Creation and Evolution

by Lenn E Goodman
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reviewed by Arthur McCalla

Lenn E Goodman (of the Philosophy Department at Vanderbilt University) is a distinguished scholar of metaphysics and ethics, specializing in Jewish and Islamic philosophy. Having previously (Goodman 1996) argued that the God of Abraham is also the God of philosophers, Goodman here further develops his ongoing reflection on the relationship between God and the good and his long-standing conviction that our idea of God and our values are dialectically intertwined so that natural theology and natural law “inform, critique, and enlarge the other” (Goodman nd). The book consists of an introduction, five chapters of exposition and argument, and a brief afterword. Chapter 5 is the heart of the book.

Goodman’s aim is “to lower the temperature” in the debates over the “fit of Darwinian discoveries with religious values and beliefs” (p 1)—in fact, there is very little in this book about belief and a great deal about values. Writing against both biblical fundamentalists and militant secularists, Goodman hopes to show that religion is no threat to evolution and that Darwinism doesn’t mean that God is dead. His grand theme is that proximate and ultimate causes need not be rivals and therefore that evolution and theism are complementary; God works in and through nature.

Comments in chapter 1, which presents a short history of anti-evolutionism in America interspersed with conceptual clarification of philosophical concepts, betray Goodman’s irritation with Dawkins, Hitchens, and their ilk. Contemporary anti-evolutionism, he says, is not a manifestation of ignorance or backwardness, but an understandable reaction against the atheist and morally relativist constructions put on evolution by some of its most vocal champions. Despite his sympathy for anti-evolutionists’ defense of their faith, however, Goodman’s discussion in chapter 2 of how we ought to read the Genesis creation story rejects out of hand the literalist reading favored by fundamentalist anti-evolutionists. Instead, he endorses a traditionalist reading of Genesis as teaching ethical and spiritual truths, not scientific or cosmological ones. He emphasizes that Genesis, as a polemic against ancient Near Eastern paganism, naturalizes nature and points to a transcendent God as the cause of the natural order.

Chapter 3 outlines “The case for evolution” from Darwin to recent DNA evidence. Chapter 4 then considers “Three lines of critique” that have been offered against it. Goodman tells his readers up front that he does not think that the critiques are fatal to the evolutionary hypothesis, but that they “reveal evolution’s strengths and limits” (p 112). The three critiques are: (1) the nineteenth-century charge that evolution rests on a tissue of circumstantial evidence, pursued in the twentieth century by the creation science movement and
elaborated by Alvin Plantinga; (2) Karl Popper’s mid-twentieth-century charge that Darwinism is not falsifiable and therefore vacuous because evolution is a near tautology: types that survive are, by definition, well adapted; but adaptive traits are those that promote survival; and (3) the recent charge from proponents of “intelligent design” (ID) that living structures and processes are irreducibly complex and therefore cannot have come into being through evolution alone.

Goodman judges that the first charge is simply wrong; the scientific evidence for evolution is robust. He bluntly rejects as special pleading Plantinga’s attempt to claim equal epistemological status for biblical and scientific evidence. Goodman next shows that evolution eludes Popper’s charge because it is not, in fact, tautological and it does risk predictions that require confirmation by evidence. In turning his attention to ID, Goodman notes that ID does not refute Darwinism but rather offers supernatural design as the solution to any questions currently unanswered by science. Goodman regards this “God of the gaps” argument as both tactically and strategically ill-advised. Tactically, because such a God must shrink as knowledge grows; strategically, because rather than seeing God only where our knowledge fails, theists should see God everywhere, including in the operations of nature revealed by science. He criticizes both secular Darwinists and ID proponents for taking natural causation to be opposed to theism, and then either enshrining natural causation as the final explanation for reality in place of an ultimate source or, out of fear, supplementing natural causality with miraculous causality. Goodman identifies both moves as idolatry: the displacement of reverence for God onto “the works of our own hands or figments of our fears and wishes” (p 132). This is an interesting statement because it clearly shows that Goodman here is not merely engaging in philosophical analysis of the concept of idolatry (in the manner of Halbertal and Margalit 1992), but using the concept normatively, that is, practicing philosophical theology.

Chapter 5 (and Goodman’s entire reconciliation project) is built on the premise that Darwinism does not eliminate value or teleology from nature. Evolution, in this reading, is a progressive (albeit not unilinear) process in which, as a result of the pursuit by every living being of the good of survival, intrinsic values of order, awareness, and personhood emerge. This immanent teleology points Goodman to theism, not in the sense of a divine Designer, of course, but in the sense of an ultimate cause of the values perceptibly emergent in the natural order. He ascribes these finite goods “to the Infinite Goodness where immanence and transcendence meet” (p 170). Darwinism in this reading displays one of the secondary causes through which God as Ultimate Cause works. Far from opposing the biblical creation narrative, Darwinism adds to it “a plotline, the trajectory by which species win their local good” (p 145).

Goodman’s opponents are clear enough; and so are his fellow travelers. Throughout the book he cites approvingly ancient and medieval rabbinic and, occasionally, Christian biblical commentators, while in chapter 5 he aligns himself with the modern natural theologians Aubrey Moore, Teilhard de Chardin, and Arthur Peacocke. The overall picture is one of a theistic Idealism without miracles or a personal God (he never states this latter point explicitly, but it seems likely from among other things his extensive and positive use of Spinoza’s *Ethics*). Like the Romantics, Goodman is seeking the Infinite in the finite, and indeed his motto could be Friedrich Schleiermacher’s “we should do everything with religion, nothing because of religion” (1996:30).
As a practical matter, it is important for secularists and religious moderates to work together against anti-evolutionism. But two final points suggest difficulties that the author’s reconciliation of evolution and theism may present to secular readers. First, in his afterword, Goodman states, “Nature, like scripture, demands careful, active, thoughtful and responsible reading and readily falls prey to misinterpretation” (p 176). Reversing the emphasis of this sentence, we may ask why the Bible deserves such reverent treatment. Is this not a variation of Plantinga’s special pleading? Relatedly, here and there Goodman takes passing swipes at the modern historical science of biblical criticism, which seeks to locate the books of the Bible in the socio-historical context in which they were written and edited.

Second, values exist; does it matter ethically whether they come from an ultimate source or emerge from an entirely materialistic evolutionary process? While Goodman would rightly deny that he argues from authority or revelation, his reconciliation project depends on seeing the Infinite in the finite. Readers who do not share this religious perspective may be unwilling to reconcile evolution and theism at the price of renouncing naturalistic explanation of values and religion. It may be that this thoughtful book will fulfill its goal of encouraging readers to develop their own models of reconciling Darwinism and religion only for readers who share its author’s religious interpretation of the world.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AUTHOR’S ADDRESS
Arthur McCalla
Department of Philosophy/Religious Studies
Mount Saint Vincent University
166 Bedford Highway
Halifax, NS B3M 2J6 Canada
arthur.mccalla@msvu.ca

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