

JONATHAN W. CHAPPELL

A Grammar of Descent: John Henry Newman and the Compatibility of Evolution with Christian Doctrine

It is widely assumed that the nineteenth century was an age dominated by unbelief. According to this view, developments in the natural sciences, such as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, combined with the rise of historical-critical biblical scholarship, drove many Victorians away from traditional Christian belief towards scepticism. However, while it is certainly true that many nineteenth-century thinkers came to regard orthodox religious belief as incompatible with modern science, the eminent English Roman Catholic theologian John Henry Newman (1801–90) is an outstanding example of a nineteenth-century thinker who believed that there need be no necessary contradiction between the data of Christian revelation and the scientific advances of his day. This paper explores Newman's ideas concerning evolution, and, by focusing on his engagements with some key Victorian contemporaries, shows that, for Newman, evolutionary theory was compatible with Christian doctrine.

Keywords: Newman, evolution, Darwinism, faith and reason, development of doctrine, theodicy, rationality, conscience

Introduction

An influential view propounded by many contemporary scholars, such as A.N. Wilson,¹ is that the nineteenth century was an age dominated by unbelief. According to this thesis, developments in the natural sciences, such as Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, combined with the rise of historical-critical biblical scholarship, drove many Victorians away from traditional Christian belief towards scepticism. While it is certainly true that a good number of nineteenth-century thinkers came to regard orthodox religious belief as incompatible with modern scientific thought, so much attention has been paid in the existing literature² to the lives and

1 Wilson, A.N. *God's Funeral*, New York: W.W. Norton (1999).

2 The narrative that the Victorian era was dominated by a crisis of faith is pervasive in much modern literature and has served to exclude from view a great deal of the religious history and significance of the period. Indeed, much recent historiography has tended to add credence to the assumption that the relationship between Christianity and science in the nineteenth century was one of conflict and mutual hostility. It also serves to strengthen the view that the Victorian intelligentsia experienced a crisis of faith and largely abandoned religious belief. See e.g. Willey, B. *More Nineteenth Century Studies: A Group of Honest Doubters*, London: Chatto & Windus (1956); Cockshut, A.O.J. *The Unbelievers: English Agnostic Thought*,

thought of figures who experienced such a crisis of faith that the intellectual coherence and cogency of Christianity for many Victorians has been buried under a preoccupation with expressions of doubt.

However, some important recent scholarship has done much to complicate and contest this conventional generalisation. For example, David Livingstone's recent book, *Dealing with Darwin: Place, Politics and Rhetoric in Religious Engagements with Evolution*,³ convincingly shows that there were indeed a number of Protestant thinkers who worked at reconciling faith and Darwinism during the Victorian period.⁴ Moreover, Don O'Leary's *Roman Catholicism and Modern Science: A History*,⁵ has highlighted the intense intra-Roman Catholic debate about evolution which existed between 1840 and 1880.

O'Leary's research shows that, in the mid to late nineteenth century, a number of key English Roman Catholic figures sought to harmonise Christianity and modern science. However, the Roman Catholic Church was internally divided between Ultramontane and liberal views. Ultramontane Catholics looked to the Papal Magisterium for firm leadership and strongly resisted any concessions to modern thought; liberal Catholicism, by contrast, placed greater emphasis on the freedom of individual intellect and conscience, was open to new scientific discoveries and thus relied far less on an infallible teaching authority.

As O'Leary observes, Ultramontane and liberal Catholics clashed over a

1840–1890, London: Collins (1964); Symonds, A. (ed.) *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*, London: SPCK (1970); Chadwick, O. *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1975); Helmstadter, J. & Lightman, B. (eds.) *Victorian Faith in Crisis: Essays on Continuity and Change in Nineteenth-Century Religious Belief*, London: Macmillan (1990); Mitchell, S. *Daily Life in Victorian England*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press (1996); Brett, R.L. *Faith and Doubt: Religion and Secularization in Literature from Wordsworth to Larkin*, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press (1997); Wilson *op. cit.*, (1); Claeys, G. (ed.) *Encyclopaedia of Nineteenth-Century Thought*, London: Routledge (2005); Hempton, D. *Evangelical Disenchantment: Nine Portraits of Faith and Doubt*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (2008).

3 Livingstone, D.N. *Dealing with Darwin: Place, Politics and Rhetoric in Religious Engagements with Evolution*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (2014).

4 For other important research that deals with the support for Darwin's evolutionary theory among nineteenth-century evangelical Protestants see e.g. Moore, J.R. *The Post-Darwinian Controversies: A Study of the Protestant Struggle to Come to Terms with Darwin in Great Britain and America 1870–1900*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1979); Livingstone, D.N. *Darwin's Forgotten Defenders: The Encounter Between Evangelical Theology and Evolutionary Thought*, Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press (1987); Roberts, J.H. *Darwinism and the Divine in America*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press (1988); Larsen, T. *Crisis of Doubt: Honest Faith in Nineteenth-Century England*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006).

5 O'Leary, D. *Roman Catholicism and Modern Science: A History*, New York/London: Continuum (2006); see also Artigas, M., Glick, T.F. & Martínez, R.A. *Negotiating Darwin: The Vatican Confronts Evolution*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press (2006); Finnegan, D. 'Eve and evolution: Christian responses to the first woman question, 1860–1900', *Journal of the History of Ideas* (2014) 75(2), 281–303.

number of issues during this period. One key issue was evolution. The Ultramontane majority, gaining succour from Pope Pius IX's 1864 *Syllabus of Errors* (which condemned free scientific and philosophical enquiry) insisted that Catholics were forbidden by the dogmatic imperatives of their faith from believing in human evolution. Liberals, however, represented a small minority of Catholics, who, because of their openness to natural science, and attempts to reconcile the Church to evolutionary theory and historical-critical biblical scholarship, risked provoking a punitive or disciplinary response from the ecclesiastical authorities.

As a means of illustrating the nature of this more 'liberal' Catholic approach to evolution, O'Leary focuses on the work of the Roman Catholic zoologist, St George Jackson Mivart (1827–1900). Mivart was convinced that the biological and geological evidence available in his day strongly suggested that human beings did evolve. However, he was determined not only to retain a role for God in nature, but also to harmonise evolution with Catholicism in a way that upheld orthodox doctrine.

From his various writings, it is clear that the eminent English Roman Catholic theologian, John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801–90), is an outstanding example of a nineteenth-century thinker, who, along with Mivart, believed that there need be no necessary contradiction between the data of Christian revelation and the advances of modern thought.⁶ However, while open to the idea of evolution, Newman was just as anxious as Mivart to uphold orthodox Catholic doctrine. An important distinction must therefore be made between the efforts of figures such as Newman and Mivart, and the aims of the movement that subsequently came to be known as Catholic Modernism. This movement,⁷ associated particularly with late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century figures, such as Alfred Loisy, the Baron Friedrich von Hügel, George Tyrrell and Henri Bremond, was supportive of evolution, but argued that it was necessary for Catholic doctrine to be modified in the light of new knowledge. Newman and Mivart should not therefore be considered precursors of Modernism, for, although it was their firm intent to harmonise evolution and theology, they insisted on doing so in a way that remained thoroughly orthodox.

6 However, there remains a paucity of published material that focuses specifically on Newman's arguments concerning the compatibility of evolution and Christian doctrine (though see Jaki, S.L. *Newman's Challenge*, Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. (2000), pp. 265-290; Kalthoff, M.A. 'A different voice from the Eve of the Origin: Reconsidering John Henry Newman on Christianity, Science, and Intelligent Design', *Perspectives in Science and Christian Belief* (2001) 53, 14-23; and Vilbig, R. 'John Henry Newman's view of the "Darwin Theory"', *Newman Studies Journal* (2011) 8(2), 52–61).

7 A scholarly and well-balanced investigation into Catholic Modernism is offered by Jodock, D. (ed.) *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2000).

Newman and evolutionary theory

For Newman, the theory of evolution and the notion of divine design were not only compatible, but mutually supportive. Indeed, in both private correspondence and published books and articles, he defended the view that evolution was consistent, not only with the philosophical tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, but also with its teaching concerning revealed religion. Michael Ruse has plausibly identified the source for Newman's thinking about evolution as the archetypal approach to animal morphology promoted by the leading Victorian anatomist, Richard Owen.⁸

Although Newman referred to the work of Darwin in his writings, it is clear that he tended to operate with a fairly vague notion of evolution and did not really deal in detail with Darwin's more specific proposals. Indeed, it should be emphasised that there are some key differences between Darwin and Newman, which problematise the notion that Newman regarded Darwinism per se as fully compatible with Christian doctrine. Thus, while Newman was broadly supportive of evolution, it is difficult to square Darwin's own deism/agnosticism, and the opportunistic, relativistic and non-purposive character of natural selection, with Newman's model of the world as shot through with divine purpose.

Newman's writings offer only somewhat scattered comments on evolution. Nevertheless, his various reflections on the relationship between evolution and theology are worthy of careful attention because they afford privileged access to the mind of a distinguished nineteenth-century theologian who made one of the first tentative attempts to demonstrate in general terms how evolution could be accommodated within a Catholic/neo-scholastic philosophy of nature. Indeed, in our own time, when palaeontologists, such as Stephen Jay Gould,⁹ have portrayed science and religion as 'non-overlapping magisteria' and biologists, such as Richard Dawkins,¹⁰ have dismissed the God hypothesis as 'intellectually redundant', Newman's remarks on evolution are of great significance because they offer a sketch of how constructive dialogue between evolutionary thought and theology might be possible.

The aim of this paper is not to consider Newman's ideas concerning evolution as merely a decontextualised collection of theological arguments, but, rather, to offer a reading of Newman's evolutionary insights that situates them firmly within their historical context. In doing so, this paper will focus on Newman's engagements with some of his Victorian interlocutors

8 Ruse, M. *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2005), p. 60.

9 Gould, S.J. *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, London: Heinemann (2001).

10 Dawkins, R. *The Blind Watchmaker*, London: Longman (1986); *The God Delusion*, London: Bantam Press (2006).

and will attempt to show how his ideas concerning evolution were compatible with the Aristotelian and neo-scholastic thought which dominated the Roman Catholic philosophy of his day.¹¹

Newman and the harmony of faith and reason

For many, the challenge of science to religious belief was just as formidable in Newman's day as it is in ours. His most celebrated works, such as the *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* and *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, were produced during the 1860s and 1870s – a period dominated by a vigorous and impassioned struggle between science and religion.¹²

Although Newman acknowledged the differences between experimental method and faith, he never saw them as antithetical. On the contrary, following the philosophical and theological tradition of St Thomas Aquinas, Newman argued that, while a clear distinction must be made between faith and reason, both can, and should, be harmonised. There can be no contradiction between true natural knowledge and divine revelation, he averred, because both have their origin in God.

Accordingly, Newman had great respect for scientific research, pondered

11 In the *Apologia* Newman wrote: 'I felt altogether the force of the maxim of St. Ambrose, "Non in dialectica complacuit Deo salvum facere populum suum" – I had a great dislike of paper logic. For myself, it was not logic that carried me on; as well might one say that the quicksilver in the barometer changes the weather. It is the concrete being that reasons ...' (Newman, J.H. *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd (1955 [1864]), p.169) Indeed, Newman was suspicious of, and took issue with, the static and rigid 'paper logic' approach that characterised the neo-scholastic study of Thomas Aquinas in Catholic seminaries during the nineteenth century. Newman feared that this rigid interpretative approach, as found, for example, in the commentaries of the sixteenth-century Jesuit, Francisco Suárez, was in danger of excluding a priori the possibility of doctrinal development. Newman, by contrast, favoured the more dynamic 'Thomas for himself' school of Thomism (which was to receive the approbation of Pope Leo XIII in his 1879 encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris*). This is doubtless because of its restoration of the importance of both faith *and* reason, and the possibility this opened up for the development of doctrine (see Bouyer, L. *Newman: His Life and Spirituality*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press (2011), p. 353; see also Ondrako, E.J. *Progressive Illumination: A Journey with John Henry Cardinal Newman 1980–2005*, New York: Global Academic Publishing (2006)). Accordingly, this article does not claim that Newman (fully) endorsed a Suárezian-style neo-scholastic interpretation of Aquinas. It only claims that Newman's ideas concerning evolution were compatible with Aristotelian and (classical) Thomistic thought.

12 It must be acknowledged, however, that a number of historians of science have queried this characterisation of the 1860s and 1870s. James Secord, e.g., has argued that Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* sounded a decidedly conciliatory note after the bitter disputes about evolution that erupted after the publication of *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. See Secord, J.A. *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (2000), p. 514. Others have suggested that it was John Tyndall's Belfast Address in 1874 that marked the start of a period of 'struggle' over the implications of evolutionary theory for traditional religious views. A case can therefore certainly be made that before that controversial lecture the dominant note was conciliatory rather than conflictual.

deeply on the questions posed by science and endeavoured to keep abreast of the latest scientific theories. In *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education*, he insists that there is nothing 'special' or 'singular' about theology that is not 'partaken by other sciences in their measure'. All domains of knowledge constitute that 'Philosophy which embraces and locates truth of every kind'.¹³ However:

Theology is one branch of knowledge, and Secular Sciences are other branches. Theology is the highest indeed, and widest, but it does not interfere with the real freedom of any secular science in its own particular department.¹⁴

Thus, while Newman regarded theology as the highest form of intellectual enquiry, he nonetheless held that there is a basic epistemological equality between theology and science. But he insisted on the need for both to adopt different methodological approaches to the investigation of knowledge.¹⁵ Science should therefore be free to pursue its own enquiries; it should not, however, trespass beyond the field of empirical enquiry. Equally, the Church should not seek to interfere in scientific matters.

As so much of his writing on natural theology attests, Newman believed that it was generally inadvisable to use the data of science in order to buttress religious belief.¹⁶ He was extremely wary of efforts to use science to reinterpret Scripture precisely because the theological meaning of Scripture was not easily discerned. For Newman, science certainly did not

13 Newman, J.H. *Discourses on the Scope and Nature of University Education Addressed to the Catholics of Dublin*, Dublin: James Duffy (1852), pp. 152–153.

14 *ibid.*

15 In this vein, Newman argued: '[The Physical Philosopher] contemplates the facts before him; the Theologian gives the reasons of these facts. The physicist treats of efficient causes; the Theologian of final. The physicist tells us of laws; the Theologian of the Author, Maintainer, and Controller of them; of their scope, of their suspension, if so be; of their beginning and their end' (Newman, J.H. *The Idea of A University: Defined and Illustrated*, London: Longmans, Green, and Co. (1886 [1858]), p. 434). Newman was thus clear that theology and science correctly adopt different methods (and thus contrasting epistemologies). For Newman, theology is a deductive science that begins with a set of doctrinal truths. Science is an inductive science that proceeds through experiment and observation and does not assume in advance a set of established truths. They are both 'sciences' in the broad sense of being separate branches of knowledge. But they have very different objects of enquiry: God and nature. Without revelation, we would know very little of 'God'; without 'physical science', little of nature. Of course, this does not mean that Newman subscribed to something like Gould's non-overlapping magisteria, which tends to relegate religion to a private sphere of subjective opinion and emotion. See Kenny, A. 'Newman as a Philosopher of Religion', in Brown, D. (ed.) *Newman: A Man for Our Time – Centenary Essays*, London: SPCK (1990); Carr, T.K. *Newman and Gadamer: Toward a Hermeneutics of Religious Knowledge*, Atlanta, GA: Scholar Press (1996); Moleski, M.X. *Personal Catholicism: The Theological Epistemologies of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press (2000); Rupert, J. *John Henry Newman on the Nature of the Mind: Reason in Religion, Science, and the Humanities*, Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books (2011).

16 See John Cornwell's discussion of this point in his excellent *Newman's Unquiet Grave: The Reluctant Saint*, New York and London: Continuum (2010), p. 234.

provide the exegetical key. This point is aptly illustrated by a letter written to J.M. Capes¹⁷ on 14 November 1850, in which Newman argued: ‘We ought not to theorize the teaching of Moses, till philosophers have demonstrated their theories of physics. If “the spirit of God” is gas in 1850, it may be electro-magnetism in 1860.’¹⁸ Newman’s claim here appears to be that scientific hypotheses are, by their very nature, tentative, provisional and partial, and should not therefore be employed to direct or shape theological enquiry without extreme caution and careful qualification.

In terms of the ‘creation debate’, which was as contentious an issue in the late nineteenth century as it is in our time, Newman held that a literalistic reading of the Genesis narrative – a six-day creation and so forth – has never ‘engaged the formal attention of the Church’. And, given that this is so, he proceeds to lend tacit support to the enquiries of historical-critical scholarship, arguing that ‘it is not at all probable that any discoveries ever should be made by physical inquiries incompatible at the same time with one and all of the senses which the letter admits, and which are still open’.¹⁹ What Newman seems to be suggesting, in carefully chosen language designed not to alarm the guardians of doctrinal orthodoxy, is that, while discoveries in the natural sciences might render a literal historic reading of the creation story problematic, Holy Scripture is amenable to various modes of interpretation, and this leaves open the possibility for a more analogical hermeneutic.

The development of doctrine and evolution

The theological idea with which Newman is perhaps most associated is that of the development or unfolding of doctrinal truths.²⁰ This idea, first adduced in his *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*,²¹ arose as a result of Newman’s attempt to defend Catholic teaching against attacks from some Protestants, who regarded certain elements of Catholic doctrine, such as devotion to the Virgin Mary or Purgatory, as innovations

17 Editor of *The Rambler*.

18 Newman, J.H. *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, ed. C.S. Dessain et al. (hereafter cited as *LD*), Oxford: Clarendon Press (1961–2008), Vol. 14, p. 127.

19 Newman *op. cit.*, (15), p. 439. A sagacious discussion of Newman’s understanding of the relationship between secular and religious knowledge is to be found in Culler, A. Dwight, *The Imperial Intellect: A Study of Newman’s Educational Ideal*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (1955), pp. 244–270.

20 For a comprehensive account of Newman’s thoughts concerning the development of doctrine, see Lash, N. *Newman on Development: The Search for an Explanation in History*, Shepherdstown, WV: Patmos Press (1975); see also Mashburn, T.J. ‘The categories of development: An overlooked aspect of Newman’s theory of doctrinal development’, *The Heythrop Journal: A Bimonthly Review of Philosophy and Theology* (1988) 29, 33–43; Ker, I. *Newman on Vatican II*, Oxford University Press (2014).

21 Newman, J.H. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, London: James Toovey (1845).

or corruptions. Relying on an extensive study of the early Christian Fathers in tracing the development or elaboration of doctrine, Newman argued that later Catholic teachings were in some way implicitly present in sacred Scripture and tradition from the very beginning of the Church. He averred that such Catholic doctrines had a developmental history analogous to doctrines that were accepted by Protestants (such as the Trinity, or the divinity and humanity of Christ).²² That is to say, he claimed that later tenets of Catholic doctrine remain consistent with earlier ones because they have become more detailed and explicit over the centuries; they have, in short, *evolved* over time.²³

As scholars such as Hugh MacDougall have observed, there is some evidence that Newman's ideas concerning *doctrinal* development may have predisposed him towards an acceptance of the evolutionary principle that living things have themselves come into being via a process of *biological* development.²⁴

When considering the possibility that the human race might have evolutionary antecedents, Newman, in contrast to many of his ecclesiastical contemporaries, approached the question with equanimity. For instance, in *Essays Critical and Historical*, written as early as 1840, Newman examined the popular pre-Darwinian conception of evolution which held that 'man's being' had originally emerged out of

some brute nature, some vast mis-shapen lizard of the primeval period, which at length by the force of nature, from whatever secret causes, was exalted into a rational being, and gradually shaped its proportions and refined its properties by the influence of the rational principle which got possession of it.²⁵

22 It has been suggested by some scholars, such as Rowan Williams ('Newman's *Arians* and the Question of Method in Doctrinal History', in Ker, I. & Hill, A.G. (eds.) *Newman After a Hundred Years*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1990), p. 263), that the central theme of the *Essay* was in fact developed from Newman's *The Arians of the Fourth Century*, published in 1833. This work by Newman was concerned with dogmatic history and contended that the Christological definition at the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE) was something new – the development of a doctrine that had only existed in embryonic form in the ante-Nicene period.

23 Cameron, J.M. (ed.) Introduction to Newman, J.H. *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Harmondsworth: Penguin (1974 [1845]), pp. 7-44.

24 MacDougall, H. 'Newman – historian or apologist?' *CCGA Study Sessions* (1968) 35, p. 95. In this context, the renowned Newman scholar, Ian Ker, also refers to Newman's *Essay* as 'the theological counterpart to the *Origin of Species*' and observes that it pre-dated Darwin's seminal work by over a decade, see Ker, I. *John Henry Newman: A Biography*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1990), p. 300.

25 Newman, J.H. 'Milman's view of Christianity', in *Essays Critical and Historical*, Vol. 2, London: Longmans, Green & Co. (1907 [1840]), pp. 193-194. This essay also appeared in the *British Critic*, January 1841, p. 76.

Such sentiments clearly illustrate Newman's openness to the possible veracity of biological evolution.²⁶

Newman and Darwinian evolution

Newman's early interest in Darwinian evolution comes across clearly in his first known mention of Darwin's theory contained in a letter to William Monsell dated 26 June 1863. Such correspondence indicates that Newman found evolutionary theory a valuable means of understanding the mechanism of competition and growth in general. While musing on the possibility of founding an oratory in Oxford, Newman discusses the way in which different houses competed with each other to become a new lodging for Catholic students at Oxford in a way very reminiscent of Darwinian natural selection:

You might have several lodging houses. And house might run against house, and, on the Darwin theory, the stronger specimen prevail. If Mr A. or Mr B. or Mr C. set up a lodging house, it would be soon seen who were fitted for their post, who not. And then, you would advance to one large house, instead of three small ones.²⁷

References such as these to 'the Darwin theory' show Newman's openness to contemporary thought, and his desire, in contrast to many other ecclesiastics of his time, to embrace the great biologist's ideas and make use of them in his own writing.

As far as can be determined, Newman's next statement regarding evolution can be found in a diary entry dated 9 December 1863. This entry, recorded some four years after the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, offers much greater insight into Newman's thought. Above all, it shows that, while other nineteenth-century clergymen, such as John Keble,²⁸ were content to claim that God had deliberately placed the fossils in the rocks so as to create the impression of evolution,²⁹ Newman adopted a more gradualist view and argued, on the contrary, that fossils, in addition to anatomical similarities between human beings and other species, constituted persuasive evidence in support of evolutionary development:

There is as much want of simplicity in the idea of the creation of dis-

26 Newman appears to argue that even a (naturalistic) explanation of a purportedly natural event that looks like it occurs without God's creative action in fact comes within the ambit of the traditional doctrine of concurrentism – that there are true causes in nature which have their own integrity and independence but that they have their effect only when conjoined with divine action.

27 *LD*, Vol. 20, p. 479.

28 John Keble (1792–1866), Newman's fellow Tractarian and leading light of the Oxford Movement.

29 See Culler *op. cit.*, (19), p. 267.

tinct species as in that of the creation of trees in full growth, or of rocks with fossils in them. I mean that it is as strange that monkeys should be so like men, with no historical connection between them, as that there should be ... no history or course of facts by which fossil bones got into the rocks. The one idea stands to the other idea as fluxions to differentials. Differentials are fluxions with the element of time eliminated. I will either go whole hog with Darwin, or dispensing with time and history altogether, hold not only the theory of distinct species but that also of the creation of fossil bearing rocks. If a minute once was equivalent to a million years now relatively to the forces of nature, there would be little difference between the two hypotheses. If time was not, there would be none: that is, if the work of creation etc. [varied as] α F.T. force being indefinitely great, as time was indefinitely small.³⁰

This journal entry reveals that Newman's thoughts concerning evolution were already starting to crystallise by the early 1860s. He observed that evolutionary theory offers a plausible way of explaining both the fossil record and the morphological resemblances between *Homo sapiens* and the higher primates. He also recognised that there is a sense in which both an instantaneous creation of species *and* the evolutionary process itself would, in their respective ways, necessitate an omnipotent Creator: instantaneous creation requires an external agency powerful enough to supply the 'indefinitely great' force of nature, while evolution requires an agency of equivalent power to supply the indefinitely large amount of time required for the creation of the universe.

Newman's most remarkable, and theologically perceptive, statement regarding *On the Origin of Species* is, however, to be found in a letter dated 22 May 1868 to Canon John Walker of Scarborough, nine years after the publication of Darwin's theory. Walker had sent Newman for inspection a copy of a recently published book by Robert Mackenzie Beverley (1798–1868) entitled *The Darwinian Theory of the Transmutation of Species Examined by a Graduate of the University of Cambridge*. It seems clear that Newman only read the prolegomena and concluding chapter of this volume because, as the editors of his correspondence point out, the middle sections of his own copy remained uncut. However, it is still possible to gauge the main argumentative thrust of the book from a passage contained in the prolegomena, which states that 'a view of nature taken as the production of the Creator's will, can never be made to harmonize with the blind force of cellular tissues sprouting by accident into all the phenomena of life'. At the end of the book, Beverley argues that the wondrous complexity and

30 From Newman's notebook for 9 December 1863 (Newman, J.H. *The Philosophical Notebook of John Henry Newman*, Sillem, E. & A. Boekraad, A. (eds.), New York: Humanities Press (1969), p. 158). An informative discussion of this issue is also contained in Lyon, J. 'Immediate reactions to Darwin: The English Catholic press' first reviews of the "Origin of Species"', *Church History* (March 1972) 41, p. 78.

beauty of the natural world in general, and the intricacy of living things in particular, clearly demonstrate the falsity of the Darwinian assumption that biological life has evolved as a result of purely random processes. On the contrary, the book averred, enlisting William Paley's famous teleological argument for support, the complexity of nature was such that it could only have come about as a direct result of the 'conscious contrivance' of a divine Creator.

While Newman had 'no wish to speak lightly of the merits of this so-called Natural or, more properly, Physical Theology',³¹ he nonetheless felt highly dubious about the theological utility of Paley's teleological argument, with its famous analogy between the watch and the world. For instance, in *The Idea of a University*, Newman expressed his concerns about Paley's argument as follows:

The reasoning by which Socrates, in Xenophon's hearing, confuted the little atheist, Aristodemus, is exactly the reasoning of Paley's Natural Theology... . Physical Theology, then, is pretty much what it was two thousand years ago, and has not received much help from modern science: but now, on the contrary, I think it has received from it a positive disadvantage, – I mean, it has been taken out of its place, has been put too prominently forward, and thereby has almost been used as an instrument against Christianity.³²

Newman's rationale for rejecting the teleological argument as presented by Paley was simple: anyone who accepted the *deus ex machina* model of creation and believed that the world was subject to immutable 'laws' that had been 'fixed' by God at the moment of creation was in danger of excluding a priori the possibility of *creatio continua* – the view that creation is an ongoing process in which God plays an active part as agent of change. Those inclined to praise God for the beauty and intricacy of his fixed and timeless laws would, Newman feared, be less likely to embrace the idea of a God who constantly and invariably acts with (or concurs with) created causes.³³ Accordingly, any physical theologian who remained too wedded to Paley's argument, and refused to acknowledge the inherent mutability of the natural world, might easily be driven to repudiate the very notion of divine design altogether if confronted with evidence that clearly showed

31 Newman *op. cit.*, (15), p. 450.

32 *ibid.*, pp. 450-451.

33 In his argument against deism, Newman averred that God does not intervene to further shape creation over time but constantly and invariably acts with (or concurs with) created causes. So all that occurs in the world – for example evolution, or human or animal reproduction – is a product both of secondary natural or 'ordinary' causes and ceaseless divine action. That is why Newman argues that even when a miraculous event occurs (like the fiery pillar leading the people of Israel out of Egypt) ordinary causes are not overridden or made redundant but continue in their real effects. God is not in competition with created causes but cooperates with them. See Newman, J.H. *Two Essays on Biblical and Ecclesiastical Miracles*, London: Longmans, Green & Co. (1907).

that living things are indeed subject to change. And, in words which could almost be said to anticipate the implications of Darwin's theory for Paley's 'physical theology', Newman wrote that:

This so-called science tends, if it occupies the mind, to dispose it against Christianity... . Thus, the God of Physical Theology may very easily become a mere idol; for He comes to the inductive mind in the medium of fixed appointments, so excellent, so skilful, so beneficent, that, when it has for a long time gazed upon them, it will think them too beautiful to be broken, and will at length so contract its notion of Him as to conclude that He never could have the heart (if I may dare use such a term) to undo or mar His own work; and this conclusion will be the first step towards its degrading its idea of God a second time, and identifying Him with His works. Indeed, a Being of Power, Wisdom, and Goodness, and nothing else, is not very different from the God of the Pantheist.³⁴

It is quite possible that Newman's pre-existing antipathy towards Paley's teleological argument made him peculiarly receptive to evolutionary ideas. Furthermore, once he had received from Canon John Walker his copy of Beverley's book defending the teleological argument, Newman lost no time in forthrightly expressing his views concerning evolution – and his great disdain for Paley's theory. In his letter of response to Walker acknowledging receipt of Beverley's book, Newman stated that Beverley's critique was somewhat confused – and that clarification of certain fundamental points was required 'before it can cohere'. He then boldly asserted: 'I do not fear the theory [of evolution] so much as [Beverley] seems to do – and it seems to me that he is hard upon Darwin sometimes, when he might have interpreted him kindly.' Newman then went on to present his own innovative, and theologically insightful, reading of Darwin's theory:

It does not seem to me to follow that creation is denied because the Creator, millions of years ago, gave laws to matter. He first created matter and then he created laws for it – laws which should construct it into its present wonderful beauty, and accurate adjustment and harmony of parts gradually. We do not deny or circumscribe the Creator, because we hold He has created the self acting [*sic*] originating human mind, which has almost a creative gift; much less do we deny or circumscribe His power, if we hold that He gave matter such laws as by their blind instrumentality moulded and constructed through innumerable ages the world as we see it. If Darwin in this or that point of his theory comes into collision with revealed truth, that is another matter – but I do not see that the principle of development, or what I have called construction, does. As to the Divine Design, is it not an instance of incomprehensibly and infinitely marvellous Wisdom and Design to have given certain laws to matter millions of ages ago, which have surely

³⁴ Newman *op. cit.*, (15), p. 454.

and precisely worked out, in the long course of those ages, those effects which He from the first proposed. Mr. Darwin's theory need not then to be atheistical, be it true or not; it may simply be suggesting a larger idea of Divine prescience and Skill. At first sight, I do not see that 'the accidental evolution of organic beings' is inconsistent with divine design. It is accidental to us, not to God.³⁵

This letter clearly shows Newman's openness to the possibility of theistic evolution. The core of his argument rests on the notion that God 'gave matter such laws as by their blind instrumentality moulded and constructed through innumerable ages the world as we see it'. What Newman seems to be implying here is that not only is a Prime Mover necessary for the inception of the evolutionary process, but that, even though the methods by which selection works on organisms might appear haphazard, a view of the process *in toto* unmistakably shows the operation of law. This clearly bespeaks an *emergent* model of creation; one which – in the language of Aristotelian and neo-scholastic philosophy – suggests that while 'intrinsic finality' is the purpose which is peculiar to biological systems, there exists an 'extrinsic finality' or purpose which controls and directs the universe towards its entelechy.³⁶

Newman's letter also contains the remarkable passage in which he argues that God has 'created the self acting originating human mind'. This is theologically significant, because it shows that, for Newman, while the human body (including the physical brain) may well be the product of a purely evolutionary process, the existence of the human mind (or soul) cannot be explained in such ontologically reductionist terms. Newman therefore seems to reject the materialist assumption that the human mind is a species of matter – or a mere epiphenomenon of matter – and argues, on the contrary, that it must be uniquely and specially created *ex nihilo* by God.³⁷ For Newman, the human soul is immortal and therefore cannot be subject to evolutionary change, for it would then lose its 'supernatural' character and identity.³⁸ Thus, for Newman, although the human mind

35 *LD*, Vol. 24, pp. 77-78. Newman's postscript to this letter is equally insightful. His point seems to be that the 'accidental' meeting of two people who then marry and have children has never been seen as a reason to reject particular providence. In the same way, there is nothing about 'accidental evolution' which threatens that belief.

36 Entelechy (Greek: 'bearing its own perfection'). The realisation of what is potential, the actualisation of the goal for which something exists. On this basis, we might place Newman within what Ernan McMullin, in a splendid article, called the 'other Christian tradition' of interpreting Genesis in a way that left ample room for accommodating evolution. See McMullin, E. 'Darwin and the other Christian tradition', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* (2011) 46(2), 291-316.

37 This view, in many respects, anticipated the teaching of Pope Pius XII. In his 1950 encyclical letter *Humani Generis*, Pius XII examined evolution and did not exclude it as a possibility; however, he insisted that the special divine creation of the human soul must be held *de fide* by the Roman Catholic faithful (*Humani Generis*, para. 36).

38 The arguments concerning the distinct creation of the human soul by God, and the im-

ensouls a physical body produced entirely by evolutionary means, it itself can only be understood in metaphysical terms.³⁹

Newman was at pains to gainsay Beverley's claim that it is impossible to reconcile 'accidental evolution' with divine design. In fact, he even went so far as to assert that a world created via evolution displayed all the hallmarks of an 'incomprehensibly and infinitely marvellous Wisdom and Design'. However, despite Newman's sympathetic disposition towards evolution, he was mindful of the provisionality of all inductive forms of reasoning, and this led him to accept the possibility that evolutionary theory might, in the fullness of time, be disproved.

Newman gave serious consideration to the hypothesis that the structure of matter in evolution may well indicate 'a certain law [given] to matter millions of years ago'. It is therefore worth examining Darwin's own definition of natural selection, with a view to determining whether such a mechanism has the potential to yield 'the effects which [God] from the first proposed'. Approached from this angle, evolution is perceived in quasi-purposive terms, in the sense that it has the developmental potential to produce creatures capable of adapting to, and surviving within, their respective environments. Darwin himself, in *On the Origin of Species*, spoke of natural selection as 'the preservation of a large number of individuals, which varied more or less in any favourable direction, and of the destruction of a large number which varied in an opposite manner'.⁴⁰ As this process of variation and natural selection unfolds, Darwin averred, species will be exposed to new environmental conditions, 'and will frequently undergo further modification and improvement; and thus they will become still further victorious, and will produce groups of modified descendants'.⁴¹ For Darwin, then, the creative power of evolution lies in the fact that 'natural selection is daily and hourly scrutinising, throughout the world,

mortality of the human soul, are further developed by Newman in various published sermons. See especially 'The Immortality of the Soul' (Sermon 2 in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. 1) and 'The Individuality of the Soul' (Sermon 6 in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Vol. 4) available on the *Newman Reader* website (<http://www.newmanreader.org/index.html>). These sermons are not so much 'dialectical' as apologetical, in so far as they are attempts to explicate and justify Newman's developing theological ideas concerning the human soul to specific audiences.

39 Newman's argument that the human mind is too complex to be explained in merely biological terms can be regarded as entirely consistent with evolution, inasmuch as it was also advanced by Alfred Russel Wallace (1823–1913) – co-discoverer of natural selection – who was certain that *Homo sapiens* had 'something which he has not derived from his animal progenitors – a spiritual essence or nature . . . [that] can only find explanation in the unseen universe of Spirit' (Wallace, A. *Exposition of the Theory of Natural Selection*, London: Macmillan (1889), p. 474).

40 Darwin, C. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, New York: New American Library (1958 [1859]), p. 229.

41 *ibid.*, p. 349.

the slightest variations; rejecting those that are bad, preserving and adding up all that are good; silently and insensibly working, whenever and wherever opportunity offers, at the improvement of each organic being'.⁴²

Newman's *Grammar of Assent* and evolution

Darwin had claimed that the mechanism of natural selection produced well-adapted organic beings capable of surviving within their environments. However, does such a process have the capacity to fulfil God's *telos* for creation? If it does, one would expect to see ample evidence in nature of creatures endowed with such favourable adaptations. In his philosophical classic, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* of 1870, Newman appears to acknowledge the capacity of evolution to produce, via a process of continuous selection, species that are in essence designed for the purpose of surviving. When we observe 'universal nature', Newman argues, we see that:

Every being is in a true sense sufficient for itself ... It is a general law that, whatever is found as a function or an attribute of any class of beings, or is natural to it, is in its substance suitable to it, and subserves its existence, and cannot be rightly regarded as a fault or enormity. No being could endure, of which the constituent parts were at war with each other. And more than this; there is that principle of vitality in every being, which is of a sanative and restorative character, and which brings all its parts and functions together into one whole, and is ever repelling and correcting the mischiefs which befall it, whether from within or without, while showing no tendency to cast off its belongings as if foreign to its nature. The brute animals are found severally with limbs and organs, habits, instincts, appetites, surroundings, which play together for the safety and welfare of the whole; and, after all exceptions, may be said each of them to have, after its own kind, a perfection of nature.⁴³

As this quotation shows, Newman's recognition that 'mischiefs' often befall species is analogous, in many ways, to Darwin's thesis that 'injurious variations' often occur within species. For Newman, those species that are burdened by mischievous elements cannot 'endure' because they lack the capacity to adapt and survive within their environments. That is to say, the evolutionary process 'selects' those organic beings with favourable characteristics precisely because they are more likely to enhance the 'safe-

42 *ibid.*, p. 91. It should be emphasised, however, that Darwin and Newman did not appear to share the same conception of law and created order. Darwin clearly doubted the doctrine of particular providence and was much more of a Deist when he wrote *On the Origin of Species*. He certainly did not subscribe to Newman's concurrentism (if Newman's understanding of causality can accurately be so described).

43 Newman, J.H. *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, London: Longmans, Green & Co. (1887 [1870]) p. 348.

ty and welfare' of the whole species. The designer, Newman appears to be reasoning, achieves his *telos* for creation by enabling creatures themselves to gradually evolve the characteristics needed to maximise their chances of survival and growth. It must be emphasised, however, that such 'mischiefs' should in no way be construed as evidence of a defect or flaw in the system ordained by God, for, as Newman puts it, 'He gave matter such laws as by their blind instrumentality moulded and constructed through innumerable ages the world as we see it.'⁴⁴

Newman can also be said to have anticipated the criticism advanced by some contemporary theologians and philosophers that the 'wasteful' nature of evolution is hardly consonant with the goal-oriented intentions of an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God. For, while Newman openly acknowledges that death and extinction are an inevitable corollary of natural selection, he is also careful to point out that even those species that are the victims of such a process are contributing in their own way to the furtherance and perfection of God's providential plan. It is the natural end of such species that their material bodies should 'subserve their existence', Newman suggests, and the very fact that each creature performs its own necessary function in evolution is a sign of the working out of the 'general laws' instituted by the Creator.

The notion that evolution can legitimately be perceived in teleological terms was supported by many distinguished scientists in Newman's day. Asa Gray,⁴⁵ the great American botanist and taxonomist, for instance, acknowledged in 1874 that the progression seen in plant and animal life from simplicity to complexity, from homogeneity to heterogeneity, is indicative of some kind of purposive trajectory to evolution. He wrote that:

We recognise the great service rendered by Darwin to natural science by restoring teleology to it, so that instead of having morphology against teleology, we shall have henceforth morphology married to teleology.⁴⁶

Evolution thus shows that changing living things are *patterned organisms* moving in a definite direction. The individual living thing exists as an actual being, but because of its relationship to its ancestors and to its descendants, the organisational pattern of the living actuality also possesses potentiality. It is always in a state of becoming, a state of becoming actual through growth and a state of becoming different through development and evolution. Teleology therefore lies at the heart of natural selection, since the preservation of every biological organ contributes to the 'safety and welfare' of the individual life form.

44 *LD*, Vol. 24, pp. 77-78.

45 Asa Gray (1810–1888), Professor of Natural History at Harvard University (1842–73).

46 Quoted by Gilson, E. *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again: A Journey in Final Causality, Species and Evolution*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press (2009), p. 99. The actual article by Gray on Darwin was entitled 'Scientific worthies', *Nature* (1874) 10, 79-81 (p. 81).

Many naturalists after Darwin, influenced by scientific and philosophical materialism, began to argue that the evolutionary process was entirely fortuitous and that biological variation in nature was the result of pure chance. Indeed, Darwin himself in *On the Origin of Species* confessed to his lack of knowledge concerning the cause of variation in the progeny of biological organisms:

Our ignorance of the laws of variation is profound. Not in one case out of a hundred can we pretend to assign any reason why this or that part differs, more or less, from the same part in the parents.⁴⁷

As a result of such theorising, many early Darwinians advocated that variation was controlled by 'blind chance'. However, in a letter to St George Jackson Mivart, dated 10 November 1873, Newman was categorical that 'chance' is not an adequate explanation of causality in nature:

I am not so well satisfied with your own hypothesis. I mean the hypothesis that chance variations are the ultimate resolution of the phenomenon, which meets our eyes, of distinct species. Of course, *chance is not a cause*.⁴⁸

Newman's letter to Mivart underscores his conviction that evolution only works through the operation of secondary causes that have the potency to effect change; and, however much it may appear to be undirected when viewed from the angle of its secondary causes, such as selection, the First Cause is necessary for its initial beginning and the divine concursus is necessary to maintain it in operation.

Moreover, for Newman, the rational laws discernible in matter, combined with the observation that variation is perpetually occurring within the natural world, clearly suggest that an intrinsic order, balance and dynamism lie at the heart of the physical universe. However, this very fact concerning the ordered structure of the world also presented Newman with a problem. We can readily observe from empirical enquiry, he maintains, that material phenomena, although in motion, are not by their nature random. On the contrary, they obey invariable natural laws and appear to act rationally by moving towards a goal or *telos*. But Newman asks how this is possible when they themselves are non-rational. His answer, echoing that of Aquinas in his celebrated 'Fifth Way', is that such material phenomena must be *caused* to 'act' rationally by an intelligent, rational Will. In his *Grammar of Assent*, Newman expatiates at length on this point with specific reference to the concept of causation in the natural world:

But, it may be argued, if a thing happens once, it must happen always;

⁴⁷ Darwin *op. cit.*, (40), p. 200.

⁴⁸ *LD*, Vol. 26, p. 384.

for what is to hinder it? Nay, on the contrary, why, because one particle of matter has a certain property, should all particles have the same? Why, because particles have instanced the property a thousand times, should the thousand and first instance it also? It is *prima facie* unaccountable that an accident should happen twice, not to speak of its happening always. If we expect a thing to happen twice, it is because we think it is not an accident, but has a cause. What has brought about a thing once, may bring it about twice. *What* is to hinder its happening? rather, *What* is to make it happen? Here we are thrown back from the question of Order to that of Causation. A law is not a cause, but a fact; but when we come to the question of cause, then, as I have said, we have no experience of any cause but Will. If, then, I must answer the question, *What* is to alter the order of nature? I reply, *That* which willed it; – *That* which willed it, can unwill it; and the invariableness of law depends on the unchangeableness of that Will.⁴⁹

Reflections such as these led Newman to conclude that, if the occurrence of *one single* fundamental change in the natural world can only be adequately explained in terms of the intervention of a conscious Mind or Will, then, *mutatis mutandis*, the fact that purposive variations within species have occurred *repeatedly* throughout evolution strongly indicates that they must be governed by the agency of the divine will. Thus, while Newman was at pains to uphold the notion of God's transcendence, this emphasis on God's active role as agent in the progressive ascent of life reveals his belief in the reality of divine immanence.

Newman goes on to argue in the *Grammar of Assent* that our own experiential and existential knowledge of the world tells us that it is a *reductio ad absurdum* to postulate that causation is explicable in terms of chance factors:

The assent which we give to the proposition, as a first principle, that nothing happens without a cause, is derived, in the first instance, from what we know of ourselves; and we argue analogically from what is within us to what is external to us. One of the first experiences of an infant is that of his willing and doing; and, as time goes on, one of the first temptations of the boy is to bring home to himself the fact of his own sovereign arbitrary power, though it be at the price of waywardness, mischievousness, and disobedience. And when his parents, as antagonists of this wilfulness, begin to restrain him, and to bring his mind and conduct into shape, then he has a second series of experiences of cause and effect, and that upon a principle or rule. Thus the notion of causation is one of the first lessons which he learns from experience, that experience limiting it to agents possessed of intelligence and will.

49 Newman *op. cit.*, (43), pp. 71-72.

It is the notion of power combined with a purpose and an end.⁵⁰

Thus, for Newman, given that we know from our experience that cause and effect is limited ‘to agents possessed of intelligence and will’, it is plausible to conclude that variation within species must likewise be occasioned by the ‘power’ and ‘purpose’ of an Intelligent Being. It is therefore possible to argue that both variation and natural selection are consistent with the notion of supernatural design – as long as variation is seen as caused by the biological laws instituted by the divine will, and natural selection is perceived as the mechanism ordained by God for the purpose of producing creatures capable of surviving. Arguments such as these suggest that Newman developed a convincing case in support of the thesis that evolution is a teleological process through which God achieves the outcomes he intended from the very beginning.⁵¹

Evolution and the problem of evil and suffering

Newman was acutely conscious that the most intractable question of all for the Christian believer is the ‘theodicy’ problem: how could an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God create a world so replete with pain and suffering? Indeed, in a letter to J.R. Mozley, Newman drove this point home forcefully: ‘The most prominent difficulty in Theism,’ he wrote, ‘is the existence of evil.’⁵² In his attempt to wrestle with this theodical conundrum, Newman affirms his belief that human beings are responsible for much of the evil that exists in the world. When seeking scriptural support for such a contention, he upholds classically orthodox Christian teaching and turns to the opening chapters of Genesis, which contain the narrative of humankind’s fall from a preternatural state of graced integrity. According to Genesis 1, the world was originally created good by God, and its amazing complexity and beauty stand as perennial testimony to the essential goodness of God’s created order. However, humankind, although created good – and endowed with the gift of free will – has nonetheless elected to reject God. And that rejection has resulted in the fall – the source of the miseries and tragedies which bedevil the human condition. For Newman, then, the account of the fall in Genesis 2 and 3 clearly shows that the root cause of moral evil lies with our first ancestors’ violation of God’s will.

In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, Newman vividly described this fallen state of humankind:

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵¹ Hinchliff, P. *God and History: Aspects of British Theology 1875–1914*, Oxford: Clarendon Press (1992), pp. 48–49, 110–111. Hinchliff points out that, in addition to Newman, even the older Tractarians, such as E.B. Pusey and H.P. Liddon, were eventually determined to come to terms with the evolutionary hypothesis, and seem to have accepted the quasi-purposive nature of evolution.

⁵² 1 April 1875; *LD*, Vol. 27, p. 260.

Starting then with the being of a God (which is as certain to me as the certainty of my own existence) I look out of myself into the world of men, and there I see a sight which fills me with unspeakable distress. The world seems simply to give the lie to that great truth, of which my whole being is so full; and the effect upon me is, in consequence, as a matter of necessity, as confusing as if it denied that I am in existence myself ... What shall be said to this heart-piercing reason-bewildering fact? I can only answer, that either there is no Creator, or this living society of men is in a true sense discarded from His presence ... And so I argue about the world; – *if* there be a God, *since* there is a God, the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator. This is a fact, a fact as true as the fact of its existence; and thus the doctrine of what is theologically called Original Sin becomes to me almost as certain as that the world exists, and as the existence of God.⁵³

This ‘terrible aboriginal calamity’ was, of course, the Adamic Fall, and for Newman the conflict, disharmony and moral disorder all too evident in the world is a direct corollary of the chronic alienation, occasioned by original sin, between the human race and its Creator.⁵⁴

However, many of Newman’s scholarly contemporaries were also deeply troubled by the problem of prelapsarian *natural evil*, and the fact that, in a post-Darwinian world, it was becoming increasingly difficult to uphold the traditional Christian doctrine that the death, disease, violence and predation that characterise the natural world are attributable to humankind’s primordial expulsion from the terrestrial paradise of Eden. For, although animal suffering was known prior to Darwin, his work revealed the sheer scale of such suffering and the fact that it had existed for many millions of years, stretching back into the distant ages of geological time. The vast majority of species that had suffered as a result of the evolutionary process were now extinct. And, a fortiori, pain appeared to be ‘involved in the very structure of the animal organism’.⁵⁵ Such considerations would seem to bring the Epicurean paradox, so beloved by the philosopher David Hume, into sharp focus and place a question mark against God’s being at once sovereign *and* benign, omnipotent *and* loving. For how could an all-loving God possibly employ such a horribly cruel method as natural selection to create his world?

We know that the savageness of nature, ‘red in tooth and claw’,⁵⁶ led

53 Newman *op. cit.*, (11), pp. 217-218.

54 See also Newman *op. cit.*, (43), p. 398.

55 Illingworth, J.R. ‘The problem of pain: Its bearing on faith in God’, in Gore, C. (ed.) *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, 3rd edn, London: John Murray (1890 [1889]), p. 113.

56 Line from Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s poem, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*

Darwin away from theism and towards agnosticism.⁵⁷ It was another of Newman's contemporaries, the political philosopher and social reformer, John Stuart Mill (1806–73), who grasped the full severity of the problem, however.⁵⁸ Writing in 1873, and therefore after Darwin's theory of natural selection had become known and widely discussed, Mill presented his famous 'dysteleological' argument,⁵⁹ which attacked the whole notion of a beneficent designer God.⁶⁰ Nature, he observed, was harsh and pitiless to its very core, and 'progress' was made only at the cost of immense suffering. According to Mill, the great moral problem raised by natural selection is that, in order for the system to work, it is necessary for most organisms to die out because nature does not regard them as favoured. This means that predation, disease, and death – and the resultant elimination of the weak and unfit – are an integral part of the evolutionary process. For Mill, the problem of natural evil is so intense that associating natural selection with a good and all-powerful God is inconceivable, because:

Not even on the most distorted and contracted theory of good which ever was framed by religious or philosophical fanaticism, can the government of Nature be made to resemble the work of a being at once good and omnipotent.⁶¹

Although Newman conceded that there is something mysterious and ultimately unfathomable about evil,⁶² he clearly felt that he had gone some way towards explaining the origin of moral evil. However, the problem of natural evil, articulated in such uncompromising terms by Mill, presented a much more formidable challenge. For how is it possible to account for the existence of death, disease and predation in terms of the Adamic Fall, when such evils long pre-dated the emergence of *Homo sapiens*? While it is true that Newman did not provide a fully worked out and systematic

57 See Darwin's letter to Asa Gray, 22 May 1860: 'I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidae* [wasps] with the express intention of their [larva] feeding within the living bodies of Caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice.' (Cited in Darwin, F. (ed.) *Charles Darwin: His Life told in an Autobiographical Chapter, and in a Selected Series of his Published Letters*, London: John Murray (1908), p. 236). See also Letter 12041 of Darwin to John Fordyce, 7 May 1879: 'I think that generally (& more and more so as I grow older) but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind' (available on the Darwin Correspondence Project website, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/entry-12041>); and see Letter 1924 of Darwin to J.D. Hooker, 13 July 1856: 'What a book a Devil's chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering low & horridly cruel works of nature!' (available on the Darwin Correspondence Project website, <http://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/entry-1924>).

58 For a fascinating discussion of the differing intellectual approaches of Newman and John Stuart Mill, see Stephen, L. *An Agnostic's Apology and Other Essays*, London: Watts & Co. (1931), particularly chap. 5 entitled 'Newman's theory of belief', pp. 107-152.

59 An astute exposition and analysis of Mill's dysteleological argument is to be found in Hick, J. *Evil and the God of Love*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd (1966).

60 Mill, J.S. *Three Essays on Religion*, New York: Henry Holt & Co. (1874).

61 *ibid.*, p. 38.

62 Newman *op. cit.*, (43), pp. 398-399.

theodicy of prelapsarian natural evil, it is nonetheless possible to discern from his writings hints and suggestions that point towards one. Indeed, there is a clear sense in his oeuvre that he considered the work of creation unfinished, and that, like St Paul, he was mindful that creation was ‘groaning in travail’ (Rom. 8:22) – awaiting its final redemption and eschatological consummation – when ‘God will be all in all’ (1 Cor. 15:28).

Newman had drunk deeply at the well of patristic theology and his ideas concerning theodicy, while only tentatively expressed, echo those of St Irenaeus of Lyons. According to Irenaeus, God created a good world – but with the potential for it to become ever more perfect. In his *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, Newman advances a similar argument and suggests, for instance, that a ‘good’ creation means precisely that which is destined for perfection.⁶³ ‘All that we see’, Newman says, ‘is destined one day to burst forth into a heavenly bloom, and to be transfigured into immortal glory.’⁶⁴

This does not mean, of course, that such a journey towards eventual perfection will be pain-free. On the contrary, Newman seems to concede that it is bound to involve suffering and sickness. However, for Newman, the harsh realities of biological existence, which include physical illness and disease, appear to be a necessary means by which God achieves his *telos* for creation. A good illustration of Newman’s thinking on this point is to be found in his *Meditations and Devotions*, where he reflects on the necessary, providential and purposive role of suffering and physical illness in his own life:

Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am, I can never be thrown away. *If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him*; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; if I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. *My sickness, or perplexity, or sorrow may be necessary causes of some great end, which is quite beyond us*. He does nothing in vain; He may prolong my life, He may shorten it; He knows what He is about.⁶⁵

Reflections such as these on the ways of providence suggest that, for Newman, even physical sickness may play a necessary part in the fulfilment of God’s purpose and plan for creation.

However, while such suffering may indeed be a ‘necessary cause’ of ‘some great end’, Newman concedes that, because its meaning and purpose are ‘quite beyond us’,⁶⁶ it is hardly surprising if ‘the prominent events of the

63 *ibid.*, pp. 348-349.

64 Newman, J.H., ‘The greatness and littleness of human life’, Sermon 14 *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press (1997 [1891]) p. 875.

65 Newman, J.H. *Meditations and Devotions of the Late Cardinal Newman*, 2nd edn, London: Longmans, Green & Co. (1893), pp. 399-402 [italics mine].

66 *ibid.*

world' such as 'the replenishing of the earth, earthquakes and pestilences' are perceived as 'evil' from a merely temporal perspective. When seen in the light of 'the spontaneous piety of the human mind', however, Newman argues that such a mind readily 'discerns a Divine Supervision' guiding all creation.⁶⁷

That is to say, although suffering is endemic within nature, Newman appears to suggest that it could be perceived as a divine means to, or even a condition of, the greater good of creation. For, if viewed from the perspective of eternity, 'it is possible to give an interpretation to the course of things, by which every event or occurrence in its order becomes providential'.⁶⁸ According to Newman, then, one can 'recognise the Hand of unseen power, directing in mercy or in judgement the physical system'.⁶⁹

Newman assures us, however, that even though sickness and suffering may be a necessary means by which the divine plan is brought to fruition, all God's creatures 'both fulfil the purposes and receive the just recompenses of an Omnipotent Providence'. He is hinting here that, although physical suffering and sickness involve great cost, the whole of creation will eventually be healed when it is brought to its eschatological consummation. For, he argues, as 'the facts of Divine Government testify', there must be a way in which it is possible to 'compensate for what is stern in the teaching of nature, without tending to deny that sternness'.⁷⁰ And, 'hope of future good,' he adds, 'sweetens all suffering'.⁷¹

Above all, Newman suggests that such a final dispensation will involve a divine justice which will entail 'Good to the good, and evil to the evil'; and even though we may inhabit an earthly realm in which 'obscurity and confusion' reign, if we allow ourselves to be open to God's providence, and submit to being enlightened by his spirit, we will instinctively recognise 'the universal rule of God's dealings' with the world.⁷² Moreover, he avers, the 'blessings of physical nature' are the 'tokens [of] the Divine System', which 'bring home to our experience the fact of a Good God'.⁷³

Thus, it seems possible to discern enough structure and substance in Newman's writings to support the claim that, for him, the seemingly cruel realities of biological life – and perhaps, by extension, the necessary 'cost' of the evolutionary process – point to a world coming to birth, a world 'groaning in travail'. Moreover, this seems consistent with Newman's view that the world is also fundamentally good, because it is the work of a beneficent

67 Newman *op. cit.*, (43), p. 402.

68 *ibid.*

69 *ibid.*

70 *ibid.*, pp. 400-401.

71 *ibid.*, p. 401.

72 *ibid.*, p. 402.

73 *ibid.*, pp. 401-402.

and omnipotent Creator who, through the works of nature, is controlling and directing it towards the eschatological realisation of his own purposes.

The uniqueness of humankind: rationality and conscience

A further point of contention between the champions of evolutionary theory and defenders of orthodox Christian faith concerned the origin and uniqueness of human beings. Newman's own stance on this issue can be seen as something of a *via media* between two extreme positions. On the one hand, there were conservative Anglo-Catholics, such as Samuel Wilberforce (1805–1873), who, in their eagerness to uphold the dignity of human beings as made *imago Dei*, refused to countenance the possibility that the human race had descended from lower forms of life. On the other hand, scientific naturalists, such as Thomas Henry Huxley (1825–1895), argued that the anatomical and morphological similarities between human beings and the higher primates strongly indicated their joint descent from a common ape-like ancestor. In 1862, for example, having conducted a public dissection of the brains of apes and humans, Huxley concluded that 'Whatever system of organs be studied, the comparison of their modifications in the ape series leads to one and the same result – the structural differences which separate Man from the Gorilla and the Chimpanzee are not so great as those which separate the Gorilla from the lower apes.'⁷⁴ And this means, Huxley argued, that 'if man be separated by no greater structural barrier from the brutes than they are from each other – then it seems to follow that ... there would be no rational ground for doubting that man might have originated ... by the gradual modification of a man-like ape'.⁷⁵

Newman steered a careful course between the positions advanced by both Wilberforce and Huxley, and acknowledged that, while there was indeed anatomical similarity between human beings and the higher primates, which suggested a historical connection, any adequate explanation of the origin of *anthropos* must account for those unique characteristics that clearly suggest a qualitative – as opposed to a merely quantitative – difference between humans and all other species. Chief among these, for Newman, were rationality and the faculty of conscience.⁷⁶ The former was

⁷⁴ Huxley, T.H. *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature*, London: Williams & Norgate (1863), p. 123. See also Huxley, T.H. 'Notes on the resemblances and differences in the structure and the development of the brain in Man and the Apes', in Darwin, C. *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2nd edn, London: John Murray (1874), pp. 309-318.

⁷⁵ Huxley *op. cit.*, (74 *Evidence*), p. 125.

⁷⁶ According to Newman, rationality and conscience, in addition to the human ego, had to be understood in a broader, supra-empirical context that included not only the seen, but the unseen. This point is explored by Ono Paul Ekeh, in his splendid article 'Newman's cogito: John Henry Newman's phenomenological meditations on first philosophy', *The Heythrop Journal: A Bimonthly Review of Philosophy and Theology* (2011) 51, 90-103. Ekeh argues that, for Newman, the human ego was an (almost Cartesian) axiomatic principle, meaning that it was among our foundational ideas of truth.

crucial because:

We call rationality the distinction of man, when compared with other animals. This is true in logic; but in fact a man differs from a brute, not in rationality only, but in all that he is, even in those respects in which he is most like a brute; so that his whole self, his bones, limbs, make, life, reason, moral feeling, immortality, and all that he is besides, is his real *differentia*, in contrast to a horse or a dog.⁷⁷

As we have seen, Newman believed that the source of such rationality lay in God's special creation of the 'self acting originating human mind'. The faculty of conscience was also endowed by the Creator, Newman thought, and is intimately related to human rationality, a connection he explains as follows:

The Supreme Being is of a certain character, which, expressed in human language, we call ethical. He has the attributes of justice, truth, wisdom, sanctity, benevolence and mercy, as eternal characteristics in His nature, the very Law of His being, identical with Himself; and next, when He became Creator, he implanted this Law, which is Himself, in the intelligence of all His rational creatures.⁷⁸

For Newman, then, conscience is peculiar to human beings, and is, quite simply, 'the voice of God in the nature and heart of man'.⁷⁹ Notwithstanding these distinguishing human features, he was, however, conscious of the fact that a tension might potentially arise between the 'revealed truths' in Scripture concerning human origins and a scientific account of human evolution. In particular, he observed that 'if there were half a dozen races of men, and that they were all descended from gorillas, or chimpanzees, or ourang-outangs, or baboons', then such a hypothesis would contradict the 'Word of God Himself', which declared that 'there were no men before Adam, that he was immediately made out of the slime of the earth, and that he is the first father of all men that are or ever have been'.⁸⁰ However, for Newman, such hermeneutical and exegetical difficulties were by no means insuperable, for, while the data of science might appear *prima facie* to conflict with Holy Writ, he remained convinced that 'philosophical discoveries cannot really contradict divine revelation'.⁸¹ Accordingly, if evolutionary theory is sound, then it is the task of the theologian qua

77 Newman *op. cit.*, (43), pp. 281-282.

78 Newman, J.H. *Certain Difficulties felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching, Vol. 2: Considered in a Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, London: Longmans, Green & Co. (1900 [1875]), p. 246.

79 *ibid.*, p. 247. Secondary sources on Newman's understanding of conscience include: Grave, S.A. *Conscience in Newman's Thought*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (1989); Crosby, J.F. *The Personalism of John Henry Newman*, Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press (2014).

80 Newman *op. cit.*, (43), p. 257.

81 *ibid.*, p. 258.

theologian to show how it is consistent with the truths about humankind vouchsafed by Holy Scripture.

The issue of the evolutionary origins of humankind was examined further by Newman in a letter dated 5 June 1870 to his erstwhile fellow Tractarian, Edward Bouverie Pusey.⁸²

Does scripture contradict Darwin's theory? – was Adam *not* immediately taken from the dust of the earth? 'All are of dust' – Eccles iii:20 – yet we never were dust – we are from fathers. Why may not the same be the case with Adam? I don't say that it *is* so – but if the sun does not go round the earth and the earth stand still, as Scripture seems to say, I don't know why Adam needs be immediately out of dust – Formavit Deus hominem de limo terrae [God formed man from the dust of the earth] – i.e. out of what really was dust and mud in nature, before He made it what it was, living. But I speak under correction.⁸³

Once again, by arguing that meaning within Scripture is not static, but, rather, should be open to fresh interpretation in the light of the advances of modern thought, Newman is suggesting a possible way of affirming the two apparently contradictory premises of creation and evolution.⁸⁴ Therefore, according to Newman, just as in a post-Copernican age it is no longer possible to subscribe to a (supposedly) biblically sanctioned geocentric cosmology, so a careful exegesis of Genesis reveals that the text itself appears to have the resources to allow for a mediate generation of Adam's body out of 'dust and mud' via the intermediary of a parent species.⁸⁵ Such a reading of the creation narrative on Newman's part is compelling because it seems compatible with the biblical text and also with the facts of human evolution and natural conditions.

Conclusion

As we have seen, Newman did not regard evolutionary theory as inimical to Christian doctrine. On the contrary, just as St Thomas Aquinas had argued in his 'Fifth Way' that non-rational things require a rational agency to control and direct them, so Newman maintained that, as evolution seems to be moving towards some kind of *telos*,⁸⁶ there must be the 'guiding hand' of providence behind it all. Only a divine will can adequately

82 E.B. Pusey (1800–1882) was Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford from 1828 until his death.

83 *LD*, Vol. 25, p. 138.

84 See Jaki *op. cit.*, (6), pp. 265-290.

85 For a good discussion of the way in which Newman's thought allowed for a 'pre-Adamite man' with reason but without conscience, see Ker *op. cit.*, (24), p. 624.

86 To some extent a parallel can be drawn between Newman's idea of creation leading to a *telos* and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's notion of an 'Omega Point'.

account for the order and causation underpinning all natural laws.⁸⁷ For Newman, then, Darwin's theory both presupposes and necessitates the existence of a Creator God.

Moreover, in common with other Victorian theologians and scientists, Newman regarded the evolutionary process as a useful and expedient *modus operandi* by which God achieves the outcomes he intended for his creation from the very beginning. Evolution is thus a purposive process, which enables creatures to both survive and ultimately perfect their natures. Lastly, a judicious and scientifically informed reading of the Genesis narrative concerning the origins of humankind shows that there is scope within the text itself for accepting the findings of palaeontology that *Homo sapiens* has descended from a non-human progenitor.

In the final analysis, Newman's openness to evolution is perhaps best encapsulated by words penned to his friends St George Jackson Mivart and David Brown. To Mivart he wrote, 'You must not suppose I have personally any great dislike or dread of his [Darwin's] theory.'⁸⁸ And to Brown he said, 'I see nothing in the theory of evolution inconsistent with an Almighty God and protector.'⁸⁹ There is thus little doubt that, as far as Newman was concerned, evolution was compatible with Christian belief.⁹⁰

Jonathan W. Chappell holds a PhD in Anthropology from University College London and an MLitt in Theology from the University of Cambridge. He has recently completed an MPhil in Philosophy at the University of Essex.

87 According to Newman, evolution provides numerous examples of 'directedness' in nature that, along with ordered regularities in general, can only be accounted for through an ultimate appeal to a supreme intelligence. See Newman *op. cit.*, (35).

88 9 December 1871, *LD*, Vol. 25, p. 446.

89 Easter Eve (4 April) 1874, *LD*, Vol. 27, p. 44. Brown was Principal of the Free Church College, Aberdeen.

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