

# Deconstructing Darwinism—a theory gone bad, a world gone mad

**Charles Darwin: Victorian myth-maker**

A.N. Wilson

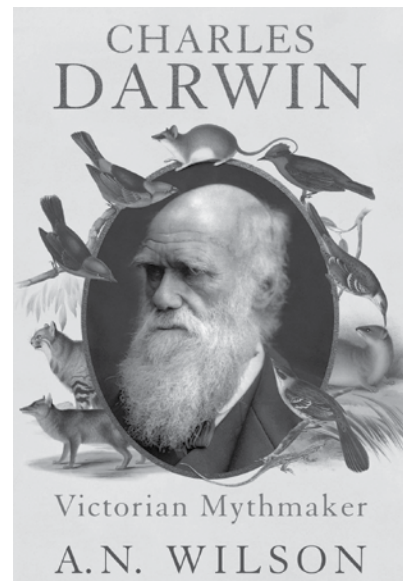
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Jerry Bergman

After reading the many negative reviews of this book in leading newspapers and also on Amazon, most of which were written by persons who obviously did not read the book, or at most read only part of it, it was evident to me that the reviewers opposed the author’s thesis on philosophical grounds. The few mistakes noted, which it was good to be made aware of are very minor and not unusual in a 448-page small print book.

A.N. Wilson (b. 1950), former professor of medieval literature at Oxford (a lecturer in Britain) is a highly acclaimed biographer. His more well-known works include a pamphlet titled *Against Religion*, biographies of Jesus and St Paul, and a history of atheism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century titled *God’s Funeral*. He has now decided to tackle Darwin. His conclusions were unexpected, both to others and, most surprisingly, to him. The enormous detail in the book slowed me down, but it shows the author did his homework.

If Wilson was a doctrinaire evolutionist, the critics no doubt would have raved about his original work. He actually had been a Darwin believer until he did the research for this book. Wilson was not attempting to glorify Darwin, as many of his biographers do, but included both sides of the man,



his good points as well as his warts. I learned much from reading this book, and could check the claims made, given the meticulous documentation (almost 50 pages, from page 373 to page 422) and hundreds of footnotes from original sources.

What may have begun the firestorm against his book was Wilson’s prelude, in which he said “Darwin was wrong. That was the unlooked-for conclusion to which I was inexorably led while writing this book” (p. 1). He added that this conclusion “certainly was not my intention when I began detailed reading for this book”. But the result of his historical research was “to part company from the mainstream of scientific opinion which still claims to believe, and in some senses does believe, the central contentions of Darwin’s famous book, *On the Origin of Species*” (p. 1).

His conclusion was based on the fact that “there is no consensus

among scientists about the theory of evolution”, even the central parts of the theory (p. 3). He added that until he began his research he had assumed “scientific opinion accepted the truth of Darwin’s central theories, and that objections to it were motivated not by scientific doubts but ... most likely religious ones” (p. 3).

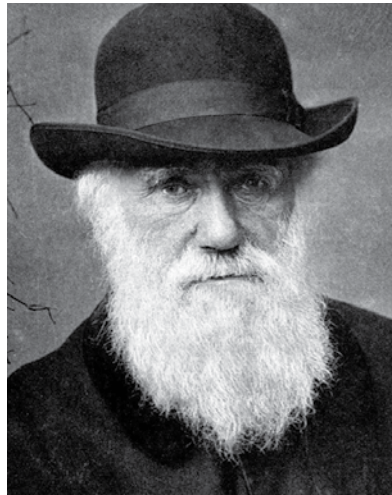
He then illustrated this contention by quoting the leading evolutionary scientists, including Harvard’s E.O. Wilson and Oxford’s Richard Dawkins. One familiar with the field will recognize most of the heated evolution controversies which Wilson accurately relates.

Wilson spent a fair amount of time documenting the sources of the major evolutionary ideas that Darwin implied were his own. For example, in his *The Dialogues*, Hume (1711–1776) attempted to dismantle the argument from design by claiming it amounted to metaphor and anthropomorphic projection (p. 78).

In response to this argument, William Paley wrote his celebrated still-in-print book titled *Natural Theology*, which introduced the well-known story of a traveller who saw a watch lying on the road side while walking. After he picked it up, he immediately realized that a watch demanded a watchmaker. Paley’s thesis is similar to the modern Intelligent Design theory.

Likewise, the creation of a world requires a creator. Wilson added that Paley was important to Darwin because it was “almost the only theologian ... whom Darwin ever read” (p. 80). It was required reading at Oxford, and Darwin admitted the book impressed him greatly. He later rejected Paley for reasons that remain unclear even today, although much speculation exists as to why.<sup>1</sup>

Wilson included an insightful discussion of Darwin’s words to his (Darwin’s) very good friend, botanist Joseph Hooker,<sup>2</sup> “it’s like committing



**Figure 1.** Charles Darwin in 1881, when he was about 71

a murder”, namely because by destroying the reason people had for believing in God, Darwin “murdered not just traditional faith but the Creator himself” (pp. 185, 293). The result was, at least in biology, Darwin removed “any necessity for religious explanations” (pp. 186–187).

Darwin’s *Origin of Species* changed the world as have few other books. It is essentially a 513-page attempt to refute Paley (pp. 80–82). Wilson argues in the rest of his book that Darwin failed to refute Paley. What Darwin did was to create a myth known as Darwinism, which is why Wilson called him a “Victorian Mythmaker” in his title. Natural selection can only operate on what exists and, as Wilson documents, neither Darwin nor anyone else has been able to explain the *arrival* of the fittest. The most common explanation is mutations, a lethal problem because over 99% are either near neutral, mildly deleterious, or lethal.

### Darwin’s racism

Wilson also documented Darwin’s very negative attitude toward the non-British and non-whites. Aside from the many widely referenced quotes on this topic, Wilson added a few less widely known examples. One

is that Darwin believed the British were clearly superior to the “immense mongrel population of Negroes ... [he] encountered in Brazil” (p. 105). Furthermore, “the doctrine of European superiority to other peoples of the planet underlay all of his later work on the descent of the human animal” (pp. 105–106). Darwin even believed that “the English were more ‘civilized’ than, say, the Italians or the Germans” (p. 106).

In some of his many encounters with Negroes (today known as African Americans), Darwin noted that one he met was “uncommonly stupid” (p. 104). The Brazilians were “ignorant, cowardly, & indolent in the extreme” (p. 104). The natives of South America struck Darwin as “more amusing than any Monkeys” (p. 117). He compared the intelligence of the natives he encountered to his domestic pets (p. 300). Darwin felt attempts to civilize the Fuegians was folly (p. 119). He wrote that the South American natives had the “strong odour of negroes, a point of real repugnance” (p. 155). Darwin described the Queen of Tahiti as “an awkward [sic] large woman without any beauty, gracefulness or dignity of manners” (p. 141).<sup>3</sup> Darwin concluded the Fuegian language was barely articulate, but a list of the Fuegian vocabulary, later prepared by a missionary, included over 32,000 words (p. 300). In *Descent of Man*, Darwin repeated claims that Wilson summarized as follows:

“... while the cruelty of slavery shocked Darwin, there is no evidence that he believed, either as a young man or as a mature one, in the equality of the human race, whether as a political ideal to be hoped for or as a scientific fact” (p. 105).

### Some of Darwin’s myths

As an historian, Wilson documented that the supposed insight Darwin

received from his famous Galápagos Archipelago visit is a myth. As the story goes, Darwin noted the finches in the different islands varied in minor ways. Darwin reasoned a few finches had arrived on an island and the different conditions on each island caused them to evolve the differences Darwin noticed (p. 133). Thus, the theory of evolution was born in Darwin's mind.

This mythology was either created or embellished by Darwin's granddaughter, Nora Barlow (p. 133). In fact, Darwin, and even FitzRoy, believed that lifeforms were not created in the exact forms existing today, but had the ability to vary, as all breeders, including Darwin, knew. The question was how much they can vary. It was known even in Darwin's day that much variety was possible, but it was not infinite as Darwin's theory proposed.

### Darwin often ignored his debt to others

A theme throughout the book was that Darwin relied heavily on others, such as the highly accomplished naturalist, author, and Museum Curator Edward Blyth, whom Wilson mentions



**Figure 2.** Erasmus Darwin, Charles Darwin's grandfather, who influenced Charles in the direction of both agnosticism and evolution

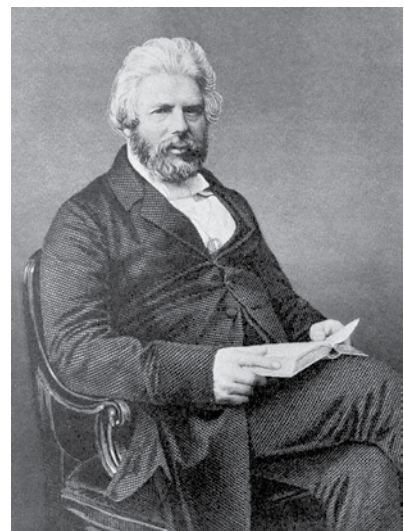
numerous times (for example pp. 174–177, 216–218). However, Darwin repeatedly mentioned natural selection and, at other times, evolution as 'my theory', implying that he originated the theory (pp. 180, 192, 194, 342, 353).

As another example, Darwin was exposed to his grandfather Erasmus Darwin's evolution theory (figure 2). Erasmus, "the most famous poet in England" (p. 23), expressed his evolutionary ideas in his book *Zoonomia* and elsewhere in "verses which disposed of the necessity of a creator". It was 'glaringly obvious' to Darwin that his evolution theory was an alternative to Christianity (p. 44). Charles Darwin eventually accepted this alternative theory, and then set out to refute Paley.

Another example is Robert Chambers' book *Vestiges of Natural History of Creation*, which expounded a theory like Darwin's (figure 3). A major difference was Chambers did not include the theory of natural selection. Like Darwin, Chambers argued that the solution to the origin of life is not God but natural laws (p. 193). When Darwin read *Vestiges*, Wilson added that "it was a very great shock to his system" because he "was brought face to face with the uncomfortable truth that his general underlining ideas were not original" and the basic points of *Vestiges* were very similar to his theory—in other words, he scooped Darwin (pp. 194, 195).

### His difficulty dealing with criticism

Wilson noted Darwin was close to the then leading British anatomist/paleontologist Richard Owen (1804–1892), but they later became 'bitter enemies', which Darwin claims was due to Owen's "jealousy at my [Darwin's] success". The reason was far more likely due to the fact that Owen was an effective outspoken



**Figure 3.** Robert Chambers, who wrote one of the first books which detailed the theory that Charles Darwin modified and claimed as his own.

critic of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection.

Owen was also critical of Darwin because Darwin largely ignored the previous theories of evolution that had been proposed by others, such as Blyth, a concern that Wilson had. Darwin is also well known for his strong dislike of those who found fault with his theory and were open about their opposition. An example is his former friend George Mivart. Mivart argued, to give one example, that natural selection could not produce structures as complex as the vertebrate eye because the beginning stages of the structure would serve no purpose until all of its essential components were present (we know this as 'irreducible complexity'). Darwin "was horribly discountenanced by Mivart's objections to his theory" (p. 291). As a result of Mivart's valid criticisms, Darwin ruthlessly attacked him in writing. Mivart also opposed eugenics, and Darwin's defence of his (Darwin's) son's work in this area was so strong that not long after Mivart critiqued his son, Darwin formally cut off all communication with Mivart.<sup>4</sup>

Eventually, Darwin became so frustrated with the many valid objections to his theory, which he could not answer, that he abandoned the scientific approach in favour of propaganda (p. 292). The reviews by scientists of the first edition of *Origins* were very often respectful but very critical, and many effectively pointed out the serious problems with the theory. The result was that Darwin simply believed what he could not prove, and the more doggedly he believed, “the more resolutely he basked in Huxley’s histrionic public defenses of his theory” (p. 293). Conversely, Darwin’s book ‘confirmed’ in their mind what much of the reading public already suspected, namely evolution was true.

The most useful section of Wilson’s book was on Darwin’s evolution theory. The last months of releasing his 1859 book caused Darwin intense anxiety due to his major doubts about publishing his work. The manuscript was sent by the publisher to two readers for their assessment. One simply stated that *Origin* “does not prove the theory which it expounds ... it is like asking the jury for a verdict without putting witnesses in the box”. The reviewer added one of the book’s virtues was “it concedes the ‘difficulties’ of the theory”, in chapter 9, so should sell well, a major publishing concern (p. 242). The publisher, John Murray “considered the theory as absurd as contemplating a fruitful union between a poker and a rabbit”. Then came the rewriting of *Origin*, and marking mistakes in the proofs, which caused Darwin “bad vomiting” and “great prostration of mind and body ... which half killed [him]” (pp. 242–243).

Instead of a second printing, so many new corrections and changes were required that Murray asked Darwin to prepare a 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, which he did (incurring an extra charge of £72.8d). Many more changes were

required for the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, which came out in November 1860 (p. 268). And with each revision of *The Origins* “through six editions, he discarded more and more of its central theory” until “the theory itself was in tatters” (pp. 286, 342). So many problems existed that at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “‘Darwinism’ had been all but put to sleep, and science had moved on”; but then, from the “mid-twentieth century onwards, it awoke with all of its mid-Victorian anti-religious trappings” (pp. 286–287).

### Incorrect historical claims

Charles openly acknowledged the central role that Malthus played in the development of his own ideas about biological evolution. Darwin even referred to Malthus as ‘that great philosopher’.<sup>5</sup> Darwin wrote that when he read Malthus’s book on population, “... it at once struck me that under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones ... destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species.”

Darwin concluded that in his day infant mortality was ‘very high’ and only the fittest could survive in the struggle for life (p. 295).

The fact is, “Malthus’s predictions of a struggle for survival by cataclysm could not have been less accurate” (p. 20). Even in England in Darwin’s day “where child mortality was painfully high, it was still the case that a huge majority of humans survived childhood” (p. 294). We now know that, “instead of blind struggle, there was ingenuity; instead of selfish grab, there was co-operation; with an increase in population, there actually followed an increase in food” due to better farming techniques and new hybrids (p. 20).

Wilson carefully documents how wrong Malthus was, and when

Darwin wrote *The Descent of Man* he should have reflected this reality. In chapter four of *The Descent*, the “Malthusian doctrine is retained in all its nonsensical plentitude” (p. 295). Wilson summarizes this book as follows: “Darwin, when placed beside even the most reactionary or fascistically inclined readers of the twenty-first century, seem[s] simply monstrous”, even claiming “the inferior and discarded breeds [of humans] felt no pain as they died” (pp. 296–297).

### The gradual evolution problem

A major problem Darwin had, which is still true of Darwinists today, was coming up with evidence for his view that nature does not proceed in leaps, but rather gradually, little by little, as human breeding does. If this was true, all life would be “in a state of infinitely slow evolution to something else”, and, as Darwin taught, taxonomy classification would be only temporary—a condition the fossil record simply does not support (p. 249).

This fact contradicts Darwin’s main thesis that

“... natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinizing, throughout the world, every variation, even the slightest: rejecting that which is bad, preserving and adding up all that is good: silently and insensibly working ... at the improvement of each organic being” (p. 251).

This problem is why Gould and Eldridge argued for punctuated equilibrium, in which some lifeforms, in geological terms, change rapidly, while at other times they are in a state of stasis. Nonetheless, “all life would be a work in progress, always changing, at least eventually” (p. 250). Wilson reviewed Darwin’s book on flowering plants, first published in 1896, noting Darwin recognized that plants “provide

one of the most devastating challenges” to his theory (p. 269).

Wilson documented that the discovery of the laws of genetics were “lethal to Darwinism” in spite of the major efforts to blend the two to form Neo-Darwinism decades later (p. 277). The reason it was a lethal nail in the coffin for Darwin was the problem that Mendelism created for Darwin’s gradualism. Darwin recognized this even though, as far as we know, he never read Mendel, and never acknowledged the problem that limited variation could not be overcome, acknowledging: “If this [Mendelism] were *true*, adios *theory*”, meaning his theory (p. 279). We now know that because nearly all mutations are near neutral or lethal, and variation is not unlimited as Darwin proposed, his theory was without foundation.

Wilson is very effective in explaining the fallacies of Darwinism. His summary of chapter 3 of the *Origin* is that all life is in a state of constant war with each other, the weak die, the strong survive, but the result is that the healthy and happy thrive. Wilson explains this is like telling children the frightening story that nature is in a constant state of brutal war, but it all ends well because the strong and good lived happily ever after (p. 250).

### The effect of the book in Darwin’s lifetime

In his lifetime, Darwin never did fully convince the science professors in Britain “though there were those abroad ... especially in Germany who became *plus royaliste que le roi* [roughly, more Catholic than the Pope] in their enthusiasm for the survival of the fittest” worldview (p. 241). Darwinism “almost from the first, was widely popular in Germany” (p. 316). Haeckel and others were among Darwin’s most active proselytizers, which formed the basis of the social

programs “of the Third Reich, culminating in the Holocaust” (p. 316).

In the end,

“... although Darwin’s book would persuade the thinking world ... that evolution was true, he would have a harder time persuading the scientific academy that one species could evolve into another ... the professors of science were not ready yet to believe that species could mutate [into other species] [but], the thinking public most definitely was ready [emphasis in original]” (pp. 241, 245).

Furthermore, “... the great majority of scientists, especially in Britain ... had rejected evolutionary theory as continental claptrap” (p. 266). In fact, “many of Darwin’s most enthusiastic supporters ... were Christians. ... what was professionally troubling to him, was the difficulty in persuading his fellow scientists” (p. 257).

His close colleague, the eminent botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817–1911), devoted his 1869 presidential address at the British Association for the Advancement of Science to “the fact that Darwin’s theory had failed” (p. 280). Darwin’s reply to this news from Hooker was that he had at this time partly abandoned his theory of evolution by natural selection in favour of Lamarckism, thus “the *Origin* triumph was not that it was true in detail, but that it made people believe in evolution in general” (p. 281).

Darwin also, in an effort to explain the arrival of the fittest, developed his theory of pangenesis, which was soon refuted.<sup>6</sup> Pangenesis is the idea that all cells in an organism can shed minute particles called gemmules, which circulate throughout the body and finally congregate in the gonads, allowing cells of the parent that undergo changes to transmit these modifications from parents to their offspring.

### Darwin’s doubts about his theory

Several sections deal with Darwin’s personal doubts about his theory. The best example is his constant revision of his *Origin* book in each new edition until the last, the 6<sup>th</sup>, in which a large number of major changes were made.<sup>7</sup> Burrows concluded that the 1<sup>st</sup> edition is the clearest and Darwin actually “weakened his argument in an attempt to meet criticisms” in the later editions (p. 256). Quoting Professor Vorzimmer, Wilson wrote that Darwin’s history in dealing with the many problems of his theory “is one of documented qualifications and nagging doubts”.

Furthermore, Darwin’s annotations and marginalia on his copies of the printed articles about topics related to his evolutionary thesis “amount to over a hundred thousand words, and reflect twenty-three years of doubt” (p. 256). As one Darwin biographer wrote, although Darwin was a warrior for his theory for most of his life, he nevertheless “had many moments either of doubting it or (which is different) of not seeing how it could be defended” (p. 256).

### Darwin’s racist book

Wilson also reviewed Darwin’s 1871 book *The Descent of Man*, noting it covered existing differences in people groups, some very racist. Darwin suggested that man could have evolved from some comparatively small animal, like a chimpanzee, or from a powerful one, like the gorilla (p. 302). From this book likely came the speculation that man evolved from apes. Much, or even most, of the book contained material not concerned with humans, but rather insects, fish, birds, reptiles, and amphibians, much of it “scarcely throws any light on the supposed subject of the book, namely the descent of man” (p. 302). Darwin even saw evolution in the behavior of his progeny, concluding that his

[Darwin's] children's enjoyment of hiding in the bushes was due to the "hereditary remains of [the human] savages' state" when we were less evolved (p. 189).

Some of Darwin's claims in this book are simply wrong, such as the statement that a thousand persons a year "were all burnt at the stake" by the church (pp. 178–179 in Darwin). The research puts the number at, at most, 40 per year, not for heresy as Darwin implied, but for behaviour that "Darwin himself hotly disapproved, both on evolutionary and bourgeois principles" (pp. 303–304).

### Evolution is the doorway to atheism

As Wilson correctly pointed out, "Darwin had come to disbelieve in Christianity". Although he was unable to openly fully admit his conclusions in this area, in one private letter he acknowledged his hatred toward Christianity (p. 239). As one of Darwin's relatives noted, Charles Darwin and his brothers "were quite unable to understand the minds of the poor, the wicked, or the religious" (p. 327).

Darwin's lack of belief affected his wife, Emma, whose "faith was less vivid than it had been in her youth", according to their daughter, Etty, who herself became "a decided unbeliever" (p. 239). Wilson opines that "It is hard to think of any other branch of modern science ... whose proponents spend as much time talking about the errors of theology as of the truth of their own area of expertise" (p. 287). Lastly, the story of mankind's emerging from a long line of primates by survival of the fittest "is now the dominant myth", replacing belief in descent from Adam by both scientists and among the elites of secular society (p. 298). Since the first Adam has been removed from reality, there is no longer any justification to accept the last Adam,

Christ (p. 334). In short, Darwin replaced Adam, and concurrently "the deification of Darwin [occurred], both by his few disciples in the nineteenth century and by the many in the twentieth and twenty-first" (p. 366).

Wilson documented that Darwinism had become a religion. It was spoken of as a faith, and those who rejected the view that the origin of humans was purely natural, including the co-founder of the theory, Alfred Russel Wallace and St George Mivart, were excommunicated from the tribe, the loyal circle of Darwin supporters (pp. 319, 325, 338). Wilson adds that "the worship of Darwin as a man ... is all necessary to bolster the religion of Darwinism" (p. 347).

The veneration Darwin had achieved is illustrated by a note he sent to a complete stranger, sold at an auction in 2015. The note, expected to fetch between 70 and 90 thousand dollars, sold for \$197,000. This amount was \$4,800 per word for a few common words written in November of 1880 that Darwin penned to tell the writer he did not believe the Bible was a divine revelation, nor that Jesus Christ was the son of God (pp. 351–352). In the end, it was Darwin, more than any other man, that persuaded much of the academic world that "'special creation' was wrong and 'evolution' was right" (p. 360).

### Conclusions

In conclusion, this is one of the best biographies of Darwin I have read. It covers enormous detail and, although parts are laudatory of Darwin, as a whole it is very balanced and well-supported, with references to the letters and books penned by Darwin and his family and friends. Wilson even covered Darwin's endless health problems, adding one more theory to the mix—lactose intolerance, which seems to fit his symptoms and the

situations in which he became ill (p. 273).

He also covers the harm Darwin has caused to society, writing that "Darwin was a direct and disastrous influence, not only to Hitler, but on the whole mid-twentieth-century political mindset" (p. 346). Furthermore, "Darwinism, as is shown by the current state of debate, is resistant to argument because it is resistant to fact" (p. 347).

### References

1. See Sulloway, F.J., Why Darwin rejected intelligent design, *J. Biosciences* 34(2):173–183, 2009.
2. Letter to Hooker dated 11 January 1844; in: Burkhardt, F. (Ed.), *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, vol. 3, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 2, 1987.
3. Darwin, C., Diary of the voyage of the H.M.S. Beagle; in: Barlow, N. (Ed.), *The Works of Charles Darwin*, vol. 1, New York University Press, New York, p. 325, 1987.
4. Adrian, D. and Moore, J., *Darwin: The life of a tormented evolutionist*, Time Warner Books, New York, p. 613, 1991.
5. Barlow, N. (Ed.), *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin*, Norton, New York, p. 120, 1958.
6. See Bergman, J., *The Dark Side of Darwin*, New Leaf Press, Green Forest, AR, chap. 10, pp. 187–210, 2011.
7. According to Charles Darwin in the sixth edition of the *Origin of Species* edited by J.W. Burrow (Penguin, New York, 1985), as quoted by Wilson on p. 256.