Darwinian fundamentalists like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett have been criticized for failing to take note of how serious theologians actually argue for and conceive of God. Their atheistic defenders have responded by insisting that one doesn’t need a Ph.D. in theology to see that the emperor has no clothes (so to speak). Yet, while the theologian rightly finds such hand-waving (via the shout of ‘Courtier’s Reply!’) unfortunate (does not the ultra-Darwinist want to see, so as to properly argue against, what someone like Thomas Aquinas actually thinks?), he might benefit from putting aside The God Delusion and Breaking the Spell and turning instead to The Selfish Gene and Darwin’s Dangerous Idea. At the very least, a successful critique of tracts like these would make hand-waving responses more difficult.

It is a relief, then, that in Conor Cunningham’s 550-page opprobrium of Darwinian fundamentalists, he doesn’t try to bang them over the head with the Summa, nor does he take much time to address the arguments in their own popular atheist tracts (Cunningham finds these books desperate). Cunningham instead shows the ultra-Darwinist that, like the very creationists they lambaste, their own Darwinian theories are pseudo-scientific, anti-evolutionary, ideological, irrationally fundamentalist, nihilist, and dualist. Or, in theological parlance, ultra-Darwinism is a Christian heresy, a matter-hating Gnosticism.

Throughout the book, Cunningham charts the various ways ultra-Darwinists abandon good science for the sake of maintaining an a priori, and ironically old-fashioned, commitment to nominalism and reductivism. Cunningham persuasively argues that the sort of atheist conclusions ultra-Darwinists supposedly reach ‘from science’ are potentially persuasive only if their biology is first transformed – impossibly – into
physics. Thus while natural selection, as an emergent phenomenon, is responsible for some but not all of nature’s myriad biodiversity, the ultra-Darwinist must see it as the single force responsible for all biodiversity. Thus while evolution has produced a conscious entity that symbolically interprets an immanently normative nature, through language which itself reveals grammar's deep structure, the ultra-Darwinist posits memes. Thus evolution, with its polychromatic explanations and messiness, its riches and surprises, its emergences and inevitabilities, and its inherent rationality, is repackaged by ultra-Darwinists as something monochromatic, static, algorithmic, and neat. Thus while evolution works on form and favors the macro-level, cooperation, and the group, the ultra-Darwinist insists on primal selfishness and individual selection – that is, if they countenance something as teleologically rich as an ‘individual’ at all. After all, Dawkins himself sees macro-physical organisms as but throw-away carriers of DNA (thus revealing his Gnostic credentials).

Cunningham, with the help of a host of experts in evolutionary biology and philosophy of science, argues that these matter-hating, revisionist, and pseudo-scientific readings of evolution ‘on the ground’ (or more properly denials of evolution) are curious cases of the ultra-Darwinist cutting off his nose to spite his face. As such, the ultra-Darwinist bears semblance to his creationist nemesis, who must also give wild stories to make the evidence fit with his literal reading of Genesis. In typically humorous fashion, Cunningham suggests that, just as a creationist explains fossils by saying they are ways of God testing our faith, the ultra-Darwinist has ‘the devil’s fossils’ – teleology, mind, meaning, true belief, etc. – and these too are tests to his nihilistic faith, and must be explained away.

A running theme through this ambitious work is that the rhetoric of disenchantment, whereby man is pulled from the apex of the spiritual/material divide and humbly placed alongside his next of mammalian kin, is doubly Gnostic and anti-evolutionary. It is anti-evolutionary because to deny the *scala natura* is to ignore
precisely what evolution has given us. Moreover, it is a curious case of the genetic fallacy, whereby we are axiologically conflated with the original organic entities of the primordial swamp. It is Gnostic because it assumes offense at the ‘discovery’ of being merely animal, or merely material. But why, asks Cunningham, should our animal ancestry or our ‘mere’ material constitution be seen as an ontological slight, unless ‘mere’ matter is, à la Descartes (and against all evidence), stripped of mind and meaning? As we have no reason to countenance such a priori revisionist readings of nature, our 'mere' material constitution and animal ancestry are hardly blows to an orthodox Christianity insisting on the Logos made flesh. After all, as Cunningham humorously reminds us, Christ was not a Jedi Knight.

Cunningham spends the final part of the book reminding his readers that taking Darwin seriously (something neither the creationist nor the ultra-Darwinist do) is precisely what an orthodox Christian should do, as a real deference to evolution reveals the orthodox insistence that matter itself housed the Logos of God. Dawkins famously wrote, “The universe that we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil, no good, nothing but pitiless indifference.” Cunningham, by contrast, argues that evolution actually reveals precisely the riches and rationality we would expect if it were the product of a creator-God made manifest in the Incarnation. He thus sees Darwin’s idea not as ‘dangerous’ but as pious. He then insists that both forensic (‘literal’) readings of Genesis and intelligent design, in addition to their spurious science, are ironically both modern (specifically, post-Newtonian) and theologically atrocious ways of looking at scripture and God, respectively (and it is here that the Summa strategically returns!). Furthermore, Cunningham argues, through copious quotations from the sources, that to read the Genesis story of creation as forensic evidence would have been regarded by many Church Fathers as patently bizarre. Thus both creationism and intelligent design, insists

Cunningham, are nothing short of heresy.

One of the many strengths of this book is Cunningham’s abundant use of experts to make his case. The book is rife with direct quotations from scientists, philosophers, popes, medieval theologians, and Church Fathers – and a bit of Monty Python. The bibliography is breathtaking, to say the least. It is also very readable, so theologians and philosophers who are a bit rusty on their biology will nevertheless find the author’s writing accessible. Needless to say, Cunningham doesn’t pull any punches. The writing is impassioned and the arguments persuasive. It will certainly not be the last word on an entrenched society-wide debate over the relationship between religion and science, but it should stir the pot quite a bit.

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