

Understanding the Times: *Ideas Have Consequences or Man the Machine*

January 12, 2010

Psalm 8

INTRODUCTION & REVIEW

The Greek philosopher Plato once defined man as a featherless biped. And it's not difficult to see how he might have come to this definition. As he looked around him he noticed that one of the most obvious differences between men and animals is the number of feet they have. Horses and cows and donkeys and mules and sheep and goats and dogs and cats all have four feet; but man has only two. And so it would seem reasonable to incorporate this distinguishing feature into his definition of man.

Man is a biped.

But then again so are birds.

So what is it that distinguishes men from birds? A man doesn't have feathers. So Plato defined man as "a featherless biped." But then a man by the name of Diogenes plucked a chicken and brought it to the lecture hall, saying, "Here is Plato's man." And so it became obvious that it was necessary to add some further attributes to the definition besides bipedalism and featherlessness.

Plato's most famous student was Aristotle. He defined man as a rational animal, and most subsequent thinkers have included rationality as being a key element of what makes a man a man, or of what makes a human being human. And there is an element of truth to this. God has made man after his own image and likeness and while this is not *limited* to, it certainly *includes* the attribute of rationality.

Now why do I bring this up? Because it is important for us to understand that man is a logical being. He necessarily seeks consistency in his thinking. Given a certain set of assumptions he will inevitably come to certain forgone conclusions. The short way of saying this is that *ideas have consequences*.

We have been seeking to understand the times in which we live, and how the West has departed from a basic Christian understanding of the world. We are especially interested in examining the dominant alternative to the Christian faith, which is the philosophy of materialism, the view that all there is is matter, no god, no soul, no spirit, nothing above and beyond the physical, material world. Matter is the sum total of everything that exists. It's the ultimate reality. And every individual component of the universe is simply matter in motion.

Remember Carl Sagan's saying? "The Cosmos [the physical universe] is all there is, all there ever was, and all there ever will be." He intended this to be a poke in the eye to Christians. He was offering it as conscious alternative to Christianity.

But it's not just on PBS and among adults that such views are promoted. Kindergartners get a pretty good dose of it in the *Bear's Nature Guide*, featuring the Berenstain Bears from the popular series of picture books for children. The Bears take us on a nature walk, and a few pages into it we come across a two-page spread with a beautiful sunrise and the words spelled out in capital letters:

Nature is all that IS, or WAS, or EVER WILL BE!

Now, am I trying to pick a fight with the Berenstain Bears? No. I bring this up only to illustrate how pervasive the idea is. It's not just in weighty tomes of philosophy that you encounter this stuff, nor in master's level college courses. *It's the operating assumption in all school curricula at every level and in every subject.* It's not even a matter which is up for debate. It's the *de facto* position. And not just in school curricula, but in every vocational field as well. Philosophical naturalism or materialism, with its counterpart, Darwinian evolution, is simply assumed to be true so that a material and evolutionary explanation is given for everything. Period.

There is no room for an alternate explanation.

What's Darwin Got to do with It?

We would do well to understand Darwin's role in all of this, because nothing has even come close to the influence of his work on evolution in providing the intellectual foundation for atheism. Now we shouldn't suppose that there were no atheists or philosophical naturalists or even no evolutionists before Darwin. There were. But not many. Every age of human history has had its atheists. But what Darwin did was to make atheism intellectually respectable. Because although there were atheists before Darwin, they had a really difficult time of trying to explain things. How were they to account for the world if it was not created by God? Even those who were not personally committed to Christ and who did not live a devout life, at least thought that the existence of God was a rationally necessary idea. As we have seen, even if they did not think of God in distinctively Christian ways, they were still committed to the idea of a Supreme Being of some kind: an unmoved mover, an uncaused cause.

Even so, there have always been some—but only a few—in every generation who have denied the existence of God. Some of the ancient Greeks even taught a kind of evolution. Aristotle, for example, believed in the theory of spontaneous generation—that complex, living organisms are generated by decaying organic substances. He said that it was readily observable that mice, for example, spontaneously appear in stored grain, maggots in meat, aphids from the dew which falls on plants, and so on.

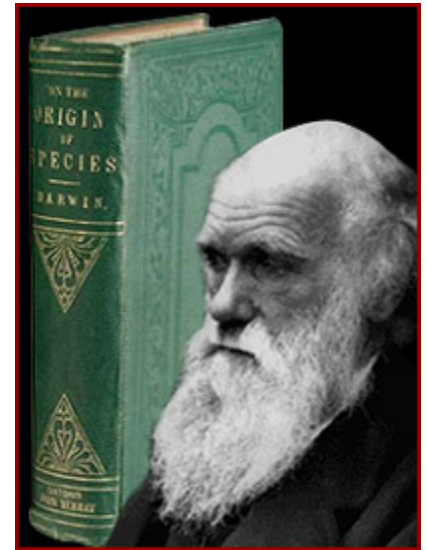
And there were others in the generations before Darwin who said it might be possible for one species to evolve into another, but this was never widely accepted because what was missing was a plausible explanation of *how* it could happen. This is what Darwin supplied, and he supplied it in his book entitled, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*,

which was published in 1859. He theorized that the origin of species was due to a process which he called natural selection.

Darwin noted in the first place that it's common to see certain variations between animals within the same species (size, strength, color, limb length, fertility rate, disposition, etc.). We observe this variation both among domesticated animals and animals in the wild.

Secondly, he said, there is in the natural world a struggle for existence, a struggle for survival, which includes among other things: competition with other living organisms for scarce resources, and a struggle to escape predators. This struggle for existence, he argued, resulted in the survival of the fittest (a phrase originally coined by Herbert Spencer), that is, whichever animals have those particular variations that confer upon them an advantage over their peers survive in the struggle for existence, and those which do not have those variations—those advantages—die off. And if those variations are heritable traits, they are passed them on to subsequent generations. Thus, because of the struggle for existence, nature selects which characteristics, which traits, which variations will be passed on.

Now let me just say, that there is nothing here with which a Christian need disagree. It's obvious that there is a struggle for existence in the natural world which is due to the the fall. It's obvious that there are certain variations between animals within the same species; and it makes sense that if those variations give an advantage toward survival, those variations are likely to be passed down to future generations. What we do disagree with, however, is that these variations have actually resulted in the rise of new species. And this is the very thing that has not yet been proved. But this is what Darwin speculated. This is how he accounted for the *origin* of species. And though in this book he only hinted at the evolution of man, saying only, "light will be thrown on



the origin of man and his history,” in a subsequent book entitled, *The Descent of Man*, he made explicit what he thought of human evolution, namely, that man originated in the same way as every other species, and that man is really only a higher form of animal. And he explained all of this without any recourse to Divine intervention. It was all a purely natural process. He argued that given enough time things could change on their own. Species could develop on their own by ever so slight modifications from one generation to another over an incomprehensibly long period of time. The accumulation of beneficial modifications could give rise to higher, more advanced species.

Man the Machine

What Darwin effectively did was to offer a purely natural explanation for the world. Nowhere has this had a more devastating effect than in our understanding of the nature of man and morality.

As I have said, ideas have consequences. Man is a rational being and he seeks consistency in his thinking. If we have been mistaken in believing in God and thinking that man has a soul, when God doesn't really exist and man is only matter in motion. Then the whole basis and nature of morality changes.

Remember Bertrand Russell's quote from last week? In his book, *Why I am NOT a Christian*, he said,

...man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; ...his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms...

Everything he is—not simply his body, but his mind as well, and the products of his mind: his hopes and fears and loves and beliefs—all these things are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms...an accidental grouping, a random

arrangement of matter. In other words, if all there is is matter, then man is basically a machine, a very complex machine, to be sure, but really nothing more than a machine. The operations of his mind are subject to physical laws, the laws that govern electrical impulses and chemical reactions. Consequently, like all physical objects subject to natural laws, the mind of man has no freedom to do otherwise than it does.

Think for a moment about physical laws. Think about the law of gravity, for example. The law of gravity states that two particles attract each in proportion to the product of their masses and inversely as the square of the distance. What this means in practical everyday terms, of course, is that an unsupported object will fall to the ground.

And according to modern thinkers with materialist and evolutionary assumptions, man is just the same. He cannot do otherwise than he actually does.

Not every proponent of naturalism would go quite this far (though many have), but this, really, is the only *consistent* viewpoint of naturalism or, in other words, of atheism. If we deny the existence of God and believe that only what is material is real, there is no place for free moral agency; and if there is no place for free moral agency, then there is no place for human responsibility. Everything is naturalistically *determined*. Man is just a spring or a cog in the vast machinery of the universe. And just as a spring or a cog is not free to act in any way it pleases, but must act according to how it is acted upon, so man is not able to act freely, but only according to how he is acted upon by the forces around him and in him.

An evolutionary view of the nature of man necessarily requires that one adopt some form of the psychology of *Behaviorism*. One of the leading early exponents of Behaviorism was John B. Watson (1878-1958), who was heavily influenced by the work of the Russian physiologist Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936).

Watson took Pavlov's conditioning of the dog and formulated it into a theory of human behavior. He believed that all complex forms of human behavior—

emotions, habits and so on—could be understood as composed of nothing more than simple muscular and glandular elements.

The *leading* Behaviorist was a man by the name of B.F. Skinner (1904-1990). One of his most famous books was *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* (1971). It was his firm conviction that human behavior can be fully explained in terms of physiological responses to external stimuli. And he advocated mass conditioning as a means of social control. As Pavlov conditioned his dog to salivate at the ringing of a bell, so society as a whole could be, and *should be* conditioned. Incidentally, he regarded the chief instrument of producing such conditioning to be the public school classroom. The classroom has always been the laboratory of social engineers.

But concerning the nature of man's mind, Skinner once said, "The real question is not whether machines think but whether men do. The mystery which surrounds a thinking machine already surrounds a thinking man." In other words, he said, we recognize that the operations of a machine are determined by physical laws. The mind of man, being confined to the physical organ of the brain, also functions only according to physical laws. How, then, can we believe that a man really thinks any more than a machine does?

Do you see what implications this has in terms of free-agency and moral responsibility? If man's thoughts and choices and actions are naturalistically determined there is no such thing as free-agency. And if there is no such thing as free-agency, there can be no such thing as responsibility. In his book, *Why I Am Not A Christian*, Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) writes,

When a man acts in ways that annoy us we wish to think him wicked, and we refuse to face the fact that his annoying behavior is a result of antecedent causes which, if you follow them long enough, will take you beyond the moment of his birth and therefore to events for which he cannot be held responsible by any stretch of the imagination.

No man treats a motorcar as foolishly as he treats another human being.

When the car will not go, he does not attribute its annoying behavior to sin; he does not say, 'You are a wicked motorcar, and I shall not give you any more petrol until you go.' He attempts to find out what is wrong and to set it right.¹

According to Russell, then (and he articulated the view of a great many thinkers), man is no more free or responsible than a motorcar. There is no such thing as evil or wickedness, only mechanical failures which annoy us. Their actions are due to antecedent causes for which they are not responsible. They experienced mechanical malfunctions which may be somewhat annoying, but not inherently wicked, and therefore they are not to be blamed. Russell continues,

A man who is suffering from plague has to be imprisoned until he is cured, although nobody thinks him wicked. The same thing should be done with a man who suffers from a propensity to commit forgery; but there should be no more idea of guilt in the one case than in the other.²

Russell uses an example of criminal behavior to illustrate his point. And notice that he makes a comparison of criminal behavior with illness. A man who commits forgery is not wicked, he is ill. Again, this is the logical consequence of evolutionary assumptions.

Clarence Darrow, a famous American lawyer in the early 20th century, and a vocal atheist, who argued in the Scopes trial on behalf of the defense, said this in a speech to the prisoners in the Cook County jail in 1901 (notice its similarity to Russell's notions):



Clarence Darrow

“There is no such thing as *crime* as the word is generally understood. I do not believe there is any sort of distinction between the real moral conditions of the people in and out of jail. One is just as good as the

¹ Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am NOT a Christian* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 40

² *Ibid.*, p. 41

other. The people here can no more help being here than the people on the outside can avoid being outside. I do not believe that people are in jail because they deserve to be. They are in jail simply because they cannot avoid it on account of circumstances which are entirely beyond their control and for which they are in no way responsible.”³

Two decades later Darrow would actually use this argument in the courtroom when he was defending two teenagers, Nathan Leopold and Richard Loeb, two wealthy college students who murdered 14 year-old Bobby Franks in 1924. Their crime caused quite a sensation because it was motivated by their desire to prove that their high intellects made them capable of committing a perfect crime. Leopold was 19 at the time of the murder and Loeb was 18. They thought of themselves as Nietzschean supermen. (We’ll talk more about the philosophy of Nietzsche at another time). Both were exceptionally intelligent. At 19 Leopold, who could speak five languages, had already finished college and was attending Law School at the University of Chicago. Loeb was the youngest ever to graduate from the University of Michigan. They worked themselves up to committing the crime for months, starting out with petty theft.

They put their plan into motion on Wednesday, May 21, 1924. They lured young Bobby Franks, a neighbor and distant relative of Loeb’s, into a rented car. Loeb struck Franks with a chisel, and then they suffocated him. They burned the body with hydrochloric acid to make identification more difficult and then concealed the body in a culvert under a railroad track outside Chicago. They then attempted to make it look like a kidnapping gone awry, by typing a ransom note for \$10,000. During police questioning, their alibis broke down and each confessed. Their confessions were substantially the same, except that each blamed the other for the actual killing.

They made it clear that they were not after money. They committed the crime simply for the thrill of it, and to show that they were above the ordinary lot of men

³ Cited in Herb Titus, *God, Man, And Law: The Biblical Principles*, p. 13

who were bound by conventional morality.

Their trial was billed as “The Trial of the Century.” If convicted they faced hanging. Loeb’s family hired Clarence Darrow to represent the boys. Darrow had long been an outspoken critic of capital punishment and was the best lawyer money could buy.

The media guessed that Darrow would have the boys plead not guilty by reason of insanity, but Darrow surprised everyone by having them plead guilty.

In this way, Darrow avoided a jury trial which, due to the strong public sentiment against his clients, would most certainly have resulted in a conviction and perhaps the death penalty. Instead, he was able to make his case for his clients’ lives before a single person, Cook County Circuit Court Judge John R. Caverly.⁴

Darrow took the case because it offered him a huge public platform to make his case against capital punishment. He knew that with the media attention the case would get, his argument against the death penalty would be reprinted all around the world. If he could successfully defend such cold-blooded killers like Leopold and Loeb against the death penalty it would make other capital punishment cases more difficult to prosecute. Darrow gave a twelve-hour speech in which he said, among other things.

Why did they kill little Bobby Franks?
Not for money, not for spite, not for
hate. They killed him as they might kill a
spider or a fly, for the experience. They
killed him because they were made that



Clarence Darrow with
Leopold and Loeb in 1924

⁴ www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leopold_and_Loeb

way. Because somewhere in the infinite processes that go to the making up of the boy or the man something slipped, and those unfortunate lads sit here hated, despised, outcasts, with the community shouting for their blood.”⁵

Darrow was successful. Leopold and Loeb were sentenced to life in prison for the murder, plus 99 years for the kidnapping. It was this same Clarence Darrow, by the way, who defended John Scopes the following year in Dayton, TN.

But, you see, logical consistency. Ideas have consequences. Certain presuppositions about the nature of reality, about the nature of man, lead to certain inevitable conclusions. If all there is is matter, then man is simply a complex machine whose thoughts, words, and actions are simply the result of accidental collocations of atoms. All of his behavior is attributable, not to free and intelligent choice, but to involuntary chemical reactions and electrical impulses in the brain. Such a view necessarily destroys the basis for morality, personal responsibility, and civilized society.

⁵ Herb Titus, *God, Man, And Law*, p. 14.