

Evolution as a Religion

Review, with Commentary, of Mary Midgley's 2002 Book

In 1985, Routledge published renowned British philosopher Mary Midgley's book, *Evolution as a Religion*.^{*} In 2002 she rewrote the Introduction and Routledge re-published the work as a revised edition. The book has 191 pages of text--probably more than 40,000 words--and numerous quotes from the biology literature (although no reference is more recent than 1985). Because Midgley is such a careful thinker, skilled in philosophy and quite knowledgeable in the biological sciences, discussion of this work should yield useful insights relevant to the theme of this website.

Mary Midgley is not a Christian. She says of Christianity, "it's a perfectly sensible world view," although she doesn't hold to it herself. She's a Darwinist. But she's far too smart to be drawn into scientism, the popular view that science, and science alone, answers the deep questions of existence. She understands quite well scientific methodology and the limits of science. Unlike some moderns, Midgley acknowledges the existence of evil and its origin in human nature. She explored this theme in a previous book, *Wickedness*. She's also acutely aware of moral, psychological, sociological and spiritual issues, so she's a contemporary intellectual whose views on science and how it relates to the broader issues of life deserve to be examined.

^{*} On this website, we argue that it's not evolution that is the religion Midgley discusses in her book, rather it's pantheism. In our view, evolution is the outworking or the cardinal tenet of pantheism, and pantheism is the religion that motivates the writers Midgley discusses in her book.

Evolution as a Religion is no easy read. She certainly is not writing for the general public! Nevertheless, the following emerge as her basic arguments: Darwinian evolution explains origins. She holds to billions of years and to biological evolution; she calls that factual science. The title of her book reflects her thesis that some scientists have gone beyond the facts of science and have developed ideas that are implied by evolution but that she regards as nothing more than speculation. She calls these notions “beliefs,” therefore they are “religious.” So her book’s title evidently means that certain speculations and implications deriving from evolution that are not based in discovered fact are religious, although they are easily (mis-)construed as scientific because they come from such esteemed scientists as Francis Crick, Jacques Monod, Edwin Wilson, Stephen Weinberg and Richard Dawkins. The particular notions she analyzes and skewers in the book include social Darwinism, the naive expectation of perpetual progress, and eugenics (or the creation by gene technology of an improved human). Along the way, Midgley wanders into such other topics as the famous late 19th century Wilberforce-Huxley debate over evolution and religion, Marxism (she terms it religious), and Utopianism (she scoffs at such presumption). Midgley fears that the “quasi-scientific” fantasies she discusses corrupt not only science but society.

Let passages from *Evolution as a Religion* speak for their author: – “The theory of evolution is not just an inert piece of theoretical science. It is, and cannot help being, also a powerful folk-tale about human origins” (page 1). With this assertion, Midgley begins her book. She views Darwinism as scientifically demonstrable truth that also serves the role of providing

meaning to life. The rest of her book is a sustained argument that the implications certain writers derive from evolutionary theory are illegitimate (“speculation”). The theory of evolution has been “hijacked” (her word, page 9) in an attempt to develop worldviews that are, in fact, not scientific at all. She states (p. 8), “This [view of certain sociologists] is not a denial of evolutionary theory itself, which is usually conceded as correct in its own sphere, but a steady rejection of any attempt to use it in the interpretation of human affairs.”

Midgley criticizes the use of evolutionary theory to justify unrestrained capitalism, Marxism, social Darwinism, the depressingly pessimistic worldview that life is meaningless and purposeless, and the expectation that genetic engineering can one day manufacture super-humans.

– Scattered throughout the text are insights to delight the reader and provoke thought. She writes, for example, on page 19, “Science is not just a formless mass of experimental data; it is a system of thought in which they are ranged, a system which connects with the rest of our thinking.” Disappointingly, she doesn't discuss the particular thought-system into which the theory of evolution fits. We attempt to do that in the articles on this website. On page 73 we read, “If indeed an evolutionary change is at hand, the most likely prediction by far [rather than upward progression to human supermen] is that it might be one involving the extinction of the human race.” We ask Midgley why the “extinction” she anticipates didn't already occur millions of years ago? John Sanford has written (*Genetic Entropy*, FMS Publications, 2014) that genetic entropy must lead inexorably to the extinction of any species. Genetics is the most formidable enemy to the theory of evolution; indeed it

falsifies it.

Then we find on page 157 this splendid comment, “But a hunger for meaning is central to our lives.” By this she means scientists are not merely trying to satisfy curiosity, they seek to understand and see the order that's in our world -- and that's where the “religious” component comes in. Religion is how we attribute meaning to life, and we all do it, necessarily, not just scientists in their work. It's part of human nature, part of thinking, to try to see meaning in the world we inhabit. And on pages 171-2, Midgley discusses how Darwinism is “liberating.” What she means by that is it frees individuals from certain restraining societal structures so that individuals can compete for success and wealth. But what's mainly “liberating” about Darwinism, we assert, is it provides rebels with an excuse to be free of God's laws and demands. Scripture states we're all rebels, we're all anti-theists by nature, and the role of evolutionary science is to placate the rebel's mind, to satisfy his need to explain origins apart from biblical revelation. Whether evolution is demonstrably true or not is irrelevant!

– Midgley understands the role that presuppositions have in science. “Facts are not gathered in a vacuum, but to fill gaps in a world-picture which already exists” (p. 2). Scientists work within a prior or pre-existing worldview. Science isn't merely a chasing after facts. “Merely to pile up information indiscriminately is an idiot's task...Facts will never appear to us as brute and meaningless; they will always organize themselves into some sort of story, some drama” (p.4). She points this out to introduce her argument that certain writers (scientists, sociologists, economists, etc.) have distorted the theory of evolution in creating stories that are entirely made up but are

presented as scientific fact. We would carry the thought further and say that we all necessarily hold presuppositions about the world, unconsciously perhaps, and it's those presuppositions that drive us toward either accepting biblical revelation as true or preferring human speculation to God's written truths.

– One of the distortions Midgley discusses is what she terms the “Escalator Fallacy.” “It is the idea that evolution is a steady, linear upward movement, a single inexorable process of improvement, leading . . . 'from gas to genius' and beyond into some superhuman spiritual stratosphere” (page 7). She decries “[t]he idea of a vast escalator, proceeding steadily upwards from lifeless matter through plants and animals to man, and inevitably on to higher things, was coined by Lamarck and given currency by Herbert Spencer under his chosen name, 'evolution.’” On pages 70-71, she shows that the notion of progressive evolution has to mean some kind of deity is involved, a supernatural creative being. She admits that the current understanding of progressive evolution is religious, writing wryly, “It may be on the borderline between religion and magic...” Then on page 79, she portrays evolutionary progress as disguised humanism, writing, “By what right, and in what sense, can we consider ourselves as the directional pointer and aim-bearer of the whole evolutionary process?” To this, we make the following two comments: (1) evolutionary theory today requires progressive evolution, common ancestry is a key component of the

definition of evolution; and (2) she is correct: there never was any such progressive development, it's nothing but imagination.

Carl Sagan, who narrated the TV series “Cosmos,” illustrated progressive evolutionary development saying, “The nitrogen in

our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of star-stuff.” Not to be outdone, Neil deGrasse Tyson, narrating the new “Cosmos” series, states, “Our ancestors worshipped the sun. They were far from foolish. It makes good sense to revere the sun and stars because we are their children. The silicon in the rocks, the oxygen in the air, the carbon in our DNA, the iron in our skyscrapers, the silver in our jewelry—were all made in stars, billions of years ago. Our planet, and we ourselves are stardust.” Mary, we ask, is this fact, or is this too just hype? Religious belief? Scientists are drawing stark and dramatic conclusions here from no data whatsoever. They are speculating! They have found certain elements in the sun and stars, and the same elements are in us, and they then arrogantly pronounce, without hesitation or embarrassment, that the one led to the other by a naturalistic evolutionary process.

On whose authority are we to take these statements as true and base our world view and ultimately our lives on them? Why don't they explain the mechanisms that re-organized those elements into humans? Where did the information that organizes matter and that enables entropy to be overcome, thus enabling life, come from? They suppose that simple elements inexorably self-organize into complex structures. But in nature, there's nothing “simple.” Atoms are complex. Prokaryotes are complex. The microscopic brain of a gnat allows those insects to fly, navigate and communicate. There's complexity in the sun, indeed, it's everywhere in nature! Think climate! How can dumb matter be cognizant of the need for more specialized or complex structure and then proceed on its own to develop it? This whole conjectural paradigm of simple to complex is flawed. It's

negated by observation and by reason. These men are not telling us scientific facts derived from experimentation and careful observation, they are reciting myths.

No one was there, after all, in the distant past to observe evolution. It's nothing more than another human idea, without basis in discovered fact. Evolutionist Adrian Bejan, professor at Duke University, concedes this, writing in the *Journal of Applied Physics*, "In biology, evolution is largely a mental construct built on imagination, because the time scale of animal evolution is immense relative to the time available to us for observations. We cannot witness animal evolution, and this places the biology argument for evolution at a disadvantage." "Disadvantage"! What an understatement. The scientific evidence needed to support evolution should be observational, but the evolutionary process is too slow for any human to witness it occurring or to do controlled experiments on it. So "evidence" for it can only be inferential, conjectural, and tentative. But such evidence is weak; there exists no unambiguous evidence for evolution. Similarities can be equally well explained by common design as by common descent. The fossil evidence is hypothetical. There is no mechanism to account for the process, mutations and natural selection now being acknowledged as inadequate for the task. "Survival of the fittest" is a tautomer; indeed, adaptation is a better explanation of what is observed in nature than transformation. The origin of life defies scientific explanation. Extrapolations and computer models demonstrate nothing. Doesn't Midgley see that her criticism of certain implications of evolution as "beliefs" applies with a vengeance to Darwinian evolution itself?

– Midgley skewers positivism (or scientism): "[P]eople today

who have a specially strong faith in science -- expressed by speaking of the 'omnicompetence of science' and claiming that it is the sole legitimate intellectual method open to humanity -- are not themselves merely talking science. They are stating a very bizarre position in metaphysics” (p. 24). When, on page 78, she writes, “The question, *in what do you put your faith?* is central to the whole enquiry” (italics hers), she suggests that scientism is a misplaced faith, a faith in technological prowess, in intellectual schemes, in means rather than in a particular desired end.

In *To Explain the World* (Harper, 2015), Steven Weinberg writes, “It was essential for the discovery of science that religious ideas be divorced from the study of nature.” What Weinberg really means by this is, the (religious) presupposition that the universe has purpose or meaning opposes or thwarts science. In his view, science must be not neutral, nor even atheistic, but *anti*-theistic. He wants to see science used as a weapon in warfare against Christianity. Whether he really believes that all existence is just the bouncing around of various atoms or not, what impels him is his evident hatred of God. Midgley discusses this false dichotomy between science and religion, arguing that knowledge attained by science does not exclude the metaphysical. Is “objective knowledge [by the physical sciences] the *only* source of real truth”? “So what sort of truth do we deal with in everyday life, in personal relations or in the study of history? And since scientists frequently disagree and change their theories, which scientific truth are we to accept?” And, “...the pre-eminence of physical science, not as part of a cluster of ideals, but as the one to which all the rest should be subordinated...the claim is as arbitrary as any in the

long history of moral fraudulence” (pages 98-99).

Capping her contempt for positivism, Midgley writes the following: “The habitual conviction of the all- sufficiency of science looks to them like something, not just obvious, but itself scientifically established. It looks, in fact, as we have seen, like a part of the theory of evolution. It also serves them, however, as a religion in that it tells them what to venerate, indicating the supreme values available and justifying the sacrifice of all others to them. Since its basis is in fact not scientific at all but merely imaginative, it seems to be a fair question whether this faith should not be viewed simply as one religion among the others available” (p. 110). Well said, but Midgley doesn’t probe deeply enough. What she and almost everyone misses is that at a more fundamental level is the prior rejection of the God of Scripture. It’s not scientism or positivism [or naturalism or physicalism] that’s a religion, as Midgley here suggests. These –isms are only the out-workings of pantheism, the anti-theistic religion that lurks invisibly in the background.

And Midgley’s view of religion doesn't exclude what scientists do: “The intellectual attitude necessary for science, if given its full scope and not reduced artificially to a mere mindless tic for collecting, is continuous with a typically religious view of the physical world. This is one of the varieties of religious experience” (pages 130-31). She correctly finds broad overlap between science and religion if science is understood as the attempt to make sense of the world. Indeed, as she observes (page 119), for a scientist to assert that religion is nonsense is itself a religious statement! Of course, Midgley doesn't attempt to identify the religion lurking behind evolutionary science. But we do. Scientists and science popularizers who proclaim the

Scriptures to be humbug are pitting their pantheist religion against theism. What's going on in the Western world is a massive program to rid society of Christianity and replace it, not by “science,” but by an alternative, anti-theistic religion.

– Midgley is repulsed by what other writers see as clear implications of evolutionary theory. She argues, for example, against the view that life is valueless because evolution occurs by random processes. She quotes physicist Steven Weinberg, who stated, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seem pointless,” and she then pointedly asks, “how does Weinberg know?” (p. 87). Weinberg calls the universe “hostile.” She asks, why not “generous”? She writes, “For those of us who know nothing about astrophysics, Weinberg and his sources are authorities about that. There we ought to believe them. But this does not give them any authority at all on the choice of suitable symbols for human destiny. Here their stories must stand on their own merits as myths” (p. 108). She's right. Bold proclamations by evolutionists regarding origins have no authority beyond their own personal beliefs or opinions, in contrast to the biblical narrative, which rests on the authority of the sovereign God and Creator. And regarding the view that nature is red in tooth and claw, she terms it (page 135), “a hymn to egoism;” the notion is “...certainly spiritually ambitious enough to constitute a faith and in some sense a religion.”

Regarding Dawkins' ascribing omnipotence to the gene (pages 143-46), Midgley writes, “...this idea has no place in science, it is extremely suggestive to the religious sensibilities. Worship, as we have already

seen, is not only something carried out in Gothic buildings by

people singing hymns. It has many other forms and can be entirely informal. It is certainly the mood most strongly suggested by Dawkins' discussions of the gene.” She is correct in pointing out that if behavior is ascribed to genetic causes, human freedom vanishes and we are merely machines. But she evidently fails to realize that true human freedom derives from God's will and purposes. She also blames evolution for modern Western man's unbridled self-assertiveness, radical self-absorption and individualism, intense competitiveness, greed and elitism (pages 163ff). Evolution is an anti-theistic notion; it's the sacred myth of pantheism, so it's not surprising that its implications are horribly anti-human. Midgley is correctly deeply troubled by these implications of supposed evolutionary mechanisms. She should jettison the whole notion of Darwinism.

– Regarding faith and religion, Midgley correctly writes, “A faith is not primarily a factual belief, the acceptance of a few extra propositions like 'God exists' or 'there will be a revolution.' It is rather the sense of having one's place within a whole greater than oneself, one whose larger aims so enclose one's own and give them point that sacrifice for it may be entirely proper...But almost everyone, however sceptical or uninterested in religion and metaphysics, has faith in something...Marxism and evolutionism, the two great secular faiths of our day, display all these religious-looking features” (pages 16-17). We repeatedly argue on this website that all people are religious. They have to be. Humans are by nature religious--and that includes atheists. Further, on this website we identify the religion of those who reject the transcendent God of the Bible and who hold to evolution as the explanation of origins to be pantheism.

Pantheists believe that, in some way, deity resides in the natural world, not as any personal Being but as some force or Unity or...hey, who knows, after all it's only a made-up idea, a human invention. Of course, those we term pantheists don't acknowledge any such deity, but if they ascribe creative ability to nature (and that's what evolution is), then nature has divine attributes and a deity is invisibly there in the background. Pantheism is the religion that, in the Western world, is the alternative to Christianity. Christianity is based on revelation; pantheism is based on human speculation, human reason, human imagination. Evolution is a self-serving delusion that fosters and excuses autonomy from our Creator. It ensnares people in a farrago of intellectual-sounding conjectures steeped in arcane scientific jargon. But it's a fantasy. It's the sacred myth of an invisible religion, pantheism.

What shall we conclude from the above? Midgley is an intellectual of the highest order. She has the acute ability to perceive errors in thinking that are too subtle for most minds. She readily finds certain ideas propounded by modern writers to be nothing more than beliefs ("fantasies," her word), yet she holds tightly to Darwinian evolution! Does she not realize that the whole modern explanation of origins, Darwinian evolution, is no different than the speculations she faults?

What undoubtedly drives Midgley into believing in evolution (it cannot be described as anything other than a belief) is the idea of billions of years. Scientists, more precisely geochronologists, supposedly have dated the cosmos as 13.8 billion years old and the earth as 5.4 billion years old. So as any thinking person

would do, she realizes that the most plausible explanation of origins, if that much time is involved, has to be evolution. It certainly would not be creation, for what kind of god would do something as bizarre as take billions of years to make something if there was any purpose to that work? Billions of years makes the Bible look preposterous. So Midgley has bought into the myth of billions of years. And that means that Christianity cannot put on offer anything other than some nice ethical teachings for those who might be so inclined. The delusion believed today is, there's no God and evolution is as reasonable a way as any to explain the existence of everything.

To try to explain “billions of years” from a biblical or creationist perspective is difficult. It can be done, but it involves some understanding of physics and chemistry and the assumptions that the measurements

involve. If people suppose that a scientist puts a rock into an instrument and the read-out says millions or billions of years in the same way that a sample of blood is drawn up into a machine and the blood sugar is read out as so many milligrams-percent, they desperately need a wake-up call. But most people can't be bothered with complicated explanations because they don't want the alternative to billions of years, viz, theistic creation. They prefer to suppose creation is nothing more than superstition.

Mary Midgley wrote 40,000+ words quibbling over the implications of evolution all the while adhering tightly to the myth itself. What she needs to do is step outside the box she's created and into another box in order to know truth. Anti-theistic presuppositions need to be jettisoned to understand existence. Nehemiah chapter 8 points out (6 times!) that on that particular

day, the people of Judah “understood” the Word of the Lord. Understanding of otherwise unknowable matters comes from Scripture, it comes by revelation. Not by human speculation. The great truth suffusing existence is that the invisible God has revealed Himself and His will for us by means of the written word. He did it to reach out to us His creatures, whom He loves, precisely because we creatures are limited to the physical world. Revelation is bona fide knowledge and we can understand it. (It's also self-authenticating, but that's another story.) It's trustworthy and authoritative because it comes from a good God, from the Creator.

Obtaining understanding from the Bible is an endeavor vastly more worthy than trying to precisely delimit Darwinism. “Understanding” means thinking deeply about a matter, correlating it when possible with prior knowledge or experiences, and perhaps changing one's ideas or behavior. And what understanding comes from the Bible? That the eternally existing Creator seeks a personal, loving, never- ending relationship with His human creatures, and to make that possible He has already done all that's necessary including taking Himself the judgment our sins and rebellion deserve. And having entered into that relationship by believing in Christ, God's beloved Son, while we walk here in this life, God expects us to live a righteous life, according to His moral standards, which also have been revealed in the Bible. Now, we ask, what's there to despise about this proposition? We find on the Internet that Midgley's father was an Anglican curate and college chaplain. So surely at one time in her life she was aware of the Gospel. Yet she writes that biblical ideas are “archaic” (page 13). Why did she, indeed why should anyone, reject such a

sweet gift as is freely offered in the Bible?

We pray Mary Midgley will come to her senses and understand all that Christ accomplished on the cross for her and for us.