming a priest, wrote in his diary:

“One might well ask why are there any Jews in the world order? That would be exactly like asking why there are potato bugs. Nature is dominated by the law of struggle. There will always be parasites who will spur the struggle on and intensify the process of selection between the strong and weak. The principle of struggle also dominates human life. One merely needs to know the laws of this struggle to be able to face it ... In nature, life always takes measures against parasites; in the life of nations that is not always the case. It is from this fact that the Jewish peril actually stems. There is therefore no other recourse for modern nations than to exterminate the Jew ...”¹

The identity of the author who penned this malign and diabolic passage is probably self-evident, and it surely verges on calumny if I now remind you what another man of very much the same age wrote

some ninety years earlier, but now in the cloistered calm of southern England.

“to my imagination it is far more satisfactory to look at such instincts as the young cuckoo ejecting its foster-brothers, - ants making slaves, - the larvae of ichneumonidae feeding within the live bodies of caterpillars, - not as specially endowed or created instincts, but as small consequences of one general law, leading to the advancements of all organic beings, namely multiply, vary, let the strongest live and the weakest die”².

No mention of potato bugs here and all in all an almost rosy picture, especially when elsewhere this individual wrote of this process “that no fear is felt, that death is generally prompt, the healthy and the happy survive and multiply”³.

To equate Charles Darwin with Josef Goebbels is indeed to libel the former and exonerate the latter. Yet as at least scientists (whose grasp on reality can sometimes be decidedly shaky) may forget---- although the ranting and vicious Goebbels never did---- words have power. And words like “struggle”, “selection”, “strong” and “weak” that may flow across the pages of a gentle Darwin can as readily ooze from pens that drip venom. Darwin himself was adamant that what he saw in the natural world need bear no application to the human condition, yet with his recognition that the exquisite watch, against which Paley’s foot had stumbled, came from an artificer who was blind as a bat – and probably deaf as a coot –, so our world changed forever.

And maybe those malign forces are not so easy to banish. Thus the biologist Michael Ghiselin writes:

“The evolution of society fits the Darwinian paradigm in its most individualistic form. The economy of nature is competitive from beginning to end ... No hint of genuine charity ameliorates our vision of society, once sentimentalism has been laid aside ... given a full chance to act in his own interest, nothing but expediency will restrain him from brutalizing, from maiming, from murdering – his brother, his mate, his parent, or his child. Scratch an ‘altruist’ and watch a ‘hypocrite’ bleed”⁴.

This extraordinary passage is briskly dismissed by the philosopher Mary Midgely: As she writes “this claim is essentially pure fantasy, not only unsupported by the empirical facts which are supposed to be its grounds, but actually contrary to them, such as they are”⁵. Indeed, subsequently she uses that useful word “bogus”⁶, but also muses “is this a quite exceptional aberration?”⁷. If only it was.

Fundamentalists now stalk the world. You’ll know the type: rich in rectitude, lacking self-doubt, ever anxious to proselytize, simplistic, ignorant, moving across a one-dimensional landscape, and curiously humourless. But at least ironically they show a rich diversity of positions. Consider the recent and scandalous activities of atheist fundamentalists in the Royal Society and their witch-hunt against Michael Reiss whose unexceptional comments on the challenge of “Intelligent Design” were deemed to be, well, *–verboten*.

The irony that Michael Reiss was charged with education may have passed these individuals by, and it seems all the more peculiar that Darwin's formulation has led to a continuous maelstrom. Nice Mr Darwin? Pottering down the sandwalk, playing a bassoon to his earthworms? Surely not! Consider the words of Graham Swift in his novel *Ever After*, a Darwinian plot involving the doomed Victorian Matthew Pearce entwined in more recent shenanigans worthy of David Lodge. As his ultimately pathetic modern, Bill Unwin murmurs:

“I have dipped into Darwin. It's heavy going. The prose thick, gray, and formidable. It is hard to see in this sober stodge the bombshell that tore apart Matthew's life and horrified Victorian society”⁸. Swift's anti-hero continues “The frontispiece of my copy of *The Origin of Species* ... shows a brooding, oracular figure, all flowing beard and thought-furrowed brow, seated on a rickety wicker chair. He looks like the original Hoary Sage. He looks a miserable old codger. So did he want fame? Was it important, after all, that it was his name on the bombshell? He always maintained that he worked only for the elucidation of truth [But] Did he reflect on the desirability of [its] elucidation? ... On the big question, the God question, he seems to have maintained – this one-time candidate for orders – a careful reticence, a curiously bland open-mindedness, an obtuse bewilderment. Reading Darwin, you sometimes get the feeling that the man was – dim”⁹.

Darwin's immense intellectual capacities were, after years of honing, razor sharp in some directions, but woefully blunt in others. I

wonder if he really understood the force of Adam Sedgwick's point, in the passage we have just heard

“we are point-blank at issue. There is a moral or metaphysical part of nature as well as a physical ... You have ignored this link [indeed] you have done your best in one or two pregnant cases to break it. Were it possible ... to break it, humanity ... would suffer a damage that might brutalize it, and sink the human race into a lower grade of degradation than any into which it has fallen since its written records”¹⁰ began.

Sedgwick, who was of course a Fellow of this College, gave thanks to God that such a prospect was not possible. Belsen tells us otherwise. And there is perhaps no more corrosive line between evolution and Christianity than this problem of evil. One cannot help but notice the strange obtuseness of so many ultra-Darwinists, this odd nebulous optimism that despite the catastrophes of the past all will be well. Sketching a series of utopian horizons, perhaps to be finally realized by genetic manipulation – under the strictest controls, of course; vetted by disinterested and honourable citizens, naturally – linked as often as not to a vague nature pantheism.

A clean, bright and happy future? Uncluttered by any evil, or come to think about it God. History would indicate otherwise, and assuming God is not permanently on vacation, what are we to do about the wrongness that permeates this world. Optimists? Hands up, please! Stoics? Yes, now I see a few limp wrists, but the rest of us have seen too much. Know too much, fear too much. As did Darwin: an eye-witness to slavery and genocide in South America, pole-axed by the death of his

beloved daughter Annie, and in his investigations the frisson of horror as he witnessed the activities of the ichneumon, a leitmotif that is now central to the Darwinian dogma: competition, predation, parasitism and massive waste, all set to a vast backdrop of geological time where ceaseless destruction seemingly occurred beneath strange constellations, where the cries of the dying echoed through uncaring forests, and year by year the skeletons accumulated in what we politely refer to as the fossil record but in reality is a vast charnel house.

A melodramatic description, and it is the strongest card in the hand of the ultra-Darwinians. The old mantra is stuck in its groove “Look” they say – and notice the bright-eye fervour of the true convert – “if God is truly good, how can this be allowed? Well *we* know he doesn’t even exist, but even if he should then as Dostoyevsky insisted the fact remains that the charge sheet against God is complete, irrefutable and closed”. And it has to be admitted that our defense lawyers are in a pickle. The counter-arguments are equally well rehearsed. Here we go. As God only is perfect, so the world cannot be, *well* ... Or, without pain to awaken us (God’s megaphone in the words of C.S. Lewis) and evil to test us, we cannot grow, true enough but will this serve as a general explanation? Or, that a world without fire and water would deny us the comfort of the hearth and the slaking of thirst, but so too spare us from immolation and drowning. And these are just at the top of the charge sheet; when the Grand Inquisitor turns the page our case, already feeble, now collapses. Earlier I mentioned Belsen, and when I extend the list past Treblinka and Mauthausen, to ceaseless wars, starvation and genocide any optimism now vanishes. We live in a world permeated by

radical evil, often resisted to be sure, as often succumbed to, and although regarded as ludicrous by the ultra-Darwinists this is a force that is not only deeply malign, but active and personal, and terrible to tell also attractive.

So let us turn to the creation myths: they surely will at least hint at where we went wrong. Back to Genesis! And at once our ultra-Darwinian friends have much merriment: talking snakes, fig-leaves, even Adam the taxonomist: “my dear, it is all too rich”. But for those who believe that somehow this was the starting point of evil, will I suggest miss the point. It is certainly *our* foundational myth which is why, of course, it has such precise parallels (and anti-parallels) to the Resurrection garden, - where myth became fact. But evil, personified by death and destruction, goes back into the abysses of history. What happened and why is beyond our understanding, but the great rebellion is captured by such as Milton and Tolkien. To use C.S. Lewis’ evocative term this aboriginal disaster is both appalling remote and compelling immediate. Who needs to be reminded about its topicality ----day-by-day---- and its inevitability ----day-by-day. There seems to be no escape: the ichneumon today and for as long as it has ever existed, industriously seeks out its hapless prey. The bureaucrat sighs, poor chap, overworked as ever, hardly time to see his family now, signs European Union order 27/29/denial of holocaust/action/doc. and Tuttle – or was it Buttle is removed from the Pension List at 10:48 am, ... by a bullet in the head.

So the world is meaningless, and let us join the *danse macabre* of the ultra-darwinisti: see how they pirouette! Except ... we are, again to

paraphrase, C.S. Lewis in *Enemy Territory*. The world, alas the Universe, is fundamentally fractured, the Great Rebellion was evidently successful. The Christian view is that this is correct so far as it goes, but we are dealing with unfinished business. At this stage, from long experience, my staff now surge from the Ante-Chapel, deftly snapping open the smelling salts. In best Bloomsbury style the greatest intellects in the Chapel lower their heads, hands to the ears and shake their heads silently, from side to side. “Surely you don’t believe that?”

Well, yes I do. No time to even outline my history – I grant you Christian biologists are rarer than hen’s teeth, indeed only the other day I saw a unicorn crossing Garret Hostel bridge – but to say that for one type of individual the arguments of C.S. Lewis, Dorothy L. Sayers, J.R.R. Tolkien (oh! and Clement, Origen and, well Paul and St John, and by the way Mark) persuade me not only of the historical truth of Christianity but its cosmic significance.

Think on. Yes, the world is irrevocably fractured, yet rather than bowing to the miserific vision, our transient existence can still be transformed by joy. Darwin, like any Ring bearer, became stretched, etiolated, dull to the world, a data processor. What once had been vibrant was now all in shades of gray. Scientists, the discoverers of the unknown, are at special risk. I begin to wonder if the steps to the rostrum at the Nobel ceremony are not flanked by primroses? No matter, if there is a recurrent leitmotif from Jesus himself, to St Francis, to G.K. Chesterton and ourselves it is that the world is fallen, but it is not irredeemably bad. Rumours of heaven are all around us.

Of course, if I stand in a chapel dedicated to the undivided and holy Trinity you would expect, I trust, a dollop of orthodoxy. Unfashionable, I grant you. But if you know an alternative, I'll be glad to hear it. The world is fallen? Beyond dispute. So it is meaningless? I think not. Staggeringly, ludicrously, but as it happens, God himself plays the game to the end. He becomes as one of us. I myself cannot see how the world can work without the Incarnation and the Resurrection. The former is an inference, the latter as historically reliable as anything can be.

A far from fashionable view, I grant you, but supposing it is actually true? Yes, we live in enemy territory, and amongst the curious virtues of Christianity is that it always allows the choice. So you decide, over to you. A meaningless world, at best run by a sadistic maniac?, or a world that is skewed, bent, twisted, perverse but as Gerard Manley Hopkins said so clearly shot through with glory. Science reveals, to be sure, the unknown, but as it ascends the ladder of knowledge it takes perverse pleasure in stepping on the fingers of history. Brilliant insights are as often combined with condescension. But too often it is forgotten that the scientific trajectory is full of risks. Who knows what we will next discover? Maybe more of the same, but if, as I believe, the Resurrection on 5th April, 33AD, was felt across the cosmos, then we may yet be in for one or two surprises.

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¹ Lochner, L.P. (ed.) 1948. *The Goebbels Diaries*. Hamish Hamilton, London. (p. 297).

² Darwin, C. 1860. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, etc.* John Murray, London. (p. 244).

³ Darwin op. cit., p. 79.

⁴ Ghiselin, M.T. 1974. *The Economy of Nature and the Evolution of Sex.* University of California Press, Berkeley. (p. 247). Lest the ellipses be thought to omit more meliorative lines here is the entire quotation: “The evolution of society fits the Darwinian paradigm in its most individualistic form. The economy of nature is competitive from beginning to end. Understand that economy, and how it works, and the underlying reasons for social phenomena are manifest. They are the means by which one organism gains some advantage to the detriment of another. No hint of genuine charity ameliorates our vision of society, once sentimentalism has been laid aside. What passes for co-operation turns out to be a mixture of opportunism and exploitation. The impulses that lead one animal to sacrifice himself for another turn out to have their ultimate rationale in gaining advantage over a third, and acts for the good of one ‘society’ turn out to be performed for the detriment of the rest. Where it is in his own interest, every organism may reasonably be expected to aid his fellows. Where he has no alternative, he submits to the yoke of servitude. Yet, given a full chance to act in his own interest, nothing but expediency will restrain him from brutalizing, from maiming, from murdering – his brother, his mate, his parent, or his child. Scratch an ‘altruist’ and watch a ‘hypocrite’ bleed.”

⁵ Midgely, M. 1985. *Evolution as a Religion: Strange Hopes and Stranger Fears.* Methuen, London. (p. 3).

⁶ Midgely 1985, op. cit., p. 28.

⁷ Midgely 1985, op. cit., p. 3.

⁸ Swift, G. 1992. *Ever After.* Picador, London. (p. 223).

⁹ Swift 1992, op. cit., p. 224-225.

¹⁰ Clark, J.W. and McKenny Hughes, T. 1890. *The Life and Letters of the Reverend Adam Sedgwick.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. (pp. 357-358; vol. II).