

# A noble conception

Michael Shermer

Science can explain many things in the natural world. Although the laws of gravity, the origin of galaxies and the Universe are commonly accepted, the theory of evolution is still questioned by some. There are clear reasons for why that is, and why it need not be so.

Toward the end of his *magnum opus*, *Principia Mathematica*, Isaac Newton suggested this deeper explanation for what lies behind the laws of gravitation that explain the operation of the Solar System: “This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being.”

To my knowledge no creationist or Intelligent Design proponent today quotes the great physicist in support of their belief that a deity underlies the design and operation of nature. Why not? Newton was a deeply religious man who wrote more on the Bible than he did on nature. Because creationists are fond of compiling lists of scientific authorities who believe in God, and especially quoting them in support of design arguments, how odd it is that this passage from one of the greatest scientists in history has not found its way into creationists’ literature.

The reason for the absence of Newton’s observation is because we now have a cogent theory for how solar systems are formed from interstellar gas clouds by gravity. What was once a gap to be filled with a supernatural entity is now filled with a natural force. That is the fate of all such ‘god of the gaps’ arguments — the gaps are filled by science, and religion moves on to other problems.

Charles Darwin (pictured) understood this and he reflected on it in the second edition of *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1860, in a futile attempt to assuage his religious critics:

“I see no good reason why the views given in this volume [*On the Origin of Species*] should shock the religious feeling of anyone. It is satisfactory, as showing how transient such impressions are, to remember that the greatest discovery ever made by humans, namely the law of the attraction of gravity, was also attacked by Leibnitz as ‘subversive of natural, and inferentially of revealed, religion.’ A celebrated author and divine has written

to me that he ‘has gradually learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of the Deity to believe that He created a few original forms, capable of self-development into other and needful forms, as to believe that He required a fresh act of creation to supply the voids caused by the actions of His laws.’”

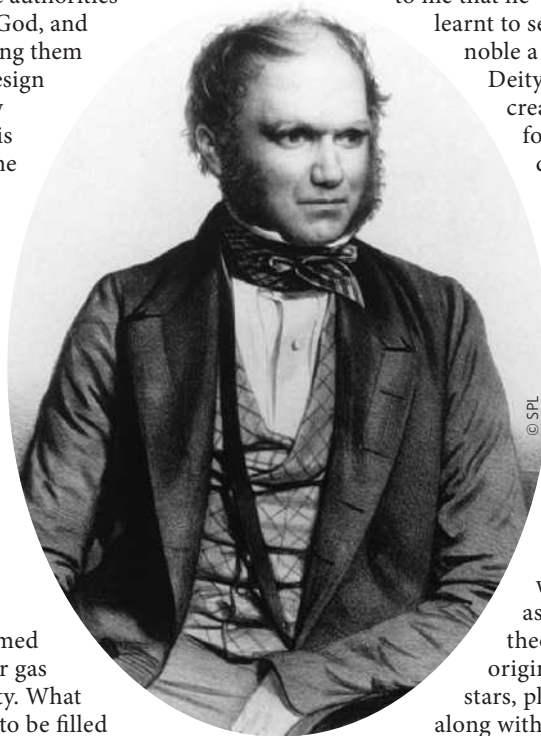
A noble conception indeed. This is why religion did not wither away when physicists and astronomers developed theories to explain the origin and operations of stars, planets, and comets, along with galaxies and the Universe itself. Why did religion not fall into disuse with the rise of science? The reason is that it is no longer the job of religion to explain the natural world. That is what science does, and it does so

spectacularly. Why, then, is evolution — alone among the sciences — still under siege in the USA, the UK, Australia, and in other countries (most recently, and disturbingly, in Turkey and other Muslim nations)? Why does no one demand “equal time” for alternative theories to gravity, plate tectonics, or the germ theory of disease? There are at least six reasons why people target the theory of evolution and resist accepting the overwhelming evidence for its reality.

*The fear that evolution degrades our humanity.* Although Nicolaus Copernicus toppled the pedestal of our cosmic centrality, the revolution he launched was about cosmic real estate and our place in it, and from which, in the long run, religious anthropocentrism recovered. Darwin’s revolution, by contrast, was about us, our favourite species, revealing us to be ‘mere’ animals that are subject to the same natural laws and historical forces as all other species.

*Belief that science is in conflict with religion.* This reaction falls under the rubric of what I call the ‘conflicting worlds model’ of the relationship of science and religion, in which one is forced to choose one over the other. If scientific discoveries do not seem to support religious tenets, believers tend to opt for religion, non-believers for science.

*Belief that evolution is a threat to specific religious tenets.* Objections given to the theory of evolution of this sort often fall under the rubric of what I call the ‘same worlds model’ of the relationship of science and religion, in which an attempt is made to interpret religious passages in holy books to match scientific discoveries, or to mould scientific findings to fit religious beliefs. For example, the attempt to prove that the creation story in Genesis is accurately reflected in the geological fossil record has led many creationists



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to conclude that the Earth was created within the past 10,000 years, shortly after the Neolithic Revolution. This is in sharp contrast to the geological evidence for an Earth 4.6 billion years old. If one insists that the findings of science should square true with religious doctrines, this certainly can and will lead to conflict between science and religion.

*Misunderstanding of evolutionary theory.* A significant source of evolution denial is that most people know so little about the theory. In a 2004 Gallup poll, for example, 29% of the people surveyed said they did not know enough to say whether they accepted the theory of evolution or not.<sup>1</sup> Because evolution is so controversial, school science teachers typically drop the subject entirely rather than face the discomfort aroused among students and parents. What is not taught is not learned. What is not understood is often feared. And what is feared may be loathed.

*The fear that evolutionary theory implies that we have a fixed human nature.* The first four reasons for the resistance to evolutionary theory come almost exclusively from the political right. This fifth reason originates from the political left, from liberals who fear that the application of evolutionary theory to human thought and behaviour implies that political policy and economic doctrines based on the belief that human nature is highly malleable will fail because the constitution of humanity is stronger than the constitutions of states.<sup>2</sup> This is what I call 'liberal creationism', the doppelganger of 'conservative creationism'. Liberal creationists fully accept the theory of evolution when applied to the human body but not when applied to the human mind.

*The equating of evolution with ethical nihilism and moral degeneration.* This is the most prominent and strongest reason that people do not accept evolution. The syllogistic reasoning behind this fear is as follows:

Evolution implies that there is no God, therefore...  
 Belief in the theory of evolution leads to atheism, therefore...  
 Without a belief in God there can be no morality or meaning, therefore...  
 Without morality and meaning there is no basis for a civil society, therefore...  
 Without a civil society we will be reduced to living like brute animals.



PAUL RAINER © LOOK AND LEARN / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

**Figure 1** | Sir Isaac Newton devising the laws of gravity. Newton — as depicted above by artist Paul Rainer — invoked an “intelligent and powerful Being” as the origin of the laws of gravitation, yet science has provided a coherent explanation that remains to be challenged.

This sentiment was expressed by the American neo-conservative social commentator Irving Kristol in 1991: “If there is one indisputable fact about the human condition it is that no community can survive if it is persuaded — or even if it suspects — that its members are leading meaningless lives in a meaningless universe.”<sup>3</sup> Similar fears were raised by Nancy Pearcey, a fellow of the Seattle-based Discovery Institute in a briefing promoting Intelligent Design before a House Judiciary Committee of the United States Congress. She cited a popular song urging “you and me, baby, ain’t nothing but mammals so let’s do it like they do on the Discovery Channel.” Pearcey went on to claim that since the US legal system is based on moral principles, the only way to generate ultimate moral grounding is for the law to have an “unjudged judge,” an “uncreated creator.”<sup>4</sup>

It need not be so. Evolution is science, as solidly supported as any in the human pantheon of knowledge. If one is a theist, it should not matter when God made the universe — 10,000 years ago or 10,000,000,000 years ago. The difference of six zeros is meaningless to an eternal, omniscient and omnipotent being, and the glory of divine creation cries out for praise regardless of when it happened. Likewise, it should not matter how God created life — whether it was through a miraculous spoken

word or through the natural forces of the Universe that He created: the grandeur of the work commands awe regardless of the processes used.

Theists and theologians should embrace science, especially evolutionary theory, for what it has done to reveal the magnificence of the divinity in a depth never dreamed by our Bronze Age ancestors who first penned the origin myths to which some still cling today. We have learned a lot in 4,000 years, and that knowledge should never be dreaded or denied. Instead, science should be embraced by all who cherish human understanding and wisdom, and that is ultimately what Darwin’s noble conception implies, and why Darwin matters today more than ever. □

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