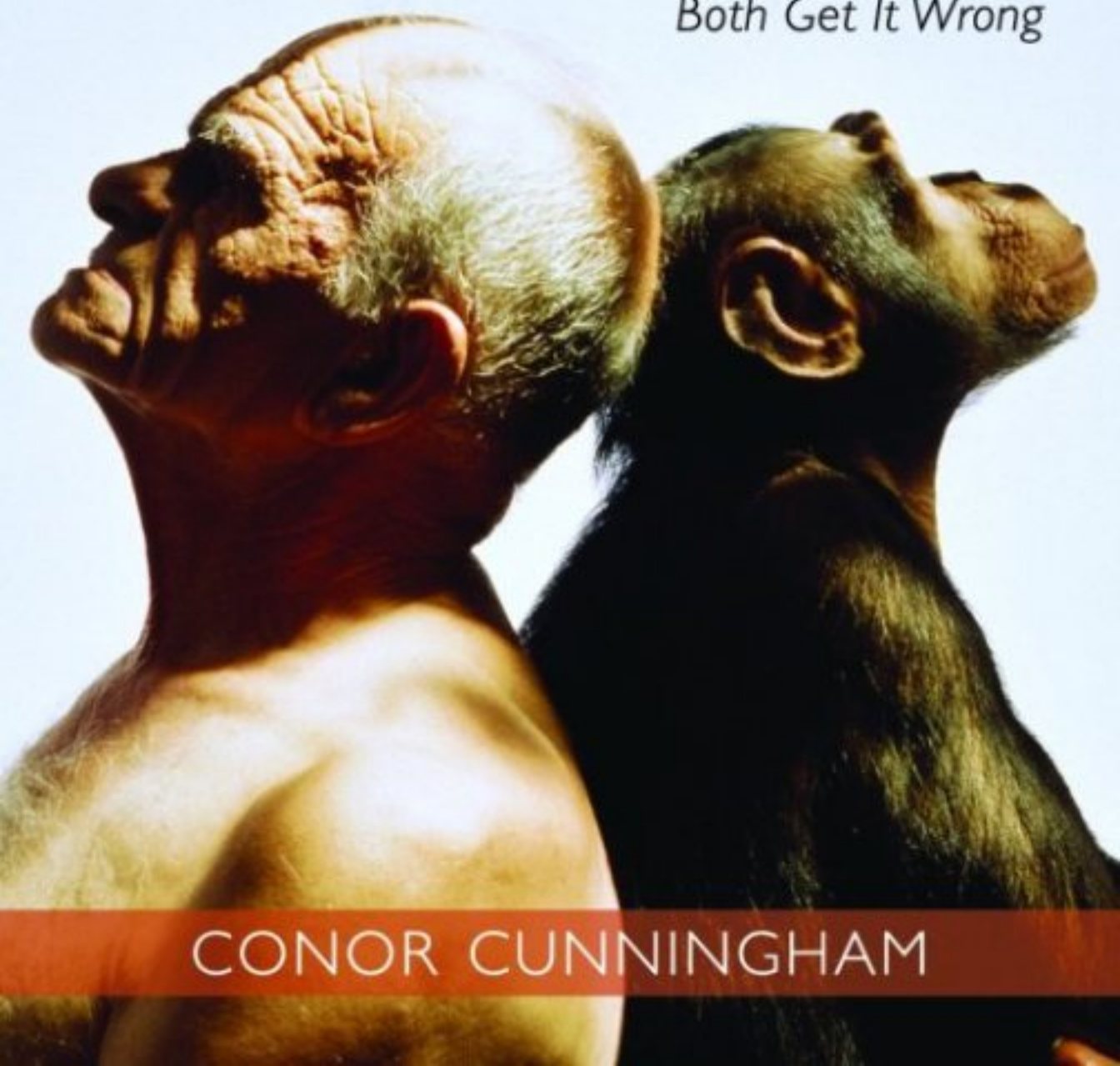


"Shows that the picture of God common to both ultra-Darwinians and creationists is profoundly at odds with Christianity." — Charles Taylor

DARWIN'S PIOUS IDEA

*Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists
Both Get It Wrong*



CONOR CUNNINGHAM

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— **E. J. Lowe**
Durham University



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Darwin's F

Darwin's Pious Idea

Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists Both Get It Wrong

Conor Cunningham

Cogent, provocative take on the hot-button subject of evolution

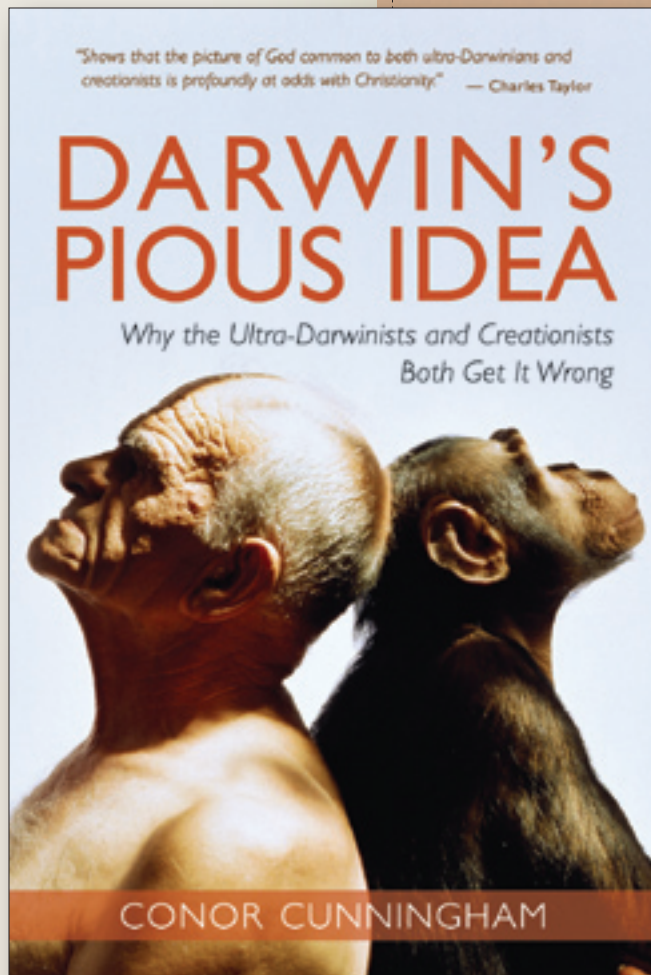
According to Conor Cunningham, the debate today between religion and evolution has been hijacked by extremists: on one side stand fundamentalist believers who reject evolution outright, and on the opposing side are fundamentalist atheists who claim that Darwin's theory rules out the possibility of God.

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Conor Cunningham is assistant director of the Centre of Theology and Philosophy at the University of Nottingham, England, author of *Genealogy of Nihilism*, and coeditor (with Peter M. Candler Jr.) of the Interventions series. Cunningham also wrote and presented the acclaimed BBC documentary *Did Darwin Kill God?* which originally aired in March 2009.



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DARWIN'S PIOUS IDEA

*Why the Ultra-Darwinists and Creationists
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Conor Cunningham

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For Crystal

*There's a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in*

Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," in
The Future (Columbia, 1992)

Leopards break into the temple and drink the sacrificial chalices dry; this occurs repeatedly, again and again; finally, it can be reckoned upon beforehand and becomes part of the ceremony.

Franz Kafka, "Reflections in Sin, Pain, Hope, and the True Way," in *The Great Wall of China: Stories and Reflections*, trans. Willa And Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), Reflection #17, p. 165

In principio erat Verbum

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“You see, I am determined to baptize [*The Origin of Species*] *nolens volens*, which will be its salvation”

Asa Gray (letter to
Charles Darwin, March 31, 1862)

Acknowledgments

It is very much my hope in writing this book that maybe the *thinking atheist* and the *thinking Christian* will move beyond the silly impasse brought about by fundamentalism (whether secular or religious). It seems to me that, in all my dealings with thinking atheists, they manifest what we might call “foolish wisdom” from which I have learned much, while thinking Christians display “learned ignorance” (to corrupt two phrases of Pseudo-Dionysius and Nicholas of Cusa respectively). For in many respects their concerns converge on certain ethical, intellectual, metaphysical, and political questions. I would argue that they do because both are created by God, but of course, I cannot prove this, yet any such ability or lack thereof is beside the point. Maybe then this book will at times surprise both Christians and atheists, for as Michel de Certeau once said, “The domain of surprise will be the birthplace of discourse.”¹ And one surprise that I certainly encountered while writing this book was the many interactions I had with many different thinkers from a plethora of disciplines, many of whom sent me book reviews, articles, and indeed entire book manuscripts — geneticists, biologists, philosophers, and so on, most of whom were atheists, at least as far as I could tell. Yet the exchange of ideas transcended any such difference, and I must say that this was an edifying experience (at least for me). Those I would like to thank on this count are: Jerry Fodor, Thomas Nagel, Leon Buss, Sandra Mitchell, Terence Deacon, Timothy Shanahan, Jerome Kagan, Marc van Regenmortel, David Stamos, Holmes Roslton III, Lenny Moss, Ernan McMullin, E. J. Lowe, and K. Weiss.

Deep in the winter of this book’s arrival, I had the great pleasure and honor of writing and presenting a documentary for the BBC (*Did Darwin*

Acknowledgments

Kill God?), and this gave me an unforgettable opportunity to meet and speak to many extraordinary people, including: Francis Collins (former director of the Human Genome Project), Daniel Dennett, Michael Ruse, Simon Conway Morris, Terry Mortensen, Nick Spencer, Pietro Corsi, and Fr. Gregory Tatum, O.P. One of the greatest delights was the BBC crew, whose tolerance of me was astounding, and much appreciated! A bunch of “atheists” they may be, but their intelligence, artistry, and enthusiasm for the project were infectious and intrinsic to its success. In this regard, I would especially like to thank Doug Hartington (though not for his choice of music inflicted on us during all those long drives, though that could just be my own limitations!), Roger Lucas, Tony Burke, Mike Jackson, Katherine Longworth, Al Rodgers, Rodrigo Salvatierra, Andy Rushton (a true artist), and Jean Claude Braggard, who was kind enough and brave enough to let an amateur like me near a camera, and who had the vision to conceive of the project in the first place. Lastly, I would like to thank Emily Davis, whose professionalism and friendship got me across the finishing line, and somewhat surprisingly in one piece. Thank you!

Man does not live by bread alone, but certainly bread as well. Those people who supported my family financially while this book was being written, I would like to say thank you from the bottom of my debt! We simply could not have survived without you, nor would this book ever have found the light of day. We would especially like to thank: Rachael Davenport, Robin Hutton, Janet Hutton, Sara Cunningham Bell, Murray Bell, Rosie Fraser, Thomas (Desmond) Murphy, Catherine Murphy, and Graeme Paxton. And in light of the financial burden that a project like this entails, it would not do to forget a very important player, our postman. My wife, Crystal, once pointed out that it would be cheaper for the family if my addiction involved an illegal narcotic rather than books, so in a bid to broker peace our postman (John) very kindly hid the books that arrived in many a parcel under the bush in our front garden, so I could collect them later when my wife was doing the school run — cheers!

I have the great privilege of working in an excellent institution, the University of Nottingham, especially the Centre of Theology and Philosophy and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies. My colleagues there have been most supportive and encouraging. I would especially like to mention Alan Ford, Karen Kilby, Philip Goodchild, Richard Bell, Alison Milbank, Adrian Pabst, Simon Oliver, and last but by no means least, John Milbank, whose intellectual brilliance and generosity have always inspired and enabled.

Acknowledgments

The stunning theological mind possessed by Aaron Riches was my main interlocutor as I wrote the pages that follow, and there is no doubt that they would have been a great deal worse without him. Similarly my efforts would have been inferior without the help of Peter M. Candler Jr., whose artistic creativity seems to throw a lifeline just when one is needed. Our many conversations were tonic to the soul, fuel for theological and philosophical thought, and seemed to make the task in hand more possible, and, well, less mad. If water can become wine, and wine blood, the same is true for friendship, for he is certainly my true brother.

I would also like to thank my publishers, Wm. B. Eerdmans, for it was a number of years ago in Spain when I fell into a conversation with Bill and Sam Eerdmans from which the idea of this book was born; more recently Jon Pott of Eerdmans has gifted me patience, support, and enthusiasm. With regard to Spain, Javier Martinez, archbishop of Granada, has been a massive pastoral support for me and my family throughout — there really is no one quite like him!

Audiences that were inflicted with earlier incarnations of what follows include Edinburgh University; St. Andrews; Dublin (Mater Dei); Braga Portugal; Baylor University, Waco, Texas; St. Edwards University, Austin, Texas; Oxford; De Paul University, Chicago; JPII Institute, Washington D.C.; Swansea University, Wales; Nottingham Trent University; and the University of Nottingham. In Granada, Spain, I gave my first ever talk on evolution, and Louis Dupré's enormously generous words after doing so really helped me decide to turn my thoughts into a book (so you can blame him). More recently, Archbishop Rowan Williams very kindly invited me to speak at Lambeth Palace on the topic of science and religion, and I would like to thank him very much for doing so, but also for his encouragement regarding my attempt to write on the topic of evolution.

Mention should be made of other important interlocutors: Ira Brent Driggers (who read a draft of the entire text — that will teach him for being a Bible scholar!), Tony Baker, Neil Turnbull, Michael Budde (get a haircut!), Alessandra Gerolin, Chris Hackett, John Wright, Marcus Pound, and, finally, Simon Conway Morris, whose own work has been a real inspiration for what follows (through no fault of his own, I assure you). Without the genius of Eric Lee I would have been at least sixty years old by the time this book had been ready for publication — thank you for all your help! I would also like to mention Patricia and Michael Devon for providing an environment in my youth, without which survival (Darwinian, I

Acknowledgments

suppose) would have been a great deal harder, if not impossible. And, eh, sorry for the painting job on the house — *mea culpa!*

If creationists would like to discover the only really good argument against the theory of evolution, they should contact my wife, for she has certainly witnessed *involution*, as time and time again I seemed to leave the ranks of *Homo sapiens* and regress to that of a *Neanderthal* (no offense to the *Neanderthal*, of course). Thus I make the original move and dedicate this book to my beautiful wife: Crystal, thank you for it all, especially my three little “vehicles” who are most useful for the transportation of my selfish genes down the generations: Georgina, Pádraig, and Martha.

Introduction

This is the age of the evolution of Evolution. All thoughts that the Evolutionist works with, all theories and generalizations, have themselves evolved and are now being evolved.

Henry Drummond (1883)¹

So it happened that in the hour of the final triumph of materialism, the very instrument of it, “evolution,” implicitly transcended the terms of materialism and posed the ontological question anew — when it just seemed settled.

Hans Jonas²

Perhaps we can move away from the dreary materialism of much current thinking with its agenda of a world now open to limitless manipulation. Nor need this counter-attack be anti-scientific: far from it. Evolution may simply be a fact, yet in need of continuous interpretation.

Simon Conway Morris³



Charles Darwin has been considered by many to be an enemy — indeed, the enemy — of religion. His theory of evolution is frequently construed,

by both its supporters and its opponents, as an attack on the idea of God and an attempted exposé of the frivolity of the piety of religious believers. On this account, both atheists and religious people alike tend to sing from the same hymn sheet: Darwinian evolution threatens to annihilate religion at its very root. What will be argued in the following chapters, however, is that nothing could be further from the truth; in fact, the unholy alliance of atheists and religious fundamentalists misconstrues Darwin's theory. What is more, in these pages we present Darwin's theory in such a way that — far from opposing religion generally and Christianity specifically — it is of great service to Christian religion. So, far from being, in Daniel Dennett's words, a "dangerous idea," the theory of evolution is a "pious idea."

In terms of Christianity, yes, the theory of evolution can seem dangerous to some Christians, and indeed it does threaten the foundation of certain versions of "Christianity." But this is the case only for those Christians who understand their faith in oddly modern terms that are radically divergent from traditional Christianity and the creedal orthodoxy of the church. In this way, Darwin's idea will emerge as "pious" because it allows us to test the relative "orthodoxy" of our faith. Of course, we would be wrong to suggest that Darwinism is a sufficient "test" of Christian orthodoxy *tout court* — it is not even a necessary test. Rather, Darwinism is an interesting and useful test at this particular cultural moment. If Darwinism is "dangerous," it is dangerous because the popular version of Darwinism offered up by the most high-profile so-called Darwinists endeavors to turn Darwinism into a universal philosophy. These figures are generally referred to as "ultra-Darwinists" or "Darwinian fundamentalists" (epithets provided by fellow Darwinists and atheists, and not by religious people). This strain of Darwinism is "dangerous" not merely to religion, but to science and even to thinking atheists. Consequently, if this version of Darwinism presents a profound attack on religion, it is, at the same time, an attack on science and our entire culture. Ultra-Darwinism, if true, leaves us bereft of rationality, ethics, philosophy, science, and even turns us, by implication, into Holocaust deniers. Thankfully, ultra-Darwinism will be shown to be intellectually vacuous, misleading, old-fashioned, and more accurately thought of as a Christian heresy than as a true presentation of Darwin's theory of evolution. It is, therefore, a blight on the landscape of Western intellectual culture, something no one, whether religious or not, should welcome.

Take Richard Dawkins as an example. In the following chapters,

Dawkins's approach to Darwinism will be completely undermined, and his attempt to appropriate Darwinism as a vehicle for his particular and rather odd — nay, vulgar — brand of atheism will be exposed for the farce that it is. Indeed, we would speculate that one of the motivating factors for Dawkins to write *The God Delusion* was that he knew, subconsciously, no doubt, that his take on Darwinism was doomed, so he was forced to move away from evolution and into rather amateur attempts at philosophy, rehashing old arguments that have existed for centuries, and long before Darwin came on the scene. Culturally, we would commend to serious readers those more honest and intelligent versions, because there is certainly a sense of *desperation* in the gaudy form these arguments take in the writings of the new atheists. It seems to us that if Darwin's theory of evolution is not dangerous, this desperation is because it is so willful, self-serving, and thus ideological that intellectual scruple only comes to it too late, if at all. And after 9/11 our culture cannot afford to embrace such poisonous froth, whether we believe in God or not. By contrast, one of the joys of writing this book was the interaction we had with many scientists (chemists, evolutionary biologists, geneticists, and so on), philosophers, psychologists, and anthropologists, most of whom sent research articles, book reviews, and in some cases entire book manuscripts. The vast majority of these were atheists, while I believe orthodox Christianity is the truth. Nonetheless, our exchanges were edifying and enlightening (for me, at any rate). Indeed, many of our concerns seemed to converge beyond the schoolyard frenzy of the new atheists, the ultra-Darwinists, and of course the creationists.

Love, we are told, drives out fear, and here the fear of being wrong was the first to leave the building, so to speak. This is not to become “all wet and woolly.” It is just to realize that none of us is God (if, as my interlocutors would point out, God exists, just as our concern would be what this word “God” actually means). We need only survey our Western history to see how so many certainties, scientific, philosophical, and so on, have passed away. This is our situation as *Homo sapiens*, always to be *in via* (on the way) as pilgrims, intellectual and otherwise. Thus, differences remain — they always will — but rather than representing a call to arms, they are a call to learning, argument, and exchange of ideas, which we all know will, or should, continue, until the end of time. After all, we may just bump into one another some rainy day, standing in the queue for a bus, sharing our last cigarette as we wait.

In chapter 1, “Introducing Darwinism — the Received View: Disen-

chantment,” we introduce what we have termed the received view of Darwinism: the myth that the theory of evolution represents a radical upheaval of all our ideas, and that major, that is, negative, consequences arise from it. In this chapter we arm the reader with the most basic tenets of Darwin’s theory of evolution. The next three chapters introduce the main debates that still rage within Darwinism; among other things, these help us to understand that “Darwinism” is not monolithic, but like the Christian church, which has many denominations — from Seventh-Day Adventism to Roman Catholicism — and as is true in religion generally, the arguments between these Darwinian denominations can be extremely vociferous. Darwin told us that evolution was driven by something he termed “natural selection.” So, what is selected by this apparent mechanism? Is it selfish genes, as Dawkins would have us believe, or is it individuals, or maybe entire species? Chapter 2, “The Units of Resurrection,” presents this debate, concluding that natural selection works at many levels and, moreover, that the idea of selfish genes is, to a large extent, nonsense, at least as presented and employed by Dawkins. Chapter 3, “Unnatural Selection,” then examines the role natural selection may or may not play: Is it an all-powerful mechanism, or just one among many mechanisms? One striking discovery of this chapter is how similar Dawkins’s understanding of natural selection is to that of William Paley’s designer “God.” And just as the latter is a heretical notion of the Christian God, so too is the former in relation to evolutionary theory, or again, at least as it is presented by Dawkins to the public. Chapter 4, “Evolution: Making Progress?” tackles the question of whether evolution involves direction: Is it a purely random process or does it display structure, that is, a sense of inevitability? We conclude that there is a form of direction inherent in evolution, though of course there is also a significant element of randomness (certainly from our perspective, which is, to be honest, the only one we have to work with). Chapter 5, “Matter over Mind: ‘We Have Never Been Modern,’” introduces and critiques the extension of Darwin’s theory beyond the biological world to that of the human mind. In so doing, we explore social Darwinism, with its legacy of eugenics, sociobiology, and, lastly, evolutionary psychology. We conclude that there are many insights presented by a Darwinian analysis of many of our characteristics, both physical and psychical, for we are after all embodied creatures (something that should not perturb the Christian, who believes that God became man). But in the end a great deal of what is presented as scientific theory or fact is just stuff and nonsense, pernicious nonsense at that. In chapter 6, “Naturalizing Naturalism: Mate-

rialism's Ghosts," we present and explore the science versus religion myth, which is in fact a fiction. In addition, we offer a critique, first, of materialism, and second, of naturalism, at least in its more extreme forms, for we discover that in a manner similar to ultra-Darwinism such philosophical positions do not threaten the heavens, but they certainly destroy the earth. In this way the chapter encourages us to move beyond the facade of the natural versus the supernatural; for within these philosophical positions it is very much the natural that is problematic, a situation that becomes most evident when in the last section of the chapter we outline the main approaches to the human mind found in philosophy, many of which do not leave us bereft of a belief in God. Rather, they leave us without any belief whatsoever — including a belief in evolution. In short, it is not that we can no longer believe in God or the supernatural (as some vulgarly refer to it); no, we can no longer believe in ourselves, or in nature. Thus, the misguided notion that we can just reject God and then live in our commonsense, natural world without any consequences is wholly misguided. In fact, many of the philosophical positions discussed in this chapter amount to a greater disaster than all the wars, diseases, murders, violence, poverty, terrorist atrocities, and genocides put together. Consequently, our cultural debate surrounding such questions requires a greater level of sophistication than is evident in the work of the new atheists. There is quite simply too much at stake for us all. One perhaps counterintuitive conclusion of this penultimate chapter is that all the various reductionisms and materialisms to be found in philosophy, when looked at from a particular angle, can indeed be read as contributing to theology. That is, the most vicious and destructive of philosophies can be reinterpreted as being handmaidens of theology, whether they like it or not. Unsurprisingly, then, the concluding chapter, "Another Life: 'We Have Never Been Medieval,'" presents a more explicitly theological account of many of the issues encountered in the previous chapters, arguing that orthodox Christianity can offer an account of life and of nature that avoids such contemporary nihilism, and in so doing restore our commonsense world, and thus with it the possibility of beauty, truth, goodness, and lastly, our belief in evolution. We do so by examining the first two chapters of Genesis, the identity of Adam and Eve, original sin, the Fall, and death itself.

As this book is written not by a scientist but by someone trained in theology, philosophy, and law, my empathy with any reader lacking familiarity with scientific terminology is acute. Every effort has genuinely been made to make this book accessible to nonspecialists. After all, I am one of

Introduction

them. But what should motivate us to interact with disciplines outside our own, and indeed to read a book about evolution, is the cultural and theological necessity to do so, because for better or worse, science's account of the natural world has been used to challenge many of our most cherished philosophical and theological views. It is important to communicate what such challenges amount to, and from whence they issue. Or, as Saint Paul might implore us, we need to learn and be familiar with the poets and thinkers of lands initially strange to us, and today the verse of evolution is a most pressing case, for if we fail in this regard we remain ignorant of some of the most major debates of our time and end up preaching only to the choir, and thus ghettoizing Christianity. But at the same time, any such encounter can help us better to understand that which we once took to be both obvious and familiar: our belief in God. As Pope Benedict XVI put it: "The theory of evolution does not invalidate the faith, nor does it corroborate it. But it does challenge the faith to understand itself more profoundly and thus to help man to understand himself and to become increasingly what he is: the being who is supposed to say Thou to God in eternity."⁴