Why Darwin remains a problem for theism

John Houston
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, jhouston@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/forum_lectures

Part of the Philosophy Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Forum Lectures by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.
Why Darwin Remains a Problem for Theism

John Houston
College of Saint Benedict &
Saint John’s University
“If you interrogate the flora and fauna of land, air, and sea, the text suggests their response will lead your mind and heart to the living God, generous source and sustaining power of their life. In their beauty, their variety, their interacting, their coming to be and passing away, they witness to the overflowing goodness of their Creator.”

~Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*

“What a book a devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low and horribly cruel works of nature”

~Charles Darwin, *Letter to Hooker*
Defining Some Terms

- **Theism**: The hypothesis that there exists an all knowing, all powerful, infinitely loving and morally perfect God.

- **Philosophical Naturalism**: The cosmos is all there is, and only natural laws and forces are operative in the world. (Entails theism is false).

- **Evolution**: The hypothesis that there is phylogenetic continuity to all life due to the emergence of ever more complex living creatures and species from simpler forms of life—(originally unicellular organisms gave rise to multicellular organisms that resulted in increasingly more complex organisms…).

- **Natural Selection**: The hypothesis that the mechanism of evolutionary change results from competition for survival, random variation, and heredity.

- **Darwinian Evolution**: The conjunction of evolution with the theory of natural selection.
Prima Facie Evidential Reason: Good reason for thinking something is true in the absence of overriding reasons to think otherwise.

Problem of Evil: The challenge of reconciling theism with suffering in the world.

Pointless Evil: Suffering that serves no purpose or greater good.

The Problem of Divine Hiddenness: A species of the problem of evil resulting from the indiscernibility of God’s presence (intellectually or experientially) in the midst of seemingly pointless suffering.

My Thesis: The problem of evil as manifest in Darwinian evolution provides strong prima facie evidential reasons that cast doubt on theism.
LPE Attempts to demonstrate that belief in God is logically incompatible with the world as we know it.

The Argument Distilled:
1) If theism were true, there would be no evil.
2) There is evil.
3) Therefore, theism is not true.

Deductive; Addresses Logical Possibility; Aims at Proof

Evaluation: Is it valid? Is it sound?

P2: The “privation” response & why it is irrelevant.
  • Addresses metaphysics, but not the epistemic problem.
  • Why this absence when God is said to be over all, in all, and through all?
The Logical Problem of Evil (cont’d)

P1: “If theism were true there would be no evil”

Theodicies

- Stories that show the logical compatibility of theism with evil
- e.g. The free will theodicy; the soul making theodicy etc.

Verdict? The argument from the logical problem of evil is a failure. Theism is logically (and metaphysically) compatible with evil.

Is the matter concluded? Is the problem of evil really just a non-problem after all?
The Evidential Problem of Evil

- Deals not in deduction, but induction.
- Deals not in possibilities, but probabilities
- Deals not in proof, but likelihood

Pose the following questions:

1. Given the hypothesis that theism is true, what sorts of things might we expect to encounter in the world, and what sorts of things might we be surprised to encounter?

Or conversely,

2. Given the hypothesis that philosophical naturalism is true (theism is false) what sorts of things might we expect to encounter in the world, and what sorts of things might we be surprised to find?

Take the first: Given theism, how surprising are the following phenomena?

- Ubiquitous, Gratuitous, and Seemingly Pointless Suffering & Death? (Surprising given theism)
What about Darwinian Evolution?

According to the Darwinian theory of evolution through natural selection, the world in which we live was actualized through extraordinary brutality, apparent prodigality, and incalculable suffering over millions of years. Given theism, this is very surprising indeed. From our epistemic vantage point, an all-powerful God’s making natural selection the means by which species emerge in the world could strongly suggest indifference to suffering at best, if not callousness or cruelty. Given the gratuitous suffering it entails, it is far easier to see how such a mechanism’s being the means of the emergence of species is compatible with deism or atheism than theism. After all, given deism or atheism, there is no theological reason to expect that the world be structured so as to mitigate creatures’ pains. On deism, God is an absentee landlord who doesn’t care about life on earth, and on atheism there is no God and nature proceeds blindly and amorally, wholly indifferent to the plight of living creatures. In such a world there is nothing at all surprising about finding gratuitous brutality throughout nature, or even discovering (as we do in this world) that such brutality is not only ubiquitous, but essential to the continuation and proliferation of life on this planet.
What about Darwinian Evolution?

But theism, on the other hand, provides prima facie reasons for expecting that God would not actualize a world that is inclusive of needless suffering, especially to the scope and degree it appears to exist in our world; for God is love, and love never willingly causes needless pain and suffering. Given theism there is no reason that the means by which life emerged necessarily had to have been natural selection. Other logical and metaphysical possibilities yielding far less suffering are open to the creative work of an omnipotent and loving God (special creation being among them). Natural selection just is survival selection, and as it turns out, in the history of species on this planet, almost every single species that has ever existed has failed to thrive or even survive. According to our best understanding of the history of biological life on this planet, the process of evolution by natural selection has entailed the failure of millions of generations of creatures to thrive, and this abortifacient process by which nature deals with her young has gone on long before human beings appeared on the scene.
What about Darwinian Evolution?

We can offer a myriad of examples of apparently gratuitous suffering that daily emerge as a consequence of natural selection. “Failure to thrive” seems at best a euphemism when describing what the elimination of species entails at the individual level. Not only do lesser adapted, weaker and infirm animals suffer being mauled, torn apart, chomped, crushed, maimed, and/or consumed by their predators (often alive, piecemeal) but some animals, due to random genetic mutations, suffer elimination through horrific congenital defects. Some of these creatures are born into a short life of pain and perish soon after due to their biological unfitness to live. Others endure the effects of congenital defects for years before succumbing to death. Still others flourish for a time, only to perish prematurely before passing on their genes.
The Gratuitous Suffering of Individual Animals
The Gratuitous Suffering of Individual Animals
“The existence of all creatures is an unowed gift. They exist in a relationship of radical ontological dependence on the overflowing Wellspring of life. And it is good.”
~Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*

Thus, it is God who brings creatures into existence and sustains their existence.

**Problem:** It is hard to see how the continued existence of a life of acute agony could be a good for any subject that experiences it, much less a “gift” that testifies to a good and loving father and steward of creation.

**Verdict:** Given theism such instances of needless suffering are surprising. In other words, such instances of suffering (which for omnipotence are clearly avoidable) provide strong prima facie reasons for thinking theism is not true.
Darwin’s Own Foresight on the Problem
Global Suffering and the Problem of Mass Extinction

• Extinction is integral to natural selection.

“Two dynamic principles amplify the outcome of natural selection, acting like its right and left hands, namely, divergence and extinction.”
~Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*

• Nature as Exterminator & Abortionist
  - More than half of all human embryos die within the first five days of their lifespan.
  - Planet Earth’s Five Mass Extinctions: More than 99.9% of all species that have ever existed on this planet have perished from the face of the earth.
  - Descendants of death & pain & elimination

**Verdict:** Given theism the fact that almost all life on this planet has failed to flourish and been consigned to non-existence is surprising. In other words, the fact of repeated mass extinctions (which for omnipotence are clearly avoidable) provides a strong prima facie reason for thinking theism is not true.
The Inadequacy of Apologetic Methodology

- Defending the Fort
  - Offering one’s “apologia” for a position already held.
  - Arguments for the compatibility of Darwinian natural selection with theism.

“...I intend to dwell primarily on the adjustments that Christian theology has to make if it hopes to stay in touch with the world of scientific discovery.”
~John Haught, Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God and the Drama of Life

Translation: I admit that evolutionary theory seems incompatible with theism. But given enough time and ingenuity we shall be able to construct (through no small amount of ad hoc reasoning) a chain of arguments that demonstrate that this is not necessarily the case.
Haught is correct: It is possible to develop arguments or narratives that demonstrate the logical or metaphysical compatibility of his creed with the discoveries of the sciences, including those related to Darwinian evolution.

However, this is of little consequence. For the same reasons the logical problem of evil fails to undermine theism, so too does the contention that Judeo-Christian religions are logically and metaphysically incompatible with the discoveries of the sciences. They are logically compatible.

In other words, the sciences are not fundamentally at odds with Judeo-Christian religion.

But again, logical compatibility is the lowest of criteria. While it tells you what might possibly be true, it does little to tell you what actually is true.

Verdict: This is not helpful. What theism needs in the face of the Darwinian challenge is not a story of the compatibility of God’s existence with the Darwinian account, but the opening of a discussion about the evidential implications of Darwinian evolution for theism.
Cosmic Interstellar Biologists and Anthropologists: A Thought Experiment
Let Us Ask More Than the Beasts...
Let Us Ask More Than the Beasts...
The Argument Formalized

ME = Mass Extinctions

s = suffering of individual creatures

S = Overall cumulative pain, suffering, and failure to thrive of life forms in general in this world

In short, let MEsS represent the problem of evil entailed by Darwinian natural selection. Thus, I maintain that:

Pr (MEsS | Philosophical Naturalism) > Pr (MEsS | Theism)

Given the facts of repeated mass extinctions; the gratuitous suffering of individual animals; and the cumulative pain, suffering, and failure to thrive of this world’s inhabitants, the probability of Philosophical Naturalism is greater than the probability of Theism given those same facts.

While this might not be an unanswerable challenge to theism, it is a formidable one.

What then might we say to that challenge?