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A New Bulldog in Town

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Professor Legge

ANTH 394

It all begins with a convenient anomaly in space time - most stories worth hearing do. What sort of anomaly it is is not particularly important; it doesn't matter if its a rip, blip, or localized wormhole. Whatever the anomaly, the end result is the same and it goes like this: at some point in the near future one, Mr. Richard Dawkins, will be sitting in his very English sitting room with a very English cup of tea reading something or the other which is very English and preparing himself to write something scathing for a very English paper. The anomaly will approach, silent or with a great ruckus, and he will be helpless to defend himself from its awesome power. It will whisk him off to a random time and place. In fact it will be a conveniently random time and place, as he will be deposited on a very convenient chair in a one Mr. Charles Darwin's study sometime in the late eighteen hundreds.

Now Mr. Darwin is hardly a revolutionary, despite the remarkable quality of his theories, and this event will likely startle him excessively. He might even spill his own tea in his startlement. Surely then, being a gentleman, Dawkins will gather his bearings enough to help Mr. Darwin sop up the spill and lo, Darwin can now see that Dawkins too is a gentleman and all this space time travel is really not so much of a bother. He'll offer Dawkins a cup of tea to replace the one he'd unfortunately left behind in the future, and Dawkins will agree, and there we are. Two gentlemen set over tea, prepared to engage in a conversation for the ages.

For a man who clearly idolizes Darwin, how much does Dawkins in fact emulate his hero? Although some some would say emulation is unnecessary, even detrimental to forward progress, this question of comparison remains significant. In his own way Dawkins has already declared his theories to simply be the natural progression of Darwin's work. He believes that, if Darwin had lived today, he would have written *The Selfish Gene* himself instead of *On the Origin of Species*. Is this defensible? Is Dawkins Darwin's conceptual heir?

Through a comparison of their seminal texts, *On the Origin of Species* and *The Selfish Gene*, an exploration of how much Darwin and Dawkins might in theory have actually agreed with each other will be undertaken. For all his assertions that his ideas are Darwin's plus 150 odd years, questions need to be asked concerning whether Dawkins is emphasizing only the parts of Darwin which further his own agenda. That being said, it's important to underline the fact that the validity of Dawkins' work is *not* on the chopping block. His intelligence and drive have already set him apart as an extraordinary writer in the field of science. The inquiries to be made here have only to do with Dawkins in relation to his idol, Mr. Charles Darwin.

Dawkins would, of course, immediately recognize Mr. Darwin as one of the few men he holds in high esteem. For a moment he may flop between the desire to introduce himself and his desire to preserve the space time continuum, but ego would win out in the end and Dawkins would be unable to resist extending a hand saying ‘Hello, my name is Richard Dawkins. I’m you’re biggest fan.’

Darwin, being something of a shy recluse would flush and introduce himself in turn only as ‘Charles Darwin. Much obliged.’

At this point a whole world of possibilities will have been opened up for Dawkins. What question should he ask first? What details of the future of science should he share? “What are you doing in my study?” Darwin will interrupt and Dawkins will wave the question off; the two of them have better things to discuss.

So where to begin?

A smile will stretch across Dawkins’ face as he realizes, of course, there is only one place to start. The solution to all of Darwin’s problems. Genetics.

Although published within Darwin’s lifetime, Gregor Mendel’s work on genetics was lost almost as soon as it was born, not to be rediscovered until 1900. Without genetics Darwin was never fully able to get a grip on the mechanics behind the evolution he was observing in the field. Although he witnessed time and again the end result of gene frequency change over successive generations, the only explanatory powers he had to work with were crude notions of ‘gene plasm’ and ‘ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.’ It was only after his death that Mendel’s work was to be exposed, and subsequently blended with Darwin’s own theories in order to create the keystone of modern biology that is Modern Synthesis (Bowler 1992, 5).

It was this study of genetics which brought Dawkins to widespread fame with his book *The Selfish Gene*. In this work he put forward the notion that evolution did not occur for the ‘sake of the species,’ or for the group, or even truly for the individual (Dawkins 2009, 10). It occurred, instead, for the sake of the gene. His theory is such that in order for a gene to survive it has to be inherently ‘selfish,’ inspiring in its host individual a sense of self preservation which guarantees that the gene will survive long enough to be passed on. Genes then live on in the offspring and in turn when the offspring are seen to a reproductive age, they too will pass these genes on again. This continues so on and so forth into a replicated sort of immortality.

Despite the fact that Darwin hadn't the faintest inkling as to the fact that genes existed, or perhaps in fact *because* of this, Dawkins describes his own work with genes as the logical continuation of Darwin's work (Dawkins 2009, xv). Where Darwin focused on the survival of the fittest individual, Dawkins took it a step further and made natural selection into a survival of the fittest *gene*. After all, what is an individual except for the expressed phenotype of his or her genotype? Physical and even mental potential is dictated entirely by the blueprint of genetics, meaning that the 'fittest' could just as easily be called 'the one with the best genes.' It is those with the best genes who survive to reproduce, and in so doing, these 'good genes' survive and live on in the bodies of new offspring, continuing to accrue in a population until environmental factors change so as to make these genes disadvantageous.

This theory may in fact be as Dawkins says: the best and most logical progression of Darwin's theories. Darwin worked with what he had, and what he had was observation. Now, with the heap of scientific discoveries which have followed since the day Darwin published *On the Origin of Species*, it only makes sense that the thread of Darwin's work should be held up, but the details parsed out. Darwin got it right, mostly, and now with our current knowledge of genetics it's reasonable that we would take his work and refine it. Science is self-corrective, and even theories as that of evolution by natural selection must in part face this system of correction. Darwin himself even seemed cognizant of the fact that future researchers would take his ideas and run with them. Indeed, he even hoped that this would happen, stating in the closing pages of *On the Origin of Species* that for new generations of naturalists 'a grand and almost untrodden field of inquiry has been opened (Darwin 2006, 304).'

As much as it made Dawkins sound like an arrogant git when he said it, he was probably right when he stated in the preface to the second edition of *The Selfish Gene* that "The Selfish Gene Theory is Darwin's theory, expressed in a way that Darwin did not choose but whose aptness, I should like to think, he would have instantly delighted in (Dawkins 2009, xv).' Darwin was clearly excited, even awed by the breadth and scope of his own discovery. That someone could come along a century and a half later and refine it to something even more astounding, something even more unfathomable, would probably have blown his mind. Darwin at his core was a man of science, a man whose practices exemplified the scientific method, and Dawkins' theory would at the very least impress him, if not, as Dawkins says, delight him.

As Dawkins will explain genetics, Darwin's eyes will light up, his fingers tight around a pencil but his notes forgotten, so enraptured he will be with what Dawkins has to tell him. 'Yes,

yes, it all makes sense!’ He’ll cry as Dawkins sketches a Punnett square and diagrams the results of Mendel’s pea experiments. ‘This, this is what I’ve been missing!’

Dawkins will look pleased with himself as he sits back in his chair. ‘There,’ he’ll exclaim ‘No more of this pangenesis and germ plasm and all that other nonsense. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny? What nonsense.’ The two of them will certainly share a laugh over that.

‘How lucky you are to have all this! How enlightened the science of the future must be, the progress that must be made daily.’ Here Dawkins will wince, a scowl crossing his features.

‘If only it were so.’ He’ll mutter, drumming his fingers against his thigh. ‘If only it weren’t for all those right-wing creationists.’

If Dawkins and Darwin then are at ease with each other scientifically, how do they feel about each other religiously? It is well documented that running up to and following the publication of *On the Origin of Species* Darwin fell out with the church, his faith being challenged by both the death of his daughter Anne and the evidence he saw piling up against a calm, well ordered, and divinely governed universe. In an 1860 letter to Asa Gray he wrote “There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the ichneumonidae with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars or that a cat should play with mice (Darwin 1860).” In other words, Darwin could no longer adhere to the Christian notion that god had made everything as it was supposed to be, with noble purpose and direction. This is something Dawkins agrees with whole heartedly. He even used this very quote to open a whole section on the heartless indifference of nature in his book *River out of Eden* (Dawkins 1995, 95). For Dawkins there is no god, only nature, and nature is blind to suffering. “So long as DNA is passed on, it does not matter who or what gets hurt in the process (Dawkins 1995, 131).”

There is a satisfaction Dawkins takes from this atheistic, amoral view on the universe, and its a satisfaction that he claims Darwin took too. In Dawkins’ mind, Darwin was a full on atheist and only played down his atheism for the sake of his devout wife. In the same letter to Asa Gray however, immediately after the passage on caterpillars, Darwin says this:

I cannot ... be contented to view this wonderful universe and especially the nature of man, and ... conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call

chance. Not that this notion at all satisfies me. I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of Newton. -- Let us each man hope and believe what he can (Darwin 1860).

It would seem to me that Darwin's opinions on the nature of god and the divine are more complex than Dawkins gives him credit for. An agnosticism existed in Darwin to be sure, one which he described at some length in his autobiography, but the above passage offers a glance at the depth of Darwin's struggles on the matter of god as well as the nuanced approach he took to religion for a good portion of his life (Darwin 1958, 85-94). He was not content with the Church of England, or Christianity as a whole for that matter, but it is dubious that he would jump happily onto Dawkins' joyriding, atheist bandwagon.

Dawkins however does not see Darwin in so many shades of gray. In his world there are atheists and then there's everyone else. Dawkins has hard set notions about religion, and despite occasional quotes which seem to allow for an overlap between science and faith, by and large the man becomes enraged at the very notion of a world where science and religion can coexist comfortably (Sheahen 2005). When interviewed by Laura Sheahen in 2005 Dawkins was asked what he made of intelligent individuals who have been taught good science and evolution and still choose to believe in religion. He replied acerbically saying "It's certainly hard to know what to make of it. I think it's a betrayal of science. I think they have a religious agenda which, for reasons best known to themselves, they elevate above science (Sheahen 2005)." Later in the same year he declared at a New York symposium that the notion of evolution as 'anti-religious' is a justified one, and he has oft used the disturbing example of moths' self-immolation instinct to explain the faulty evolution of religion in human consciousness (Hall 2005)(Dawkins 2006, 172-179).

Dawkins then is far more extreme in his anti-religion sentiments than Darwin. He's an evangelical atheist whereas, at least publicly, Darwin was more of an unobtrusive agnostic. Dawkins walks a fine line when attempting to appropriate Darwin to the side of atheism, running the perpetual risk of putting foreign words in Darwin's mouth. As much as Dawkins may like to imagine all the things Darwin would have said if he were not restrained by societal norms and devotion to his wife, at the end of the day extrapolating Darwin's religious and spiritual preferences beyond what he explicitly stated is a dangerous game.

Darwin is not the only prominent, dead scientist Dawkins has made efforts to fold into the atheist flock. In a lecture he gave at New York University he made the bold move of ascribing atheistic intent to quotes from Einstein concerning god (Hall 2005). He performed an impressive array of linguistic acrobatics in order to interpret Einstein's words in such a way so as to cut out any supernatural implication when the man used the word 'god.' Unfortunately, his desire to claim Einstein as one his own fell short, considering Einstein himself expressed indignation during his lifetime at being appropriated by atheists (Jammer 1999, 150). He never believed his denial of a personal god to be a denial of all concepts of a supernatural power, and went so far as to declare pointedly "There are fanatical atheists whose intolerance is of the same kind as the intolerance of religious fanatics ... They are like slaves who are still feeling the weight of their chains which they have thrown off after hard struggle (Jammer 1999, 97)."

If Dawkins is comfortable with airbrushing Einstein's religious views to fit his own opinions, it becomes equally possible that he's done the same with his interpretation of Darwin. Everything Dawkins says about religion and the religious inclinations of individuals other than himself really ought to be taken with a grain of salt. Although by the end of his life Darwin rejected notions of organized religion and of a personal god, he never fully rejected (at least outwardly) all concepts of divinity (Darwin 1958, 94).

As Dawkins would get going on religion, eyes bright and hands gesticulating sharply, he'll find it difficult to stop. Recounting all the sins of the far right, the evangelical movement in America, the creationist textbooks being pushed into public schools, every inch of him will radiate pure English indignation. Darwin will agree, quietly, nodding along with every crime recounted. It will undoubtedly disturb him that even after 150 years so many people could continue to hold out against his theory. In his own way though, he will also fail to be surprised. Already well used to the resistance of religious folk, he'll sympathize with Dawkins' frustration, even if he would never express his own frustrations in so vociferous a manner.

This passing notion will undoubtedly cause Darwin to smile, eventually drawing Dawkins up short as he watches amusement gather on the naturalist's face.

'What's so funny?' he'll ask at length and Darwin will only shake his head, shifting in his chair before meeting Dawkins' eye and grinning all the brighter. 'It's nothing. I'm only imagining how you and my friend Huxley would get along if ever you were to meet.'

Darwinian evolution experienced significant resistance from both scientific and religious institutions almost as soon as it was published. What Darwin wrote about was revolutionary, as much as he didn't want it to be. *Origin* tipped god off his pedestal and shoved academia all a kilter, setting both biologists and bishops to bristling. In an early debate over Darwinian evolution a Mr. Thomas H Huxley and a Bishop Wilberforce opposed each other at the Sheldonian Theater at Oxford University. Wilberforce had been coached on how to break down *Origin of Species* from a scientific standpoint, but he was no scientist himself, far more eager to attack Darwin's work from a religious standpoint. At one point he scathingly barked to Huxley, are you descended from an ape on your grandfather's or your grandmother's side? Huxley's reply was just as biting, declaring that he was in no bit ashamed to be descended from an ape, and would be much more ashamed to bear significant relation to a man such as Wilberforce (Blinderman 1957).

This exchange quickly became legendary, the sort of furious debate on which the mythological flavor of *Origin of Species* was built. It was to be the first of many encounters between Huxley and anti-darwinists over his tenure as 'Darwin's Bulldog,' a name he gave himself in reference to his ardent defense of a man who so rarely went to bat for himself. Although he originally was dubious of Darwin's theory, when *Origin of Species* was finally published he found himself overwhelmed by the evidence Darwin had collected and found himself turned into one of Darwin's most ardent supporters. As author Charles Blinderman puts it, Huxley was the ideal bulldog because of his quick wit, sharp tongue, and unerring ability to provoke. 'Provocation' Blinderman explains, 'is not always delightful, but it will frequently give rise to entertaining controversy, and in the Victorian Age controversy was located somewhere between an art and a game (Blinderman 1957).' This was a game at which Huxley excelled.

Huxley was an opinionated, aggressive, biologist with a drive to defend Darwinian evolution. Sound familiar? Indeed except for the fact that he declared himself an 'agnostic' (a term which he invented (Blinderman 1957)) instead of an atheist, Huxley could be Dawkins' hairier, victorian brother. Still, as tart and obnoxious he must have been in his time, Huxley served a key role in gaining notoriety for *Origin of Species* and developing a wide spread readership. Dawkins now finds himself performing a similar function.

Dawkins, in a way, is Darwin's new bulldog. In a day and age where Darwinism is once again under vicious attack, Dawkins fills a vital role. His tone could use some work, the vitriol and condescension dripping from his words has a tendency to make even the most reasonable of

his assertions unpalatable, but his ability at the very least to get people to *listen* and consider the matter at hand is extraordinary. Darwin certainly had an appreciation for Huxley's fighting spirit, shown repeatedly in the letters he wrote to the man, and in the praise he offered him in his autobiography (Darwin 1958, 106; 140). Why wouldn't he then appreciate the same tenacity in his newest champion as well?

'It would be lovely to meet Huxley.' Dawkins will agree, knowing plenty of the man's cleverness and already liking him if only for the fact that he was a fierce supporter of Darwin. Then a frown will cross his face.

The convenient space time anomaly seems to have returned.

Dawkins will set down his Wedgewood tea cup quickly lest it fall from his grip and soak the carpet a second time in one day.

'Another time perhaps.' Darwin will offer. 'Really, it has been a pleasure Mr. Dawkins.'

'Likewise to be sure!' Dawkins will exclaim, already feeling the world bend around him in a way universes ought not to bend. 'Remember-' but the rest of his sentence will be cut off. Convenient space time anomalies wait for no man, and in the blink of an eye Dawkins will find himself once again in his own study, the universe having stabilized itself in the way universes are wont to do.

Fortunately for the space time continuum, space time is every bit as self corrective as science, leaving no recollection of the conversation in either man's mind.

We began with a question of emulation. How much does Dawkins try to be Darwin? The result has been that, as previously acknowledged, perhaps this is not the most useful question to be asked. 'How much are Dawkins and Darwin alike?' yields far more interesting results. Despite a century and a half gap between their lives, and a similarly massive divide in scientific resources, Dawkins and Darwin actually share similar opinions on many key points. Even acknowledging the fact that Darwin never had genetics to give mechanical explanation to his theory, the science of *The Selfish Gene* progresses quite beautifully from *On the Origin of Species*. As pompous as it is to declare your book the sort of text Darwin would have written if he'd been alive in this day and age, there is a sense of truth to that claim. Dawkins has kept his theory very much in line with Darwin's.

That does not mean however that Dawkins is attempting to emulate Darwin. As can be seen from their religious differences, and other instances concerning Dawkins and religion, it

becomes clear that in many ways Dawkins is trying to shape his heroes to emulate *him*. Dawkins has frighteningly strong opinions about religious and supernatural matters, opinions which make it impossible for him to fully respect someone who believes in any concept of god. As such, he bends reality a little, picking at the bits that great scientists such as Darwin have left behind that might indicate a religious standpoint compatible with Dawkins' own. There's an inevitable question of the utility of such a practice. What is the point? If this dead man never actually said these things, what good will it do to put words in his mouth? Dawkins, however, seems totally uninterested in this detail, as he has never addressed it either in writing or in an interview.

Far from emulating Darwin, Dawkins is in fact quite different from him in many ways. Where Darwin made a point to avoid controversy, Dawkins is aggressive and scathing in his commentary (Darwin 1957, 126). He does not mind a fight and does not shy from controversy. This makes him far more like Darwin's champion Thomas Huxley than Darwin himself. Darwin's Bulldog kept the theory of Darwinian evolution in the public eye, for better or for worse, and fought tirelessly for the theory's acceptance. This sounds remarkably like Dawkins.

Although Dawkins is neither like Darwin nor really trying to be like Darwin, it doesn't seem unlikely that he and Darwin would have gotten along had they ever had the chance to meet. Darwin appreciated cleverness in men, and Dawkins has always championed good science (Darwin 1957)(Hall 2005). This is why, even after 150 years, Dawkins has decided that Darwin needs a new defender, an heir to the mantle as it were, and he feels he is the man for this job. There is a new bulldog in town, and his name is Richard Dawkins.

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