

D. Fisher  
1570 words

**FEATURE: What Darwin Thought about God  
(Second in SERIES of 6)**

VOICE: I've been reading a book that implies that Charles Darwin was an atheist. Professor, is that true?

PROF.: And I've been reading a book that says Darwin *was not* an atheist. With those two contradictory statements, let's see what we can figure out.

FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

PROF.: In our previous episode we began discussing a book that points out some of the places where a best-selling author either makes mistakes or tells deliberate untruths. British educator Roger Steer addresses his book to Richard Dawkins, an atheistic professor who spent much of his life on the faculty of Oxford University in England.

VOICE: Dawkins has written several books and articles claiming science leads a person to atheism. His titles include *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design* – and *The God Delusion*. And in 2011 he published *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What's Really True*.

Among other things, he claims that people who believe in God are suffering from a virus in their minds.

PROF.: Steer says Dawkins wrongly implies that Darwin was an atheist. Dawkins also gives the impression that scientific knowledge influences a person to be an atheist. Steer begins chapter 2 of his book, *Letter to an Influential Atheist*, by summarizing that Darwin's discovery was not the “mystery of our existence.” He says, “It was the more modest ‘origin of species.’ I think we can agree that a species is a group (a ‘population’) of organisms that interbreed with each other but not with other organisms.”

VOICE: Yes, that's a good definition.

PROF.: He continues, “Why is there a variety<sup>1</sup> of life on Earth with very many different species? In the early nineteenth century, most people who reflected on these things thought of species as in some way especially and separately created by God. One of the first to use the word ‘mystery’ when speaking of the origin of species was Darwin, who called it ‘the mystery of mysteries’.”

---

1 Many kinds and variations.

- VOICE: Those don't sound like the words of someone who thought he had all the answers.
- PROF.: That's right. Darwin didn't think evolution was an explanation for everything. For example, some thinkers speculated that *society* was also evolving, so that the world would inevitably become better. Darwin disagreed, emphasizing that his theory was merely a biological concept.  
Next Steer tells Prof. Dawkins, "Your books have been rather successful in proclaiming the message that Darwinism equals atheism. Actually the author of *The Origin of Species* was always as reticent<sup>2</sup> about pronouncing ultimate questions about the existence of God as he was about the origins of life."
- VOICE: So Darwin didn't think his theory explained *how life originated* – just how it *diversified into various species*.
- PROF.: Even in later editions of this book, Darwin said that he could "see no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of anyone." One Oxford professor told Darwin that his theory provided "just as noble a conception of Deity, to believe that he created primal forms capable of self development...as to believe that He required a fresh act of intervention to supply the [gaps] which He himself had made."
- VOICE: So he thought God had probably used evolutionary processes to increase the number of species. That sounds very similar to Darwin's conjecture that evolution had begun working after God created the original "few forms or one."
- PROF.: Twelve years after origin of species, Darwin published *The Descent of Man*. It included the words, "I am aware that the conclusions arrived at in this work will be denounced by some as highly irreligious; but he who denounces them is bound to show<sup>3</sup> why it is more irreligious to explain the origin of man as a distinct species by descent from some lower form, through the laws of variation and natural selection, than to explain the birth of the individual through the laws of ordinary reproduction."
- VOICE: What did he mean by that?
- PROF.: He explained, "The birth both of the species and the individual are equally part of that grand sequence of events, which our minds refuse to accept as a result of blind chance."
- VOICE: I hadn't thought of it that way before.

---

2 Silent, saying nothing or almost nothing.

3 Needs to explain.

PROF.: Steer writes, “He makes a good point. When I was present at a North London hospital for the birth of my two sons, I remember thinking, *What a marvelous miracle – thank God for the gift of life!* ...I have never heard anyone exclaim, ‘This “natural process” of childbirth which I’m witnessing removes the need for God!’ Darwin explained the origin of man through the laws of variation and natural selection and considered that this had no more religious significance (for or against) than the birth of a baby.” He tells Dawkins, “This is hardly the philosophy of the man who, according to you, has made it easier to be an atheist.”

VOICE: Some of my reading says that Darwin became an atheist later in life. Is that true?

PROF.: Darwin wrote that he had “never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of God.” He did express some uncertainty, and he probably could have been called an agnostic, a person who wasn't sure about God's existence.

VOICE: In one of Dawkins’ books, he quoted part of a letter to Harvard professor Asa [AY-suh] Gray. Darwin wrote, “I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created [parasitic wasps] with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars.”

PROF.: Steer points out that Darwin continued, saying, “On the other hand, I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe, and especially the nature of man, and to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as *resulting from designed laws* – with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance...”

VOICE: That's interesting. Darwin looked at everything as resulting from design in nature.

PROF.: Right. In his autobiography, Darwin commented, “Another source of conviction in the existence of God, connected with the reason and not with feelings, impresses me as having much more weight.<sup>4</sup> This follows from the extreme difficulty or rather impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe, including man with his capacity of looking backwards and far into the future, as a result of blind chance or necessity.”

VOICE: In other words, he thought the human ability to remember the past and plan for the future was another evidence of a God who had that ability and who built it into humans.

---

4 Having more importance, being more convincing.

- PROF.: Darwin concluded that paragraph, “When thus reflecting, I feel compelled to look to a First Cause having an intelligent mind in some degree analogous to that of man, and I deserve to be called a Theist.”
- VOICE: So reason forced him to believe that Someone with super-human intelligence had made everything. By calling himself a Theist, he described himself as someone who believed in God's existence.
- PROF.: Steer points out another detail that I hadn't read anywhere else. During the last fifteen years of his life, Darwin made annual financial contributions to the South American Missionary Society.
- VOICE: (SURPRISED) If he had been an atheist, he certainly wouldn't have supported Christian activities. What convinced him to do that?
- PROF.: Steer answers, “He had become an admirer of Christian missionary work during his voyage on the *Beagle*...”
- VOICE: If I remember correctly, the *Beagle* was the ship on which he traveled to the Galapagos Islands to research various species.
- PROF.: You remember correctly. During that trip he met the Yaghan [YAH-gahn] Indians in the Tierra del Fuego [tee-AIR-uh del foo-AY-goh] part of Argentina, at the southern tip of South America. Darwin said he was surprised at what he called their “savage and wild” appearance and uncivilized ways. Years later he wrote to a friend that he was greatly surprised that this tribe had improved so greatly ***as a result of missionary efforts to evangelize and educate them.***
- Steer reports that Darwin sent his final annual contribution to the South American Missionary Society a few weeks before he died. Along with the check, he included a note that commented, “Judging from the Missionary Journal, the mission in Tierra del Fuego seems going on quite wonderfully well.” Those don't sound like the words of a man whose faith in God had been dramatically shattered, or who had opened for the world a path to atheism.
- VOICE: Those are facts that weren't in the book I was reading. It sounds as Richard Dawkins wanted to strengthen his case for atheism, by omitting some important facts.
- PROF.: Roger Steer has researched the real facts, in his book *Letter to an Influential Atheist*. We shall continue discussing that book in our next episode.
- FORMAT: THEME AND ANNOUNCEMENT

Major source: Roger Steer, *Letter to an Influential Atheist* (Carlisle, Cumbria, England: Authentic Media, 2003).

Other articles by Dawkins:

- Dawkins, R. (December 1992). "Is god a computer virus?". *New Statesman* **5** (233): 42–45.
- Dawkins, R. (June 1993). "Meet my cousin, the chimpanzee". *New Scientist* **138** (1876): 36–38.
- Dawkins, R. (1993). "[Viruses of the Mind](http://www.inf.fu-berlin.de/lehre/pmo/eng/Dawkins-MindViruses.pdf)". *Free Inquiry*: 34–41. <http://www.inf.fu-berlin.de/lehre/pmo/eng/Dawkins-MindViruses.pdf>.