

An Evolving Ethic (Psalm 1)
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February 11, 2007

The psalmist wrote that those who delight in divine wisdom are as trees planted by streams of water. They grow strong and flourish, bearing fruit in its season and growing green, healthy leaves. It's a beautiful image from the natural world, combining a deeply religious affect with organic observation, and it brings to mind a story. The story begins in a place not unlike that envisioned by the psalmist. It begins next to a tree that is growing by the river. The tree is a tall tree, one of many that combine to create a dense rainforest canopy. If you were to squint upwards through the branches you might see a monkey or two, chattering to each other as they move easily among the treetops. You might notice how the trees all tangle together, how they draw your eyes toward the jungle's recesses, the miles upon miles of trees and plants that stretch out behind you. Then you might let your eyes drop, following the trunk of the tree to its base and over the packed mud of the riverbank before gazing out at the river itself. The river is broad and swift, its waters a greenish-brown with a white crest in the narrower sections. By and large, however, the river's sweep is grand. Although it isn't quite the Amazon, being just a tributary, the Rio Negro is impressive in its own right. As you look at the far shore you can see more miles of rainforest. The tops of the distant trees are swaying, and, as you listen to the monkeys overhead, you wonder which of their cousins are stirring on the opposite shore.

There is actually no telling when the psalmist composed the verses that we heard this morning, scholars can only agree on the obvious point that they come from ancient Israelite history. Whether it was before or after exile is not known, and many

commentators believe that the psalms were redacted, changed by minor additions or subtractions over time. And while we can't know when an old Hebrew scratched his lines about a tree near the water, we can get a rougher guess of the tree from the banks of the Rio Negro. That tree can be put at about 1851. The reason we can say this is because someone is coming into our scene that would have been there around that time. If you were to look out again, over the water, just downstream from the tree you're standing next to, you might see the small bow of a canoe cutting into the current and heading upriver. The canoe holds only a couple of men and is trailed by two or three more canoes carrying basic supplies for camping and species collecting. There is one man in the lead boat who seems to be directing this spartan expedition. His name is Alfred Wallace, and he has come to the Amazon basin as something of an amateur naturalist turned field biologist.

Wallace bears few official credentials and, as such, supports his exploits by shipping exotic specimens back to his native England for sale to wealthy collectors. But while he needs the funding to finance his project, he's here for love not money. Wallace was actually trained as a surveyor, but, inspired by his reading in the natural sciences, particularly the writings of Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Lyell, and Charles Darwin, he quit surveying at the age of twenty-five to follow his real passion. He has made his way to South America in order to explore the Amazon and its tributaries, and he'll end up doing that for four years. The years will be difficult and dangerous, made of sickness and short supply, not always as romantic as Wallace might have hoped. But he'll make a number of key observations along the way and when he returns to London, he'll deliver an excellent paper to the Zoological Society. The paper will be rather simply entitled,

“On the Monkeys of the Amazon,” but its contention won’t be simple at all. What Wallace will offer in his paper is an idea as beautiful and complex as the rainforest itself. I’ll tell you about it as you watch him go.

As the canoes move upstream, disappearing from view, we might just want to nod in approval. Wallace is about halfway through his expedition, and in a couple of years he won’t be in a canoe anymore with his sleeves rolled up, swatting at mosquitoes in between digs with the paddle. In a couple of years he’ll be dressed to the nines, perhaps taking a deep breath or a sip from his water glass before offering his observations to the esteemed scientists of the Zoological Society. And what Wallace will say, as he looks out over his audience, is that during his time in the Amazon he was able to identify twenty-one distinct species of monkeys. That fact itself is somewhat unremarkable, but the observation that struck Wallace was that, “The species on one side of each big stem of river differed from the species on the other side.” He termed them “closely allied species,” for they were members of the same genus, but the species distribution seemed to be divided by waters. The Amazon basin, Wallace reckoned, spread out in a vast “chicken-foot” pattern, wherein specialized biological niches were created. Monkeys were unable to cross the rivers, and over time they developed differently from each other. Based on his experience, Wallace had divided the region into four biological districts which were separated from each other as islands might be. It was a brilliant observation, and it recalled the work of one of Wallace’s heroes, namely, Charles Darwin’s record of different species separated by waters in the islands of the Galapagos.

Of course, what Wallace was adding to the growing body of scientific knowledge was another piece of evidence that would eventually support Darwin’s theory of evolution by

means of natural selection. Wallace couldn't have known it at the time of his first explorations, but Darwin had already been working on that theory for several years. Strangely enough, the theory would first emerge with a joint presentation of the papers of both Darwin and Wallace in 1858 at a meeting in which neither author was present, but that is a story for another day. The object of our focus this morning is that Wallace and Darwin both observed distinct changes in species separated over time, and each of them reached the conclusion that such species had evolved in accordance with natural selection pressures. It was an argument based on years of observation, and, implicit in the argument was the idea that if natural selection was evolution's causal mechanism, then divine direction was not. And while neither Wallace nor Darwin was attempting theology, in some ways they have faced a religious backlash ever since. It's a curious thing, actually, the strength of religious opposition to scientific understanding, and in order to consider it for a moment we might return to the psalm.

So far we have stressed the psalmist's use of natural imagery, the tree growing by the water. But if we follow the verses a bit further, we'll find that the psalm breaks into two halves rather easily. The first half, the one that likens divine wisdom to nourishing river water, is directed toward those who "meditate" on the religion and teachings that the ancient Hebrews considered to be sacred. Following this section, the second half of the psalm sternly warns against those who do not adhere to such a law. The natural imagery in the second set of verses is that of wheat chaff scattered by the wind. The psalm's counsel, then, is that those who follow divine wisdom are deeply rooted and sustained while those who do not are hastily scattered about and will soon perish. And here the wonder of the natural imagery fades a bit, as we are confronted with words of judgment

and division. We might wonder what exactly we are supposed to do with this ancient worldview, but if we listen to it more carefully, we might also begin to hear that its trouble lies more in its division than in its judgment. For the old psalm sees reality through a dualistic lens, a lens that divides heaven from earth, spiritual from material, and us from them. This sort of dualism is one of the stronger default positions of Western religion, particularly the Judeo-Christian traditions, and there are many of us who still struggle to try and see the whole without dividing it sharply into separate camps. To be sure, one of the reasons religious folk have had such trouble with evolutionary theory is that evolutionary theory refuses to use such divisive categories. Evolutionary theory moves beyond the observation of different species on alternate riverbanks or islands to see the common ancestry that links all living things together. (Talk about non-duality!) But all too often, I fear, religion has not trained people to look deeply into the nature of reality with an open mind but instead to stay on the surface using pre-scientific models that no longer reflect reality as our understanding grows and changes.

In his book *Reason and Reverence*, Bill Murry has taken note of three basic forms of religious response to scientific discovery. The first possible response available to religion is, as Murry puts it, “outright opposition to scientific discoveries and the scientific worldview.” This response takes something of a literal view of the psalm, dividing the world into good and bad, spiritual and material, us and them. Such an ancient view is actually on full display in our current context, vehemently argued by religious fundamentalists who lobby politicians, school boards, and the editors of science textbooks in order to limit students’ access to the teaching of evolutionary theory. Of course, a great many religious people do not take this view. A second tack that Murry

describes is a sort of parallelism wherein it is asserted that “science and religion deal with different ways of looking at the world, each of which has validity, but which do not intersect.” This view has been taken by many liberal theologians since it leaves room to affirm the inherent value of both science and religion. But such a view also leaves room for the same old dualism, saying, in essence, that religion deals with the spiritual while science studies the material. As such, it sounds nearly as divided as the fundamentalist view, with its major exception being the acceptance rather than the rejection of science. Murry, who is content with neither of these views, offers a third way which I find most persuasive. “The third type of relationship,” he writes, “affirmed by [a] religious naturalism, regards religion and science as in a dialogue in which a dynamic religion is constantly learning from science, evolving new understandings in the process and resulting in a scientifically informed religious perspective.”

Many of us are only beginning to learn what it means to develop a “scientifically informed religious perspective.” It means a great many things actually, some of them deeply compelling and others on the verge of disturbing. But what a scientifically informed religious perspective doesn’t mean is a release from a number of tense questions. Perhaps one of the deepest questions of all, one continually raised by fundamentalist interpreters as they respond to the theory of evolution by natural selection, is the question of meaning itself. And while this question is almost always put in terms of God language, whether or not evolution allows for belief in God, it seems to me that the underlying question is really concerned with our humanity. In his short biography of Darwin, David Quammen puts it this way. “[The question is not] evolution versus God. The *existence* of God—any sort of god, personal or abstract, immanent or distant—is not

what Darwin's evolutionary theory challenges. What it challenges is the supposed godliness of Man—the conviction that *we* above all other life forms are spiritually elevated, divinely favored, possessed of an immaterial and immortal essence..." This, I think, is the dualism that is hardest for us to give up. This is the change in our thinking that is most difficult to effect. This is the threat to all who have their made meaning by asserting human priority over every other form of life. And to begin considering the lessons that science offers, lessons of continuity and common ancestry, interconnection, speciation, and the vast unfolding of the evolutionary epic is to recast not only what we think about God but what we think about ourselves. The questions of meaning could hardly go any deeper. And if the questions cause us a pang of anxiety, then we might just pay a final visit to the psalm, we might pause, as it were, near our ancient religious roots before heading out again into our current questions.

While it is true that the old Hebrew verses reflect a dualistic view of reality, it may also be true that they suggest a certain ethic. There are different ways of going, the psalm hints, a way of wisdom and a way that is not so wise. Choose the way of wisdom, the lines whisper, without quite spelling out what that way is. And I think it is possible to read that the way of wisdom is itself evolving. It is not the way of rejecting science in the name of faith. It is not the way of accommodating science so long as it doesn't disturb our carefully arranged worldviews. It is rather the third way. The way of discovery. The way of drawing from the body of scientific knowledge and allowing our religion itself to change, to adapt, to evolve to the world we live in. If we allow this to happen, then the threat is that we ourselves may be changed. We ourselves may be changed from imagining that we are somehow better or higher or different from everything else.

Changed into knowing that we are simply parts of the interconnected web of life.

Changed into caring for more than ourselves alone as we affirm, in the language of both religion and science, that we are kin to all and bound by a common ancestry. Somewhere along the way, we may even find deepening senses of wonder, reverence, and gratitude for the whole. And while it all sounds grand enough, the truth is that such a sensibility is expressed in the smallest of ways.

Near the end of his life, Charles Darwin sat down at his writing table to put his memoirs to paper. Though he had helped to introduce one of the most important ideas in the history of science, he did not begin with that. When Darwin sat down, he began by writing very simply of how he had first opened his eyes to the richness all around him. He didn't write about his long voyage on the *H.M.S. Beagle*, he didn't write about his experimentation or his scientific correspondence, he didn't write about his first papers presented with Wallace's or his decades of subsequent study. Instead, he wrote about collecting beetles. Hunched over his desk, Darwin scratched out his memories of digging into the dirt, chipping through the deadwood, and foraging among the leaf piles in search of this brightly-colored beetle or that one, astonished at the range and variety of species to be found within walking distance of Cambridge. While his thinking had changed tremendously over the course of his lifetime, what remained of Darwin was his own sense of wonder. It not only remained, I think it had been deepened.

There are many religious voices that have condemned the likes of Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace, but on this day we might just raise our own religious voices in thanks to them and the scientific community. We might commit ourselves anew to an ethic that reflects the connections they first saw. And we might begin to practice a religious

naturalism that can evolve beyond the old dualisms to find that what is truly sacred is life—within and among us.

May it be so.

(I relied very heavily on David Quammen's excellent short biography, *The Reluctant Mr. Darwin: An Intimate Portrait of Charles Darwin and the Making of His Theory of Evolution*. The quote beginning, "The species on one side of each big stem of river..." is drawn from page 132 of that volume. I included "chicken-foot pattern" in quotations because those words were Quammen's and not my own. Quammen offered me an introduction to Alfred Wallace as well as the story of Darwin's reflections on beetle collecting recounted at the end of the sermon, and his book was an invaluable resource. I also referred to William R. Murry's book, *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century*. Murry's discussion of possible religious responses to scientific discovery can be found on page 63 and 64 of *Reason and Reverence*. I find myself very "closely allied," pardon the pun, with Murry's "humanistic religious naturalism.")