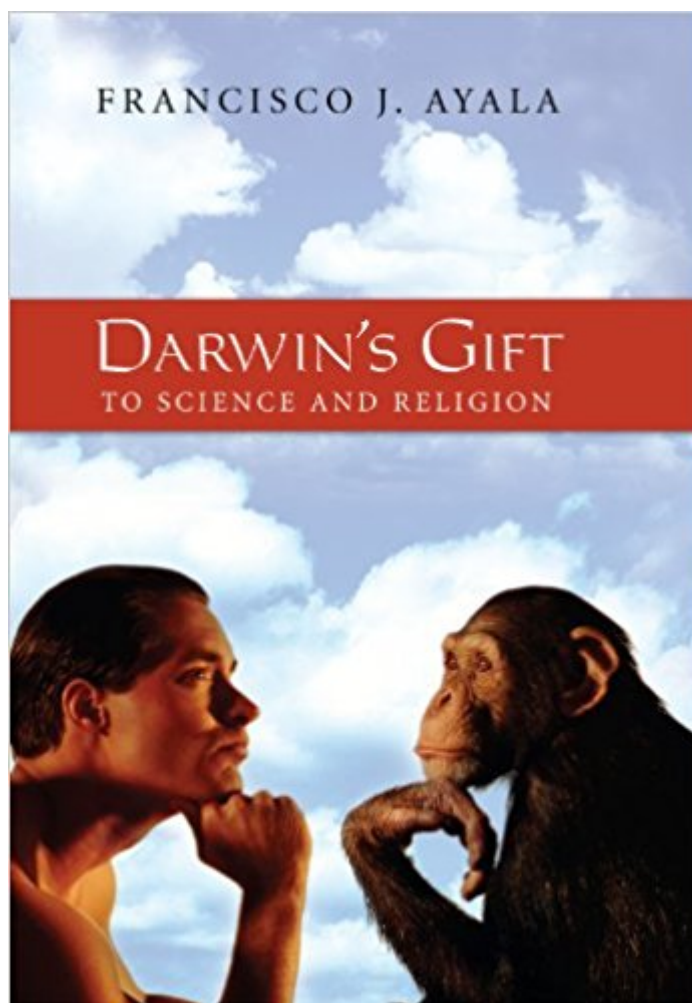


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Darwin's Gift To Science And Religion



Synopsis

With the publication in 1859 of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, Charles Darwin established evolution by common descent as the dominant scientific explanation for nature's diversity. This was to be his gift to science and society; at last, we had an explanation for how life came to be on Earth. Scientists agree that the evolutionary origin of animals and plants is a scientific conclusion beyond reasonable doubt. They place it beside such established concepts as the roundness of the earth, its revolution around the sun, and the molecular composition of matter. That evolution has occurred, in other words, is a fact. Yet as we approach the bicentennial celebration of Darwin's birth, the world finds itself divided over the truth of evolutionary theory. Consistently endorsed as "good science" by experts and overwhelmingly accepted as fact by the scientific community, it is not always accepted by the public, and our schools continue to be battlegrounds for this conflict. From the Tennessee trial of a biology teacher who dared to teach Darwin's theory to his students in 1925 to Tammy Kitzmiller's 2005 battle to keep intelligent design out of the Dover district schools in Pennsylvania, it's clear that we need to cut through the propaganda to quell the cacophony of raging debate. With the publication of *Darwin's Gift*, a voice at once fresh and familiar brings a rational, measured perspective to the science of evolution. An acclaimed evolutionary biologist with a background in theology, Francisco Ayala offers clear explanations of the science, reviews the history that led us to ratify Darwin's theories, and ultimately provides a clear path for a confused and conflicted public.

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Taking a more pacific tone than Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett in this marvelous little book, Ayala, a UC-Irvine biologist and member of the National Academy of Sciences, offers a way to reconcile religion and science on the issue of evolution. He is uniquely well suited to address this: before becoming an evolutionary biologist, he trained for the Catholic priesthood. According to Ayala, Darwin provides both a clear understanding of the nature of the physical world and an explanation for its flaws that takes the onus for them off of God. Natural selection gives scientists an eminently plausible and verifiable explanation of the shape species and members of those species have taken over millions of years. For religious believers, evolution offers an explanation for the flawed designs—such as the too narrow human birth canal and our badly designed jawbone—that might call into question the work of a benevolent designer. Ayala points out that science and religion perform different roles in human understanding: science offers a way of knowing the material world, but matters of value and meaning—the core of religion—are outside of the scope of scientific investigation. This elegant book provides the single best introduction to Darwin and the development of evolutionary biology now available. Illus. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

With the publication in 1859 of *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*, Charles Darwin established evolution by common descent as the dominant scientific explanation for nature's diversity. This was to be his gift to science and society - at last, we had an explanation for how life came to be on Earth. Scientists agree that the evolutionary origin of animals and plants is a scientific conclusion beyond reasonable doubt. They place it beside such established concepts as the roundness of the earth, its revolution around the sun, and the molecular composition of matter. That evolution has occurred, in other words, is a fact. Yet as we approach the bicentennial celebration of Darwin's birth, the world finds itself divided over the truth of evolutionary theory. Consistently endorsed as "good science" by experts and overwhelmingly accepted as fact by the scientific community, questions nevertheless remain it is not generally accepted by the public - and our schools continue to be battleground for this conflict on which this war is fought. From the Tennessee trial of a biology teacher who dared to teach Darwin's theory to his students in 1925 to Tammy Kitzmiller's 2005 battle to keep intelligent design out of the Dover district schools in Pennsylvania, it's clear that we need to cut through the propaganda to quell the cacophony of raging debate. With the publication of *Darwin's Gift*, a voice at once fresh and yet familiar brings a rational, measured perspective to the science of evolution. An acclaimed evolutionary biologist with a background in theology, Francisco Ayala offers clear explanations of the science, reviews the

history that led us to ratify Darwin's theories, and ultimately provides a clear path for a confused and conflicted public.

Dr. Ayala has a knack for showing the absurdity of the science vs. religion debate, making a good case that both are legitimate perspectives, and that both deserve the respect of the other.

Very informative, well written, a clearer picture of evolution and religion, can easily coexist.

What the title calls Darwin's gift to science and religion is by the author in his last sentence described--in his characteristic superlatives for Darwin--as "nothing if not a fundamental vision that has forever changed how mankind perceives itself and its place in the universe". Is it "forever"? And what is its "gift"? Earlier (p.159) the author says regarding "imperfection, dysfunction, and cruelty in the living world": "Evolution came to the rescue...Indeed a major burden was removed from the shoulders of believers when convincing evidence was advanced that the design of organisms need not be attributed to the immediate agency of the Creator, but rather is an outcome of natural processes". Is this a "rescue"? Was a "major burden" removed? Whatever those complaints about the world, they remain. Moreover, in the subsequent chapter the author tries to reconcile science with religion: "they may be seen as complementary. Questions about the meaning and purpose of the world and of human life transcend science. Religion answers them" (p.160). Accepting thus the possibility of God in a deistic sense, does it matter whether the complained about is the "immediate" or mediate product of God? The author's argument disposes neither of the objects of complaint nor of their attribution to God. He of course directly attributes the living world to evolution, specifically to random mutation and natural selection, the latter as "nonrandom" (p.60). The last distinction is unenlightening. Natural selection like random mutation "has no foresight, nor does it operate according to some preconceived plan" (p.70). In other words, "mutation" and "selection" are alike the operation of a blind "natural process" on the organism, which survives or perishes depending on how affected by that process. This hardly seems to account for the perpetual adaptation of live organisms. The human eye has been a favorite subject in these arguments; is it purposely designed or the result of accidents? "Intelligent-design" proponents argue the eye is irreducibly complex: it doesn't function with any component missing, and all components couldn't have assembled by accident. Author Ayala, with other Darwinists, says (p.145): "components of living beings...do not come about suddenly...Evolutionists have shown that...less complex versions...have existed in the past and can be found in today's organisms". This omits one complexity factor, however. If

something like the human eye can function without some of its components, granted lesser versions exist, it must be shown, because of the gradual nature of evolution, that the eye functions without one of its components. Even on being more liberal and assuming several components missing at once, although the gradual mutation makes their sudden appearance highly improbable, the eye must be shown to function without them. But there is far more comprehensive evidence of purpose in organisms, as I have tried to show in these reviews and is among subjects discussed in detail in my *On Proof for Existence of God, and Other Reflective Inquiries*. As a major influence on Darwin, the tradition of William Paley's analogy of organisms with functional human artifacts has overlooked the additional attribute of life in the former. Unlike artifacts, living beings behave purposefully, specifically in the direction of their survival. It is not only known that their structure SERVES purposes, but that they ACT with purpose. Purposive action in organisms is observed, rather than it or its absence being hypothesized. This leads me to author Ayala's discussion of the hypothetico-deductive method (p.194) or theories. He objects (p.139) that opponents to evolution "declare that it is 'only' a theory and not a fact...When scientists talk about the 'theory' of evolution, they use the word differently than people do in ordinary speech. In everyday speech, theory often means 'guess' or 'hunch'...". My understanding is that "theory" is not an ordinary word but is appropriated from science, where it does mean a supposition, if an educated one. The author indeed embarks on a questionable theory of knowledge. He criticizes (p.196) the use of the word "laws" for Mendel's, the famous botanist's, discoveries; ironically, his quotation (p.31) from Darwin's autobiography speaks of the "law of natural selection". More significantly, in order to elevate the status of theories, he downgrades the fundamental reasoning process of induction, of inferring a principle (law) of nature from repeated instances. He writes (p.184) that induction "may be exemplified as follows. A scientist measuring and recording everything that confronts him observes a tree with leaves...and many [other trees]...all observed to have leaves. Eventually he formulates a universal statement, 'All trees have leaves'". Author Ayala protests (p.185): "no scientist works without any preconceived plan as to what kind of phenomena to observe". Of course; and nobody holds induction to be inference from "everything that confronts" us. Induction is the very process of (p.188) "empirical testing, a process that must include the possibility of 'empirical falsification'" and which the author insists on for support of theories or hypotheses. What he seems unaware of is that the hypothetico-deductive method of science contains the weakness of a fallacy. If a hypothesis A (natural selection) appears to imply B (adaptation), it does not follow that B (adaptation) implies A (natural selection). That is to say, theory is subordinate to reliable observation. My marking four stars for the book is owing to the author's informative descriptions of many biological

details--notwithstanding his opinions about intelligence behind them--and to his apparently sincere generosity allowing spheres of value beyond the physical sciences.

The one question that Francisco Ayala does not answer from solid scientific evidence is the evolutionary emergence of Man. Let me state at the beginning of this review what is not my problem. Intelligent Design is not science, it is an old Islamic theory that there is no true causality in nature - so I am not a defender of Intelligent Design. Nor am I "creationist" in the sense of holding that species are the direct creation of a Creator. In other words, I accept Darwin's "The Origin of Species" as good science - what I call into question is his "The Descent of Man", and the conclusions that he draws from this. Francisco Ayala is convinced that human beings are one with their biology, in fact, are defined by their biology. "The Descent of Man" is merely the application of the Darwinian model of the Origin of Species to human beings - with no factual data to back it up. In his examination of Homo Sapiens, he overlooks the nature and scope of the intellectual and volitional powers of human beings and reduces and degrades them to the level of non-human species, with no consideration of the effects of these powers in human history and culture. Even from an evolutionary point of view, the nature and activities of the human intellectual and volitional powers cannot be reduced to biological laws which are predictable and measurable. The intellectual and volitional powers depend solely upon the judgment, free choice and personal autonomy of each individual and have effects outside the human organism in such number, range and variety that they defy and exceed measurement and predictability of purely biological powers. From the point of view of biological laws, this number, range and variety are so improbable as to seem essentially miraculous. Dr. Ayala has not been able to show a causal link between the human biological powers and the human intellect and will, since all the evidence from the Human Genome shows that such a causal link is organically and genetically impossible. 2nd, the causality of the biological powers in human beings is limited to somatic and psychosomatic effects exclusively. 3rd, the human intellectual and volitional powers have a scope and range and structure untouched and beyond that of evolutionary and biological powers. 4th, the human intellect is a distinct order of reality from that of biology. 5th, the origin of Homo Sapiens is an historical and not a scientific or evolutionary question. 6th, the Human Genome is its cartography is semiotic, not biological. These are facts from Molecular Biology itself that Dr. Ayala did not face in his chapter on Human Evolution and he does not solve the problem of the incomplete of Homo Sapiens in Darwin's "The Descent of Man". In this book, he gives the impression that all the questions and problems connected with the evolutionary origin of Homo Sapiens have been answered, and his book is alive with questions that

indicate that, scientifically, Homo Sapiens is an uncharted continent. The evolution of Man from lower life forms is an evolutionary supposition, there is no evidence for a descent of man, only his classification as "mammal" in the Tree of Life, with his origin unexplained because our knowledge does not reach that far. Evolutionists are not satisfied with that lacuna in our scientific knowledge and want to fill that gap and complete their evolutionary chain, which, or them, has to terminate in Man. But there is not a shred of evidence to support it and it is possible that when the Human Genome reveals its secrets, its genetic cartography, its genetic codes and the multiple genetic signatures, we will read, in endless sets of amino acids and base pairs, the unique identity of the human organism of the human person to which that organism belongs. Because the human embryo and the Human Genome are specifically human, with no evolutionary roots in any non-human ancestor. But scientific facts do show that evolution does not enter into the beginnings or development of the human species, and the semiotic cartography, instead, begins to reveal the genetic autobiography of one made "a little lower than the angels". Father Clifford Stevens
Boys Town, Nebraska

Neodarwinism theory.

This is a well-written, interesting and up-to-date look at what Darwin does for both science and religion. It touches all the bases and clearly makes its point. Darwin offers clarity to both science and religion.

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