



Demythologizing Darwin — A Review of Wiker’s “The Darwin Myth”

With 2009 being the bicentennial of the birth of Charles Darwin and the sesquicentennial of the publication of his *On the Origin of the Species*, the observance of a “Year of Darwin” has been marked primarily by the publication of a vast array of titles dedicated to revering or reviling the man who defined the dominant theory of evolution.



Wiker’s [The Darwin Myth](#), despite its arguably inflammatory title, attempts to find a middle course between the two prevailing interpretations of Darwin. Thus Wiker writes in the Introduction: “It is high time we understand who Darwin really was, and what he really did. Distinguishing the facts from fancies is no easy matter for two related reasons. First, Darwin himself is often positively misleading about his own life.... Second, biographers of Darwin have too often taken him at his word when they should have exercised a little more skepticism; moreover, they have tended toward hagiography, making Darwin a kind of secular saint who singlehandedly brought enlightenment to a world shrouded in the darkness of superstition and ignorance.” On occasion, however, Wiker seems to succumb to the hagiographic urge himself; thus he concludes his book with the declaration: “As for me, I shall always prefer a theory of evolution that can explain so great a man as Charles Darwin” — a statement which seems simultaneously cloying and patronizing, for it is hard to praise a man’s greatness in a book that focuses on that same man’s mendacity.

[The Darwin Myth](#) is littered with references to Darwin’s Whiggish moralism; Wiker assures the reader that Charles Darwin was a loving husband and father and in many regards a swell guy. At the same time, the book is built around documenting a dark side to Darwin, revealing a man who misrepresents the development of his own thought (especially his belief in evolution *before* approaching the evidence),



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the extent to which his theory relies on predecessors, and his vanity in defending “his” theory. Wiker amply demonstrates that Charles Darwin was dependent on the writings of his grandfather, Erasmus Darwin, in developing his theory; “One of Charles Darwin’s very few character flaws was this: he was oddly possessive about his theory, so much so that he failed to acknowledge his predecessors, including his own grandfather, until his detractors pointed out the glaring omissions.”

In addition to confronting Darwin’s elastic understanding of his intellectual debts, Wiker offers some useful insights regarding the difficulties of the Darwinian dogma. Wiker notes the virtual deification of death which takes place in Darwin’s system; “Death, Darwin thought, was the key to life, a complete inversion of Emma [Darwin]’s superstitious belief in a creator God and the idea that death was the punishment for original sin. Death was, is, and always will be, the creator. Unlike the biblical God, it does not pronounce everything good, it does not demand peace; instead it is the winnowing of dross and imperfection, and by this means of culling surplus populations it creates a fitter species. War, the incessant struggle of creature against creature, species against species, is the true furnace of creation and progress.” Darwin’s deification of death gives Wiker the opportunity for a double-entendre in the title for the chapter detailing the last years of Darwin’s life: “Darwin Meets His Maker.” Certainly Wiker is not the first to observe the perverse character of such a destruction-as-creation motif at the heart of Darwinism, but it deserves repeating.

Wiker’s emphasis on the moral vacuity of Darwinism is also an important element of *The Darwin Myth*: as “progress” is an essentially meaningless term when applied to an unguided process, attempts to define “morality” in a Darwinist system finally boil down to “what is, is good.” In Wiker’s words, “There is no ‘higher’ in evolution according to Darwin. Evolution doesn’t aim at anything. It is governed by blind chance variations and ruthless cutting off of the unfit. If it did aim at some predetermined moral goal, one would immediately have to assume — as did Lyell, Gray, and Wallace [other evolutionary theorists who were contemporaries of Darwin] — that a divine hand had stacked the deck.” Wiker’s brief chapter on the influence of Darwinism on the doctrines of Nazism is succinct and measured, as is his summary of the entire dilemma of the problem of morality in the Darwinist system: “The fundamental problem with Darwinism is not that it leads to Nazism, but that it can lead to anything.” The point is that since Darwin maintained that moral values are biological in origin and change in the course of the evolutionary process, “values” that survive are superior, and since morally “inferior” peoples (according to Darwin) cannot be reformed, they are simply eliminated. As Wiker quotes Darwin:

At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races. At the same time the anthropomorphous apes [like the gorilla, orangutan, or chimpanzee] ... will no doubt be exterminated. The break will then be rendered wider, for it will intervene between man in a more civilized state, as we may hope, than the Caucasian, and some ape as low as a baboon, instead of at present between the negro or Australian and the gorilla.

The identity of Darwinism *per se* and so-called “Social Darwinism” is carefully documented and established from Charles Darwin’s central works. The ghastly implications of Darwinism are manifest; “For all these reasons, we must also reject the caricature of Darwin as representing the righteous struggle of science against dread superstition.... First of all, his theory brings no march of moral progress, or righteousness. Despite his intentions, Darwinism leads to the defeat of morality and the victory of a sophisticated kind of barbarism. Second, his theory certainly appears to be ideologically



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bent, rather than scientifically straight. It may just be the case — and I think it is — that Darwin’s theory of evolution *itself* was formed to fit into the Whig history of materialist science triumphing over spiritualist superstition. That is why he felt he had to make it godless.”

Although *The Darwin Myth* does summarize the life and work of Charles Darwin, it is clearly not intended to serve as a comprehensive biography or as a detailed examination of his works. Instead, the underlying task of the work is to separate the concept of biological evolution from the theory known as Darwinism. Wiker insists “Darwinism is not a synonym for evolution. Darwinism is a particular approach to the evidence for evolution, a reductionist, materialist approach that excludes the Divine on principle. Evolution is a complex and difficult thing we are still trying to understand.” Indeed, Wiker concedes, “Those Christians who reject evolution because they believe that it leads to atheism are indeed proceeding from a proper fear.” However, Wiker then ridicules Creationists for “appear[ing] entirely irrational and unscientific,” while those who “accept evolution and deny that it leads to atheism” are “of the more sophisticated sort.” Ultimately, Wiker’s position appears to be to uphold a form of evolution that is divinely directed and in which man’s “peculiar moral and intellectual capacities are not up for negotiation.” It is difficult to say how many readers will find such argumentation theologically or scientifically compelling, but Wiker’s book will remain a helpful summary of the life and teachings of Charles Darwin, and the manner in which Darwin’s striving to create a godless evolutionary model influenced his own and subsequent generations.

Benjamin Wiker, [The Darwin Myth - The Life and Lies of Charles Darwin](#) (Washington: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2009), hardcover, 196 pages, \$27.95



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