

Natural Selection Is Fundamentally about Meaning

Fr. Charles Allen

Natural selection is fundamentally about meaning.* It's not just about genes; it's about the differing meanings that differing genes convey, allowing the meanings to continue long after the original genes, and the organisms that sustain them, dissolve. Genes are not selfish, contra Richard Dawkins, but meaningful.

It's inherent in the very nature of things that collaborative meanings tend to outlast conflicted meanings. That's why we call this natural selection: it describes a tendency inherent in the very nature of things. It doesn't require any extra designers, whether natural or supernatural.

A viable ecosystem, for example, is not just a system of organisms, some of which consume others, but also a system of collaborative meanings that outlast the individual life of any particular organism. An organism is definitely mortal, but the meaning of that organism is at least potentially immortal, as long as it's part of a system of meanings that are sufficiently collaborative. In a viable ecosystem there can be all sorts of conflicts between organisms. But the meanings these organisms pass on must remain collaborative, interdependent. That's what sustains the ecosystem.

It's also what produces increasingly complex systems of collaborative meaning. You and I are here, in all of our complexity, because of the whole past history increasingly complex collaborative meanings passed on to us and through us. We are here, in other words, because it's inherent in the very nature of things that collaborative meanings tend to outlast conflicted meanings.

For many conventionally religious people, the discovery of this natural tendency has been threatening. That's why Daniel Dennett called it Darwin's dangerous idea and wrote a book with that as the title. The idea does threaten half-baked ideas of God and of us and of our world.

But interestingly, if viewed as fundamentally a theory about meaning, it opens up new avenues for the survival of the word "God" and the most basic meanings that word conveys.

One of the most recurrent reasons that people in all sorts of cultures developed words like "God" and its near relatives is to give the fullest expression possible to the hints of meaning they find in the very fact that they are here and in the fact that they are not only here but know they are here. It's because being knowingly right here is so overflowing suggestive of meaning that we resort to extraordinary words to express all of this. And "God" is and always has been one of those words for many people, if not all. If natural selection is fundamentally about meaning, there's nothing irrational about developing ideas that aim to celebrate reality itself as fundamentally meaningful.

Of course, words like "God" have also developed to serve as good luck charms. People tend to think that they will live longer and better if they can get God to be on their side, or shape up to be on God's side. They often cling to this idea no matter how often they are disappointed by the way things actually go. And many people (maybe most people) never get beyond using the word that way.

So it's no surprise that some of the writers of our present Bible and some of the leaders of our churches have always tended to talk of God as a good luck charm. And for them natural selection is indeed a dangerous idea.

But it's also no surprise that some of the writers of our Bible and some of the leaders of our churches have always tended to talk of God in terms of the meaning that seems to overflow being knowingly right here. When they speak of God's power and providence, they have always meant that no turn of events can ultimately destroy the meaning that seems to overflow every event. They don't mean that they will live longer than others or avoid devastation. They mean that meaning outlasts death and devastation, and so do they to the extent that they reflect the meaning of all meanings. For them, there's nothing dangerous about

the idea of natural selection. They see it as confirming their hunch that the development of nature itself is a development of lasting, collaborative meaning. They are not surprised that Charles Darwin had to share credit for the discovery of natural selection with Alfred Russell Wallace, who viewed natural selection in spiritual terms (though many of his reasons for that look a bit silly today). It's no wonder that from the very beginning Darwin had his share of supporters from Jewish and Christian clergy. Only the good-luck-charm-theists found the idea threatening, as they still do.

This reflection on meaning was inspired by rereading a piece I wrote several years ago. It's a paraphrase/meditation on the first chapter of John's Gospel. I'll close with that:

Celebrating Incarnation: A Reading of John 1**

First was Meaning,
 Godward and Godful,
 Entry to all else,
 Lively and all-enlightening.

Then was Meaning enfleshed,
 Living among us,
 Shining bountifully and truthfully,
 Unquenched by rejection,
 In the face of Jesus Christ.

No one has ever seen God.
 Lively, all-enlightening Meaning,
 Enfleshed, rejected, unquenched,
 Uniquely born of God's own heart,
 Powers all who are open
 Into Godful birth,***
 Making God known.

*For more on the place of meaning (and other "entional" phenomena) in nature, see Terrence W. Deacon, *Incomplete Nature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2012).

**This is not an exact translation, but I take it to indicate "Meaning" that endures in John 1:1-18. "Logos" CAN be translated as "Meaning." That is at least one way in which the passage speaks to me today.

***John later attributes this birth to Spirit (3:5-8). But he has not worked out a doctrine of the Trinity.