

REPORTS



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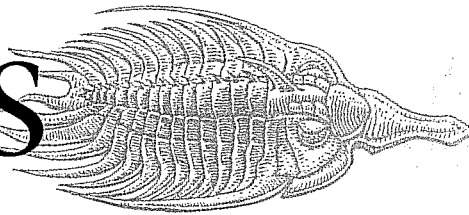
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anthropic principle by saying we apparently arose in one friendly universe among many unsuitable ones. Again, does this not go beyond the science? The only way to know a conceivable universe is possible is to observe it; that is what empirical science is about. We can observe only ours. That a physically different universe is mathematically possible does not prove it could, in fact, exist, much less that it does.

Neil deGrasse Tyson, Barry A Palevitz, and others claim that science cannot provide us with ethics or a moral code. (Several note correctly that we can do that without religion. We likely have, using religion to bolster such codes.) GG Simpson pointed out the possibility of arriving at a contingent moral code without a religious basis in his *The Meaning of Evolution* (1949), still a good read.

Jacob Bronowski showed that science *does* provide a moral code because its practice requires independence of observation and thought, and therefore dissent. Dissent requires freedom, including free speech, and tolerance (not just indifference, but respect). These, all democratic values, derive from the practice of science, not from religious dogma. Bronowski's *Science and Human Values* (1965) was popular undergraduate reading decades ago, but today's scientific community seems unaware of it. Several essays also note the harm done by the certainty claimed for religious or other dogmas. Bronowski eloquently illustrated this at Auschwitz in his 1973 BBC television series and accompanying book, *The Ascent of Man*.

Section 6, Scientific Explanations of Religious Belief, is intriguing. The authors, none seemingly persons of faith, approach the question from various viewpoints. Kurtz asks, "*How do we explain the willingness of so many people—no doubt a majority of [humankind]—to outstrip the evidence and to weave out fantasies in which their deepest psychological longings are expressed and their national mythologies fulfilled?*" (italics added). My answer: "Paul, you just did."

Many essays consider religious belief, particularly about testable claims. Perhaps the failure to include more scientists who are "believers" has caused a serious omission, one

hinted at in Kurtz's essays and in James Lovelock's. Religion fails in the area of scientific evidence, despite Dembski's claims. But wouldn't we expect that? A first-century tentmaker who, more than any contemporary, founded institutional Christianity, said that faith is about things not seen (2 Corinthians 4:18). As Kurtz and Lovelock note, valid faith is more akin to the arts than science.

"Religion," in Pandian's sense, (mis)uses empirical evidence to bolster faith. Creationists (including IDCs) misuse evidence to attack evolution (and all natural science). Basically, they are insecure in their faith and need evidence and an absolute authority to sustain it. Their faith requires "things seen" for support. Thus, they are "putting God to the test" (Matthew 4:7; Deuteronomy 6:16), and are essentially faith/less. "Scientific" creationism and IDC are bad science, and also bad faith. No author in this anthology notes this.

In their discussion of the maturation of human cognition, Mary Belenky and others (1986) describe "received knowers", who accept knowledge primarily on authority. Later stages learn by objective analysis of experience and perhaps integrate this creatively with subjective knowledge, which they can only report to others, who cannot directly experience it. Most people stick with received knowledge, because of "their deepest psychological longings." It is vital to some religions and other institutions that their flocks remain received knowers. Encouraging people to move beyond this is our problem. This interesting book does little to solve it.

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EVOLUTION AS A RELIGION: STRANGER HOPES AND STRANGER FEARS, REVISED EDITION

by Mary Midgley
London: Routledge, 2002. 212 pages.

Reviewed by
Nicholas J Matzke, NCSE

Steven Rose, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement*, described Mary Midgley as "one of the sharpest critical pens in the West." Her favorite targets are the academic barons that attempt to take human psychology and reduce it to a single factor. In recent times, the two major psychological paradigms have been based on selfishness and social conditioning, the favorites of sociobiology and social science, respectively. These are two large and powerful academic camps, and few can match Midgley's dexterity in staking out a position in the no-man's land between them and defending it against all comers.

Midgley's central point is always that there is a deep psychological commonality among humans — that is, that human nature is quite real, and has a definite, but complex, structure. After all, says Midgley, we should expect nothing less than this based on the theory of evolution — we even share substantial psychological commonalities with other social mammals. This is philosophically important because it gives everyone some common ground on which philosophical and moral questions can eventually be resolved.

Midgley staked out this position in the first sentence of her first book, *Beast and Man: The Roots of Human Nature* (1978): "Humans are not just rather like animals, humans *are* animals." This put her directly in opposition to the then-popular "blank slate" view, which states that cultural conditioning

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makes us what we are. The cultural determinists developed their view in reaction to early 1900s social Spencerism (commonly known by the misnomer “social Darwinism”), which often justified racism, sexism, and economic oppression as “natural”. Midgley acknowledges that these abuses occurred, but points out that the “blank slate” view is an overreaction, and is just as easily abused by oppressors: “blank slate” humans, fully determinable by conditioning, are a dictator’s dream.

This side of Midgley’s work, anticipating books like Steven Pinker’s *The Blank Slate* (2002) by 20 years or more, should have made her quite popular among evolutionary biologists. However, it is not well known because Midgley gained notoriety primarily as a critic of sociobiology. In *Beast and Man*, after demolishing the cultural determinists, Midgley turned right around and went after the sociobiologists, who were in the ascendant with the publication of works such as *Sociobiology* (Wilson 1976).

Her primary problem with sociobiology was not its evolutionary premises or population genetics methods, but rather its egoist rhetoric that portrayed psychology as unreal fluff that could be reduced to selfishness. This seemed unnecessary and likely to cause the repetition of many Spencerist mistakes, thereby harming Midgley’s central project of rehabilitating the concept of human nature for philosophical use.

The publication of Richard Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and its description of humans as “robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes” did nothing to assuage Midgley’s concerns, and her discontent with this work led her to start a rather bitter feud with Dawkins in the august pages of the journal *Philosophy*. The initial exchange (Midgley 1979; Dawkins 1981) is infamous for its venomous prose and makes for unusually entertaining philosophy reading, but it should be remembered that Midgley apologized for her barbs (perhaps the only time this has happened) and summarized the positive goals behind her bomb-throwing (Midgley 1983).

The first edition of *Evolution as*

a Religion was published in 1985. To forestall worries based on the title, Midgley is neither claiming that evolution is a religion and criticizing it on this basis, nor saying that evolution should be turned into a religion. Instead, Midgley remains concerned with discerning the proper philosophical implications of the theory of evolution, and criticizing the various metaphysical confusions that get in the way of doing so.

In *Evolution as a Religion*, her list of targets has expanded beyond just Dawkins. She begins by noting that popular books by prominent scientists often contain surprisingly grand statements that are very difficult to construe as scientific. One example is Dawkins’s moral conclusion in *The Selfish Gene* that we should “try to teach generosity and altruism, because we are born selfish.”

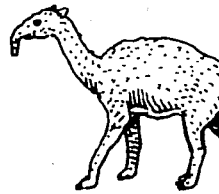
Other examples abound. Molecular biologist Jacques Monod wrote in *Chance and Necessity* (1971) that man “must realize that, like a gypsy, he lives on the boundary of an alien world.” In the conclusion to *Sociobiology* (1976), EO Wilson wrote that by the end of the 21st century, the social sciences would be reduced to biology, neurobiology would cannibalize psychology, and that this would produce “a genetically accurate and hence completely fair code of ethics.” Similar ambitious conclusions about humanity and humanity’s place in the universe can be found in more recent works as well, for example Stephen Jay Gould’s philosophy of contingency in *Wonderful Life* (1989) and Carl Sagan’s vision of humanity migrating to and speciating on different planets in *Pale Blue Dot* (1994).

Midgley calls these statements scientific “myths” — in her usage, imaginative visions connecting facts and values into a unified picture. What are we to make of them? Are they to be taken as confident scientific conclusions, as they are sometimes presented, along with the plain science presented in the books? They are certainly not found in the peer-reviewed journal articles on which these authors all built their scientific reputations. Midgley points out that these visions share some peculiar features with something that these authors go out of their

way to critique, namely religion. Religion is often criticized for numerous failings — Midgley lists some: “priesthoods, prophecies, devotion, exaltation, heresy-hunting and sectarianism, ritual, sacrifice, fanaticism, notions of sin and absolution and salvation, and the confident promise of a heaven in the future” (Midgley 1987) — yet many of these characteristics can be found, to various degrees, in typically anti-clerical popular science books. They do not really get well-organized enough to amount to full-fledged religion (although some older imaginative “scientific” visions — Marxism, for example — seem to have come close), but it appears that when religion is kicked out the front door, its elements have a tendency to sneak in the back and reappear unrecognized.

Midgley does not think that scientific myth-making is necessarily a bad thing — all major advancement in social, scientific, and moral matters is guided by these kinds of imaginative visions — but she does argue that it is very important that we recognize what is going on. Myths should be stated explicitly and held up for comparison with alternatives just like anything else. They certainly should not be accepted simply on the basis of their being “scientific”, a mistake which is very common given the prestige of science and the common lack of philosophical education among the public and even professional scientists. It is far better, says Midgley, if we consciously assemble our myths with an eye towards current human problems and the current human position — that is, the human scale in both space and time. Whether or not the cosmos is indifferent, we clearly have some pressing concerns down here on earth. Migration across the galaxy is an intriguing idea, but surely the current priority is to make sure we do not destroy the planet that we currently inhabit. Midgley suggests that the Gaia Hypothesis advocated by James Lovelock may be the kind of scientific myth that should be taken more seriously in this context. Although commonly derided for its religious overtones, it is not clear that it is on worse metaphysical ground than selfish genes.

The second edition of *Evolution*

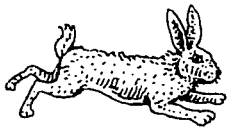


as a Religion contains a new foreword by Midgley commenting on some of the changes in the myth-scene since 1985. Marxism has completely died in the interval, but remains a useful running example of the extent to which a secular myth can develop. Midgley also notes approvingly that much of the brasher rhetoric of sociobiology has calmed, although it is now widespread in the popular imagination (just think of the analyses of Clinton during the Lewinsky scandal).

Evolution as a Religion remains relevant in the 21st century. Concerning the creationism/evolution scene, Midgley, like others (Miller 1999; Ruse 2003) argues that much of the motivation for anti-evolutionism is the bleak, harsh visions of humanity and the universe so common in the popular science writing of the 20th century. She was somewhat prophetic here — *The Blind Watchmaker* (Dawkins 1986) was a major influence in the development of Phillip Johnson's anti-evolutionism.

Midgley's argument that a diversity of imaginative visions can be constructed on the same basic facts has been confirmed now that we are beginning to see scientists writing books for the public that explicitly advocate imaginative visions opposed to those of the 1970s and 1980s. For example, Simon Conway Morris's recent books (1998, 2003) are essentially a theistic evolutionary rebuttal to Stephen Jay Gould's philosophy of contingency in *Wonderful Life*. Stuart Kauffman's *At Home in the Universe* (1995) is a rebuttal to existentialist views such as those of Monod.

Both of these authors try to defeat one cosmic vision by constructing another one out of the same mainstream scientific facts. The writers in the "intelligent design" movement take this several steps further, thinking that to repair the metaphysical situation they have to assail basic scientific facts. But perhaps all of these works, from ultra-Darwinist to anti-evolutionist, share a similar flaw, namely undue concern about determining the cosmic status of humanity. Midgley might suggest that we should worry a little less about questions of cosmic status and focus on changing the *status quo* down here on earth.



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NATURE, HUMAN NATURE, AND GOD

by Ian G Barbour
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.
170 pages.

Reviewed by Stacey E Ake,
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Given the title, *Nature, Human Nature, and God*, one might have been led to expect a book of gargantuan proportions, for there is very little that is left uncovered by that tripartite rubric. Strangely enough, there is even a kind of echo of Douglas Adams's *Life, The Universe, and Everything* inasmuch as Ian Barbour's latest book is something of a handbook or guidebook to what is out there now in the world of science and religion, or, at least more specifically, science and Christianity.

At a pleasant 170 pages, the book takes the form of a thoroughgoing and exceedingly up-to-date review article of five timely topics in science and religion: God and evolution; evolution, genetics, and human nature; neuroscience, artificial intelligence, and human nature; God and nature: A process view; and theology, ethics, and the environment. As with Barbour's previous work, such as *When Science Meets Religion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000) and *Religion and Science: Historical and Contemporary Issues* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), the style of book is that of a detailed and orderly outline of the topics under discussion. Lucid, clear, and articulate in structure and presentation, the book gives one the impression of going by somewhat quickly, rather in the way that objects are seen in one's peripheral vision while driving down a country road. My guess is that this sensation is indicative of a certain peculiarity of the book; namely, that

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