

God After Darwin

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According to widely accepted Darwinian principles, any complexity that exists in the natural world is the product of the twin mechanisms of random mutation and natural selection. Random mutation means that individual members of a species differ in their characteristics and natural selection describes the process by which favourable traits are passed on in the gene pool, at the expense of others.

Behind the rather neutral sounding term ‘natural selection’ lies a universe of suffering. Darwin was certainly not the first to notice that the suffering of sentient creatures is part of the natural world. However, what Darwinism makes clear, is the extent to which this suffering is necessary. In a Darwinian world, complexity only comes about through selection, which then necessarily means de-selection and untold suffering of sentient creatures.

An example illustrates this point. Imagine two ducks, one male and one female. Let’s say they have ten ducklings in a particular year. Imagine that each of these ducks pair up and, on average, produce another brood of ten ducklings the following year. Imagine twenty-five years of such prodigious growth. How many ducklings would be born in the twenty-fifth year? The answer is perhaps surprising: $2 \text{ ducks} \times (10 / 2)^{25}$ (25 generations producing 10 ducklings) = 9.3 quadrillion ducks (a quadrillion is a number with 27 zeroes). Now if we assume, for the sake of argument that each duck weighs 1 kg, that would be 9.3 quadrillion kg. For comparison, the earth weighs about 5.9 quadrillion kg.

The reason why the wild duck population remains more or less constant in most parts of the world is simply due to the fact that only the very strongest ducklings survive, most ducklings die painful deaths due to frost or lack of food, or by being killed by competitors. And so it is with the vast majority of species in the world. It is, for example, a staggering fact that an estimated 99.1% of all species that have ever existed are now extinct. It was no doubt this Darwin referred to, when he exclaimed: “What a book a devil’s chaplain might write on the clumsy, wasteful, blundering, low, and horribly cruel works of nature!” (*Letter to Dr Hooker, 1856*).

The natural world, which Tennyson so memorably described as ‘red in tooth and claw’. then is a place devoid of morals. Nature is, in a word, *amoral*. This means that the forces that rule it may include expediency, complexity, even beauty, but not morality. Animals and natural forces may cause damage and destruction and diseases may spread and kill,

but this is neither moral nor immoral. It simply is. Richard Dawkins puts it strikingly: “The universe we observe has precisely the properties we should expect if there is, at bottom, no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference. We cannot admit that things might be neither good nor evil, neither cruel nor kind, but simply callous - indifferent to all suffering, lacking all purpose.” *River Out of Eden* (2000).

Another key feature of Darwinian thinking is that human beings are part and parcel of the natural world. One of the key insights of Darwinian thinking was that human beings are not ‘fallen angels’, we are ‘risen apes’. The process that created the beetle and the bumblebee is the same process that created us; there was no special creation. It was perhaps this that the wife of the Bishop of Oxford understood when she exclaimed: “Oh dear, let us hope that what Mr. Darwin says is not true. But if it is true, let us hope that it will not become generally known.”

How then are we supposed to think about God in an amoral world that is so clearly predicated on untold suffering? To answer this question, we shall start with what seems to be an inherent contradiction in the Darwinian theory as presented above. Briefly, we have pointed out two features of Darwinian thinking:

- a) Nature is neither moral or immoral but amoral, devoid of morals.
- b) Human beings are part and parcel of the natural world.

However, these two statements harbour an inherent contradiction, for if we are part of nature and nature is amoral, how then are we able to make the value statement that nature is amoral in the first place. Clearly, to argue that anything is amoral must imply that the person making that judgement has the capacity for moral reasoning. Horses and cockroaches, and for that sake computers, do not worry about the unfair suffering that takes place in the natural world. To worry and lament the state of the world seems the prerogative of a singular species: the human being.

This inherent contradiction in Darwinian thinking points out an important fact: There is a corner of the natural world, which is not amoral but actually has moral potential. That is the human species. And if we are the only species that is capable of seeing the suffering of the natural world, then we have a special responsibility to respond to it. This places a great amount on our shoulders; the more sensitive we become to suffering, the more we take it seriously and act towards lessening it, the larger that small corner of the natural world becomes. If we fail to respond to these challenges, the world will descend into moral darkness. Should we succeed, we will be able to say that the forces that created the world, including the human species, also was able to create morality, even holiness, in the world. What we do reflects back on, and in many ways defines, the process that created us.

One way to describe the difference between the blind forces of nature and the human moral potential is to look at the way the Bible speaks about creation. There are multiple

creation narratives within the Torah, and it is interesting to note how they relate to the names of God. As we know, names are very important in the Jewish tradition, because they convey the essence of the character. That is true for God as well.

So in the first chapter of Genesis, we meet *Elohim* – the creator of the natural world. This name or attribute of God is also associated with the creation of the first human beings, however normal human life only starts once the first biblical humans eat from the Tree of Knowledge and learn to perceive the difference between ‘tov ve-ra’, between right and wrong. It is only subsequent to this moment, the birth of moral consciousness in the world, that we are introduced to the partnership between God and humankind.

The name that symbolises this partnership is *Adonai*. Whereas *Elohim* signifies the natural forces of the created world, that which we cannot change, *Adonai* is used only with reference to the human-divine partnership. We may therefore say that *Adonai* symbolises human/divine moral consciousness, not nature but rather how we respond to nature. Another way of distinguishing between *Elohim* and *Adonai* would be to say that *Elohim* refers to ‘everything that is’, whereas *Adonai* refers to ‘what ought to be.’

The first mention of both names or attributes of God come at the start of the second chapter of the Book of Genesis:

Genesis – Bereishit 2.5-7

Now no tree of the field was yet on the earth, neither did any herb of the field yet grow, because the Lord God (*Adonai Elohim*) had not brought rain upon the earth, and there was no man to work the soil. And a mist ascended from the earth and watered the entire surface of the ground. And the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and He breathed into his nostrils the soul of life, and man became a living soul (*nefesh chaya*).

The image of the human being working the soil expresses the essence of the partnership that the Bible envisages between God and man. The partnership is signalled in the twin names of God at the outset and gives rise to man being formed from the dust of the ground (not unlike a risen apr, perhaps). Only when man is connected to God in partnership does his soul become a ‘living soul’. The Targum, an early Arameic translation of the Bible, here uses the phrase ‘ruach memamalleh’, a talking spirit. It seems the early rabbis understood the nature of man to be crucially dependent on telling stories: they conceived of human nature first and foremost as *homo fabula*: the species that tells stories. Like the chassidic legend has it: God created the world because He loves stories.

The partnership between *Elohim* and *Adonai*, between God and man, is also brought out in our blessings. When we recite the Kiddush, we do so over wine, the product of a long process of sowing, irrigating, harvesting and cultivating. Similarly with the blessing over bread: although we need the natural resources like wheat and water, bread too is precisely the product of this creative human-divine partnership. And the blessings we recite appropriately contain both names of God: *Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam...*

What then happens if the human-divine partnership, so carefully cultivated, is challenged by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune? How are we supposed to think when confronted with a world in which it seems that God is not fulfilling His side of the agreement?

There are many answers to this question in our tradition. One of them is the *Shema*, which states that if you act morally you will be rewarded and if you act immorally you will be punished. But this is not the only answer. A completely contradictory opinion is expressed in the Talmud:

Talmud – Avoda Zara 54b

Suppose a person stole a measure of wheat and went and sowed it in the ground; it is right that it should not grow, yet the world pursues its natural course (*olam keminhago noheg*), and as for those who transgress, they will have to render an account. Another illustration: Suppose a man has intercourse with his neighbour's wife; it is right that she should not conceive, yet the world pursues its natural course.

An even stronger version of the same argument is found in Masechet Kiddushin. Here, the Talmud tells the story of a father who asks his son to go up to the loft and bring him the young birds from a nest. In order to appreciate the rationale of the rabbis here, we need to know that there are two *mitzvot*, for which the Torah explicitly promises a long life. They are, firstly, the *mitzva* of respecting one's parents and, secondly, the *mitzva* of shooing away the mother bird when taking the young or the eggs. Unifying both these commandments seems to an idea of the immunity of parenthood: without respect for the integrity of the family structure, everything would break down.

So if a boy respects his father by doing what he is told and at the same time correctly dismisses the mother bird from the nest, we should expect the boy to be somehow rewarded. How then are we supposed to respond if the boy ascends the loft, dismisses the mother bird and then falls down and is killed? The rabbis offer several possible solutions to this problem. One says the boy probably had sinned, another that he was an idolater. A third responds with denial and claims it could not have happened. But it is Rabbi Eliezer's solution that is the most radical:

Talmud – Kiddushin 39b

Now, if the boy's father said to him: Ascend to the loft and bring me the young birds. If the boy ascends, dismisses the mother bird and takes the young, and on his return falls and is killed, where then is this boy's happiness and where is this boy's prolonging of days? ... Rabbi Eleazar said: ...It was a rickety ladder (*solam raoah haya*), which meant that injury was likely. Where injury is likely one cannot rely on a miracle (*lo somchim al ha-nes*).

Rabbi Eliezer says that the problem is not to be found in the realm of theology or theodicy. It was simply a broken ladder! The boy fell down because the ladder needed fixing. What Rabbi Eliezer is saying is that when bad things happen to good people, we cannot blame God. We have to look at the causes. This concession has massive repercussions. It means that whenever we see evil in the world, we need to go out there

and fix it: *hakol tzrichim tikkun – everything needs fixing*. It means that when we witness earthquakes or see populations succumbing to the AIDS virus, our response should be: What can I do? Because that's what it means to fix the ladder.

In the conclusion of this midrash, Rabbi Joseph is quoted as saying that the reason Elisha ben Abuyah ('Aher') lost his mind was because he saw an incident such as the one described. We can add that if we can begin to see the broken ladders of this world as sources of strength rather than obstacles, we can begin to take the first few steps towards fixing them. Broken ladders can become sources of strength because they remind us of our moral sensitivity and the moral law inside us.

Let's come back to God. If we manage to be moral, to increase our moral potential and our sensitivity to the suffering around us, how does that change the nature of God? To start to answer this problem, we now turn to a midrash that contains an imagined dialogue between Moses and God at the burning bush. God has just tasked Moses with leading the Israelite slaves out of Egypt. Moses, baffled, asks God what His name is. Recall the centrality of names to a character's essence. God explains to Moses that He has many names, and that His names define different attributes of His character:

Midrash – Shemot Rabbah 3:6

God said to Moses: You wish to know My name. Well, I am called according to My work: sometimes I am called *El Shaddai*, *El Tzevaot*, *Elohim*, *Adonai*. When I am judging created beings, I am called *Elohim*, and when I am waging war against the wicked, I am called *El Tzevaot*. When I suspend judgment for a man's sins, I am called *El Shaddai*, and when I act mercifully towards My world, I am called *Adonai*, for *Adonai* refers to the attribute of mercy, as it is said: *Adonai, Adonai, merciful and gracious (Shemot - Exodus 34:6)*. Hence I will be what I will be in virtue of My work (*ehiyeh asher ehiyeh lefi maasai*).

'I will be what I will be in virtue of My work'. This phrase, connected as it is to one of God's most mysterious names (*ehiyeh asher ehiyeh*) introduces a new understanding of God's nature as presented by the midrash: *God's nature is conditional on our conduct*. Similarly to our role as the only moral force in the world, this midrash suggests that what we do crucially reflects back on the process that has created us. If we are moral, God will be God. If we are not moral, God will not be God. Or God will remain in a state of *Elohim*, never able to progress to the level of *Adonai*, of partnership with moral man.

The following midrash brings out even more clearly the way in which the ancient rabbis saw God as dependent on human moral conduct. In a later conversation with Moses, around the time of the building of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) in the desert, the rabbis imagine God and Moses in dialogue about the purpose of the Torah and human moral conduct. With a poetic allusion to a text in Psalms, the Torah is compared to a light that guides in the darkness. Since the word Torah means instruction, this makes a lot of sense. The Torah is a set of instructions that allow human beings to lead noble lives in an essentially morally dark world. However, in a striking inversion, the rabbis imagine the light of Torah as shining a path, not for man, but for God. It is God, not man, the rabbis suggest, who is stumbling around in darkness without the light of scripture:

Midrash – Shemot Rabbah 36:3

God said: Let My lamp be in your hand and your lamp in My hand. What is the lamp of God? The Torah, as it says: *For a mitzvah is a candle and the Torah is light (ki ner mitzvah ve-torah or; Mishlei - Proverbs 6:23)*. Why is a mitzvah a candle? Because if one performs a mitzvah it is as if one kindles a light before God and as if one revives one's own soul, which also called a light, as it says, *Man's soul is the Lord's lamp (ner Adonai nishmat adam; Mishlei - Proverbs 20:27)*.

Not only is the Torah the light that shines a path for God: man's soul too is God's lamp. What is intended here is to say that God is guided by human moral conduct. Only through our good deeds and our taking responsibility for the world is God able to be moral. These hands are the only hands that God has in the world!

An even stronger version of this sentiment may be found in the commentary on the Torah of the famous Chassidic rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. Levi Yitzchak was a rabbi in the Ukraine in the early 18th century. He was famous for his radical interpretations and considered himself the 'defence attorney of the Jewish people'. In this text, he also quotes a phrase from Psalms. However, the interpretation he gives is startling:

Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev: Kedushat Levi (Parashat Metzora)

In Tehillim, we read, *The Lord is your shelter (Adonai tzilcha; Psalms 121:5)*. This may be explained in the following way: 'shelter' may be read as 'shade' or 'shadow'. For whatever a person does, their shadow does after them, according to their actions. Likewise when a person serves the Lord, Creator of all the worlds, then what that righteous person does below – each and every action – is also done on high. Such a person crowns the Creator (*mekater et ha-Boreh*).

Our moral actions, says Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, 'crowns the Creator'. What does it mean to crown the Creator. As we know, the crown is the symbol of kinship. A king without a crown is no king, so what this seems to mean is that we, through our moral actions, confer upon God His kingship, His very authority. The corollary of which is: without our acts of goodness in the world, without our taking responsibility for creation, there is an incompleteness to God. Without our good deeds, God is powerless. If man is not man, God is not God. Is that the difference between *Elohim* and *Adonai*? That without our moral actions, God is forced to remain that the level of blind, amoral forces?

The prayer that we recite every day and that concludes all our communal prayers is the Aleynu prayer. The second paragraph of the prayer, reads as follows:

Aleynu Prayer

Al-ken: Therefore we place our hope in You, Lord our God (*Adonai Eloheinu*) that we may soon see the glory of your power, when you will remove the abominations from the earth, and idols will be utterly destroyed, when the world will be perfected under the sovereignty of the Almighty (*letaken olam bemalchut Shaddai*)... And it is said: Then the Lord shall be King over all the earth: on that day the Lord shall be One, and His name One (*Veneemar, vehaya Adonai lemelech al kol haaretz, bayom hahu yihiye Adonai echad oshmo echad*).

The first thing we notice is that the prayer speaks of God using both appellations, we relate here to the *Elohim* and *Adonai* partnership. The prayer looks forward to the day when the abomination (*gilulim*) will be removed from the earth. The day when the perversions of the earth, the day, perhaps when a stolen measure of wheat will not yield a crop. When the world will be perfected (*letaken olam*), when the world will be fixed, when all the broken ladders, wherever they may be, will be fixed. Note that, in the words of the prayer, they will not be directly fixed by God, only under His sovereignty. And the final phrase speaks directly on this sovereignty: It is only then (*vehaya*) that God (*Adonai*) will be King over all the Earth. And it is only on that day (*bayom hahu*) that His name will be One.

This then is the Jewish hope. This is the vision of the messianic age. At the conclusion of all our communal prayers, we end with this programme for change. When we leave shul it is with this prayer on our lips and ringing in our ears: that one day, the 'is' and the 'ought' should coincide; that *Elohim* – the amoral, blind, natural forces – and *Adonai* – moral consciousness and sensitivity – should merge and become one.