

Grand undertaking

A review of
*God's Undertaker: Has
Science Buried God?*
by John C. Lennox
Lion Books, Oxford, 2007

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A “modest level of questioning” Darwinism is viewed as “suicidal” in many circles, John Lennox writes, but it must be done. Just to be prepared for the worst, Lennox has already composed his own epitaph:

*Here lies the body of John Lennox.
You ask me why he's in this box?
He died of something worse than
pox, On Darwinism – heterodox.*

Fortunately for us, Lennox still lives. A professor of mathematics and a fellow in the philosophy of science at Oxford University, he is a committed Christian and a skilful communicator. He successfully took on the Apostle of Atheopathy, Richard Dawkins, in the live *God Delusion Debate*,¹ and Dawkins looked quite red-faced. His new book, *God's Undertaker*,² is an excellent apologetic that takes on the claims of the popular “new atheists”.

Lennox makes the whole book into one extended argument, with each chapter building effectively on what has gone before. When this is done well, a book becomes a page-turner, which the reader wants to read from start to finish. But the danger is that, by building a single argument, many important related topics can get left out. Lennox manages to avoid this pitfall, keeping the interest throughout the book unified around a single argument, while at the same time maintaining a broad scope of coverage. He covers a wide range of the relevant issues and arguments, moving between science, philosophy, and history, but ties it together so that the reader does not feel like he is doing mental heavy lifting.

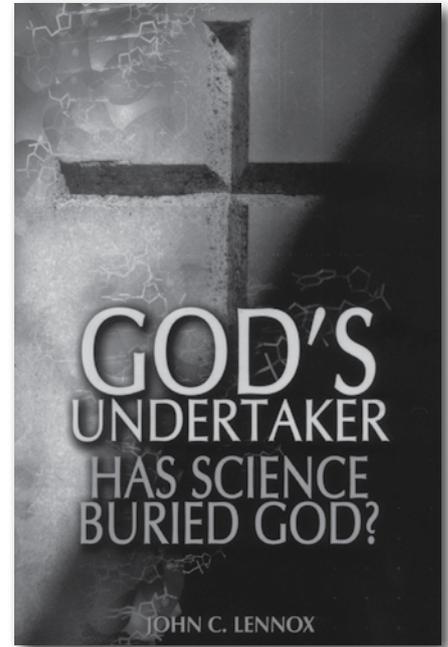
This is evident from the very beginning of the book, which Lennox

starts with a consideration of worldviews. Atheistic critics of religion usually try to draw battle lines between science and religion. Lennox dispels this myth with a pointed argument that worldviews actually shape the way everyone, atheists included, view science, so that the real battle is not between atheism and religion, but between the philosophical system of naturalism (nature is all there is) and the philosophical system of theism. In the process, he takes on the two most popular historical examples often cited to show that there is a “war” between science and religion: Galileo and the church, and the Huxley–Wilberforce debate. He explains that in Galileo’s case, the real problem was the Catholic Church’s dogmatic embrace of Aristotle, and that the Bible does not teach that the earth is the centre of the solar system or any other such Aristotelian nonsense.³ He shows that the Huxley–Wilberforce debate was a debate between scientists, and that it is far from clear that Huxley actually won. All of this material is put together into an easy-to-read argument.

It may be helpful to think of the subjects covered in this book under three headings: first, historical and philosophical issues relating to science and religion; second, cosmological design; and third, biological design. By beginning with philosophy and history, Lennox is able to eliminate philosophical objections to design, hopefully opening minds to consider, as the book progresses, theistic explanations in science.

Naturalism and scientism

We have already looked briefly at the “war” metaphor for the history of science and religion, and Lennox’s critique of that concept. From there, he digs further into the philosophical issues regarding naturalism. The standard atheist or materialist position is that nature, the cosmos, or the physical world, is all there is. If nature is all there is (the philosophy of naturalism⁴), then science is the ultimate source



of knowledge (a doctrine that has been called scientism). This is the contention, either implicit or explicit, of the leading atheist spokesmen, such as his fellow Oxford dons Richard Dawkins and Peter Atkins. Lennox suggests that the atheists’ philosophical position is indefensible, and even incoherent. He points out that “the statement that only science can lead to truth is not itself deduced from science” (p. 42), which means that as a matter of logic, scientism has to be false in order to be true. (Philosophers are familiar with this same problem of self-refutation that the verification theory of knowledge suffers.)

Additionally, Lennox points out that modern atheists who suggest that the growth of science has rendered God an unnecessary hypothesis are often committing a logical category mistake. We can use natural laws of chemistry and physics to understand how an engine works, for instance, but to then conclude that this means the engine originated by impersonal natural laws, or that the plans and purposes of its designer are unimportant, is a confusion of categories (p. 44).

There still remains the major philosophical/theological argument in defence of naturalism.⁵ It is the god-of-the-gaps argument, which suggests that the supernatural becomes

a cheap substitute for serious scientific research. According to the critics, if God is recognized by science, science will cease to function. Lennox short circuits this argument by pointing out that “God is not an alternative to science as an explanation”—science can very well describe mechanisms and natural laws that are themselves dependent on God’s sustenance.⁶ He follows up with a challenge to the sceptics. God is “the ground of all explanation: it is his existence which gives rise to the very possibility of explanation, scientific or otherwise” (p. 47).

It was the deification of nature itself that had the most detrimental effects on science, and it was the Hebraic, biblical doctrine of creation that de-deified nature and made real science possible (pp. 47–50). Modern science was possible because of the belief in a rational God ruling the universe. But, in a sense, nature is being deified again by the claims that the natural world is all there is, and this is again destructive. It “carries with it the corollary that there is no reason to trust our minds when they tell us anything at all; let alone, in particular, that reductionism is true” (p. 57). I was glad to see Lennox make an effective use of this epistemological argument against naturalism; it is a very important one and deserves more widespread attention in Christian apologetics.⁷

Cosmic design

Having laid important philosophical foundations, Lennox proceeds to examine the origins question. He begins at the macro level, the universe itself. He starts with the puzzle of the rational intelligibility of the universe itself. Why are we able to understand and study the universe? Why does mathematics relate to the physical world?

“It is very striking that the most abstract mathematical concepts that seem to be pure inventions of the human mind can turn out to be of vital importance for branches of science, with a vast range of practical applications” (p. 60).



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Lightning often figured prominently into ancient superstitions as an attribute of deities. Lennox points out that in order to understand nature scientifically, it was necessary for nature to be “de-mythologized”; and that the greatest force for de-mythologizing nature was the biblical doctrine of a Creator God existing independent of His creation.

The naturalist worldview can provide, in the words of Eugene Wigner, “no rational explanation” for the intelligibility of the universe (p. 60). But the Christian theist has an explanation: “the intelligibility of the universe is grounded in the nature of the ultimate rationality of God” (p. 61).

“Far from science abolishing God,” Lennox writes,

“... it would seem that there is a substantial case for asserting that it is the existence of a Creator that gives to science its fundamental intellectual justification” (p. 61).

Unfortunately, when Lennox turns to cosmology, he assumes without argument the standard big-bang model of the universe. He explains the significance of scientists accepting an actual beginning to the universe in the mid twentieth century, at a time when many scientists adhered to steady state models. Many nonreligious scientists were startled by the theistic implications of recognizing the simple fact that the universe had a beginning.⁸ A fascinating bit of history, to be sure, and everyone is better off without the “eternal universe” theories. But

Lennox does not deal with the biblical or scientific problems with big-bang cosmology.⁹ While this is unfortunate, he at least does not spend overmuch time on the subject before turning to fine tuning arguments, many of which are compatible with young earth cosmology. Lennox does a fine job presenting these arguments, many of which are familiar and some of which became well known recently thanks to the book and documentary, *The Privileged Planet*.

Biological design

Lennox recognizes that biological design is by far a more controversial issue than cosmic fine-tuning and the anthropic principle, and consequently devotes by far the most space in his book to this issue. He starts with a look at Paley’s classic watchmaker argument (“suppose I had found a watch upon the ground ...”). Lennox defends Paley’s basic design argument as philosophically sound. Hume had criticized design arguments, suggesting that the only way we could know the world was probably designed was by comparing it to other worlds, designed

and not designed. But Lennox suggests that Paley's arguments by analogy were not unreasonable; and more importantly, that Hume's inductive methodology is entirely inappropriate for explaining unobservable, unrepeatable events such as the origin of life. The method of abduction, or inference to the best explanation, is appropriate, and is entirely untouched by Hume's criticisms of design. "An argument that does explain a given effect is always better than one that does not" (p. 83).

So Hume did not defeat the design argument on a philosophical basis. Indeed, Paley's work was written almost 30 years *after* Hume, and Frederick Ferré argued that it withstood most of Hume's objections.¹⁰ The question, then, is whether Darwinian evolution defeats the design argument by providing a better empirical explanation. If Darwinism can explain apparent design as well as or better than the existence of a designer, why invoke God as the biological designer? It could be argued, as many theistic evolutionists have, that even if evolution is true, it does not logically follow that God does not exist. There is an element of truth in this as a matter of logic—so why not rest content with this minimal answer, pointing out that even if evolution is true, it does not mean that there is no master Planner behind it all?

Lennox has at least two reasons for not resting content with this minimal answer. First, many have suggested that the very nature of the evolutionary mechanism ("mindless, motiveless mechanism", to quote Daniel Dennett) is itself an argument against any God (p. 92). Second, Lennox writes, the "sheer vehemence" of the defenders of Darwinism "fascinates me". Why, he asks,

"... is it only in connection with this area of intellectual endeavour that I have ever heard an eminent scientist (with a Nobel Prize to his name, no less) say in a public lecture in Oxford: 'You must not question evolution?'" (p. 93).

Lennox wisely enters the debate over evolution with a discussion of the various definitions of evolution. Natural selection and variation "within

specified limits of complexity" is not at issue (p. 99). What is at issue is whether these small-scale changes (often called microevolution) can be extrapolated out to account for large-scale innovation, such as "new organs, structures, body plans", and "qualitatively new genetic material" (p. 100). Lennox describes the scope of the observed small changes as limited to variation within basic types, citing the German microbiologist and creationist Siegfried Scherer for this point (p. 106). Scherer's perspective,¹¹ which Lennox seems to favour, fits with the biblical concept of created kinds.¹² While this type of variation has been observed, the large-scale changes (the controversial evolution) have not, as Lennox shows by a brief look at the fossil record.

Origin of life

An "even more formidable challenge" for naturalism is the origin of life. Lennox considers, first, the problem of random protein formation, and offers a critique of self-organization scenarios.

Second, he describes the role of DNA in coding for life. It is complex enough when we think of it as the biological master code. But Lennox emphasizes that to think of DNA as a straightforward code that simply gets translated into biological structure is very much an oversimplification. Science is learning that DNA, and its relationship to proteins, is much more interesting and complicated than this. Lennox describes some of the relevant issues. Science is learning about the ability of genes to switch on or off. It is learning about the error-correction work conducted by repair enzymes. And it is learning about the relationship between the genome and all the possible proteins that can arise out of it (the subject of the burgeoning discipline of proteomics). Each of these complications makes evolutionary accounts of DNA origins that much more difficult.

Finally, and most importantly, Lennox turns to the issue of information, arguably the greatest scientific challenge to naturalistic explanations of life. Lennox clearly explains the

Shannon definition of information, and then explains the difference between Shannon information and semantic information (a crucial distinction that anti-design writers often fail to appreciate¹³). Lennox also explains the important concept of specified complexity. Information content that has both complexity (mathematically measurable) and specification (conforming to some meaning existing independently of itself) is inexplicable in terms of chance or natural law. As he moves into a final chapter on the origin of information itself, Lennox notes that information itself is both invisible and immaterial (even though it is transmitted by physical means). "How could purely material causes account satisfactorily for the immaterial?" (p. 168). In short, the information in biology gives evidence of intelligent design.

Lennox revisits the issue of the god of the gaps, noting that it is *knowledge*, not ignorance, that leads to the conclusion of design:

"... it is knowledge of the nature of biological information ..., and knowledge that intelligent sources are the only known sources of information ..., taken together with the fact that chance and necessity cannot generate the kind of complex specified information which occurs in biology, that point to design as the best explanation for the existence of information-rich DNA" (pp. 169–70).

If this is a gap in scientific knowledge, it is a good gap—good because science knows enough to know that materialistic explanations will not suffice.

Identifying the designer

Many in the Intelligent Design community hesitate to speak about the identity of the designer, preferring a "big tent" in which many design proponents of various religious (or nonreligious) backgrounds can gather. Thankfully, though, Lennox is not afraid to address the identity of the designer, and turns to this subject in a brief but hard-hitting epilogue. Drawing on his previous discussion of information science, Lennox rejects an

“unmoved mover” deity as the wrong candidate for speaking into the world. In contrast, Genesis presents us with a Creator God who exists independently of the universe, but speaks into it. The gospel of John informs us that this Creator is the Word, the Word that “became human, to demonstrate fully that the ultimate truth behind the universe is personal” (p. 178).

Substance and style

Throughout *God's Undertaker*, I particularly appreciated Lennox's accessible style of communicating. His writing is clear and to the point, and helpful analogies enlighten and enliven the text. “Aunt Matilda's cake” serves to explain the limits of the scientific enterprise (pp. 40–42). The finest natural scientists in the world could analyse the cake and tell us much about its chemical makeup, nutritional content, and protein structure, but they could not tell us the purpose for which Aunt Matilda made the cake. “Mr Ford in the engine” illustrates the god-of-the-gaps fallacy (p. 44). Someone who knows nothing of engineering and modern technology obtains a car and imagines a god inside the engine, making the vehicle go. When the car runs smoothly, Mr Ford in the engine is happy; when there are problems, Mr Ford must be angry. When the owner of the car learns the principles of engineering, he can explain the operations of the car without invoking Mr Ford in the engine. (But, Lennox notes, it is yet another fallacy to extrapolate to the next level and conclude that the real Mr Ford who designed the car does not exist.)

Lennox's style is also winningly collegial. Without giving ground on the issues, Lennox addresses his opponents cordially. He jokes about the rhetorical excesses of his critics—for instance, when he says that he will “risk a Dawkins' Certificate of Lunacy” by criticizing Darwinism (p. 93).

Conclusion

God's Undertaker had areas that were problematic—for instance, the uncritical use of big-bang cosmology for theistic implications. I would have

liked to see Lennox's discussion of worldviews employ a more rigorous analysis of presuppositions and a more thoroughgoing critique of the concept of philosophical neutrality. These are important issues in themselves, but it should be noted that they played relatively minor roles in the book's overall scheme. As a result, disagreements on these points should still not detract much from what was, in just about all other areas, an outstanding book.

God's Undertaker is, first of all, a readable survey of the scientific evidence for design. Even though there are a number of other very-well written works dealing with similar subject matter, Lennox's book is still outstanding in making the arguments not just readable, but interesting and connected. Secondly, and more importantly, Lennox goes beyond most other popular-level books on design in his effective integration of historical and philosophical issues (such as the origins of science and the-god-of-the-gaps argument) into his presentation. And Lennox goes beyond the standard Intelligent-Design-movement literature by taking the crucial step of identifying the designer as the God of Scripture. As a result, *God's Undertaker* is a book worth adding to any apologetics library.

References

1. *God Delusion Debate* DVD available from CMI, <creation.com/store_redirect.php?sku=30-9-540>.
2. From which the epitaph is taken (p. 94).
3. See also Schirrmacher, T., The Galileo Affair: history or heroic hagiography, *J. Creation* **14**(1):91–100, 2000; <creation.com/gal-affair>.
4. Technically, naturalism comes in two varieties. Methodological naturalism is the idea that *as far as science is concerned* (a purely pragmatic, operative assumption), nature is all there is. Metaphysical naturalism is the idea that nature is all that really exists in an ultimate ontological sense.
5. Note that the god-of-the-gaps argument is limited to defending methodological naturalism; it cannot logically defend metaphysical naturalism.
6. See further Weinberger, L., Whose god? The theological response to the god-of-the-gaps, *J. Creation* **22**(1):120–127, 2008.
7. C.S. Lewis was one of the first to make good use of this argument; see the valuable study: Reppert, V., *C.S. Lewis's Dangerous Idea*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2003. Alvin Plantinga has been its most notable exponent in recent years; see Plantinga, A., *Warrant and Proper Function*, Oxford University Press, New York, ch. 12, 1993. This argument could be considered a species within the family of the “transcendental argument” for the existence of God—that without God (and in its most robust formulation, the God of Scripture specifically), we could not know anything. The pioneer with the “transcendental argument” was Cornelius Van Til. See Bahnsen, G.L., *Van Til's Apologetic*, Presbyterian and Reformed, Phillipsburg, NJ, pp. 4–7, 496–523, 1998.
8. This subject is explored further in Copan, P. and Craig, W.L., *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2004; see also review by Kulikovskiy, A., *Argumentum ad nihilum*: argument amounting to nothing, *J. Creation* **21**(1):20–26, 2007.
9. See Williams, A. and Hartnett, J., *Dismantling the Big Bang*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, 2005; Henry, J., Christian apologists should abandon the big bang, this issue, pp. 103–109.
10. Ferré, F., Introduction; in: Paley, W., *Natural Theology: Selections*, Bobs–Merrill, IN, pp. xi–xxii, 1963.
11. Described succinctly in Scherer, S., Basic types of life: Evidence for design from taxonomy? in Dembski, W.A. (Ed.), *Mere Creation*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, ch. 8, 1998.
12. For further creationist analysis of the concept of biological kinds, including discussion and constructive criticism of Scherer's approach, see Wood, T.C., Wise, K.P., Sanders, R. and Doran, N., A Refined Baramin Concept, *Occas. Papers of the BSG* **3**:1–14, 2003.
13. For instance, erroneously substituting Shannon information for semantic information was the foundation of atheist Victor Stenger's attempted rebuttal to Intelligent Design in his book, *Has Science Found God?*, Prometheus, Amherst, New York, ch. 4, 2003. Stenger's arguments sound sophisticated, but rest on a total confusion of the relevant issues. See critique: Weinberger, L. and Weinberger, D., Designs on the Designer, *J. Creation* **19**(3): 33–36, 2005. Dawkins is another who makes this mistake; see Truman, R., The Problem of Information for the Theory of Evolution: Has Dawkins really solved it? *True Origins* <trueorigin.org/dawkinfo.asp>, 1999.