



Charles Darwin

'It's like confessing to a murder', wrote Darwin about his book 'On the Origin of Species by Natural Selection'. To explain Darwin's hypothesis of 'natural selection' imagine the following: white and speckled brown moths live in a birch wood, where the trees are white and brown. Each moth has a 50% chance of being eaten by birds. Then the forest is cut down and a factory is built with brown walls. All the white moths are eaten, but the brown moths survive.

Darwin argued that the plants and animals that survive are those that are best suited to their environment. If the environment changes then some animals may die while others, with a slight variation which by chance suits the new environment, survive, reproduce, and give rise to new species.

Darwin based his hypothesis on years of observing plants and animals, including five seasick years as naturalist aboard the 'Beagle'. He visited the Galapagos islands off the coast of South America, where he saw that on each island the turtles and the shapes of the finches' beaks were slightly different. He concluded that one species of turtle and finch had come from the mainland and then individuals who were best suited to each island environment had survived and reproduced, leading to slightly different new species on each island.

In 1859, when 'On the Origin of Species' was published, most people believed that God had designed each species during the six days of creation described in the Bible. This is what Darwin meant by 'the old argument from design in nature'. Darwin was a gentle, quiet man who hated arguments. He knew that 'natural selection' would be a devastating blow to traditional Christian beliefs and the argument, when it came, was explosive.

The argument against the existence of god which rises out of Darwin's work is based on the elimination of god as an explanation for how human beings came to be. Because evolution explains the origin of human beings, older ideas based on god about how human beings originated are shown to be incorrect.



Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein (born in 1879) described himself as ‘a deeply religious man’, yet also said he could not ‘conceive of [imagine] a God who rewards and punishes his creatures’. What did he mean?

Einstein was a genius of physics and maths who spent his life using reason and evidence to find out how the world works. He used information about the movements of the stars and planets to explain what gravity is. With his famous equation $E=mc^2$ he explained the relationship between an object’s energy and mass. He explained how space, time, light, and matter are all related.

Einstein said he was using reason and evidence to discover the ‘mystery’, ‘radiant beauty’ and ‘marvellous structure’ of reality. For him this was a religious experience in the language of his time because it was a deep and profound one. The traditional idea of God was simply not necessary to him.

In the quote from Einstein here, the view of god which is being argued against is that of a good god. This argument against the existence of a loving god is first recorded as having been made by the philosopher Epicurus almost 2,500 years ago:

‘Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent.
Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil?
Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?’

David Hume

David Hume, a Scottish philosopher born in 1711, liked good company, a good laugh, and a good argument. He argued against miracles like this: It is far more likely that a person who talks about a miracle is lying, than that the miracle actually happened.

‘When anyone tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately [wonder] whether it be more probable that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact ... should really have happened’.
(From *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* (1768))

Hume said that we know what is true from our experience and observation of the world - experience and observations that we all agree on. To think that a miracle was true,



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he would need stronger proof than the experience and observations we all agree on. For Hume there is no stronger proof than this.

Ludwig Feuerbach

Ludwig Feuerbach, a German philosopher born in 1804, argued that God is a human dream. 'God' is really just ourselves - our own thoughts, our own values, our own nature. When people think about God, they are really thinking about themselves. What people think of as God is in fact our own human nature, but seen as if it is outside ourselves.

Feuerbach's writings were translated into English by Mary Ann Evans, the famous novelist and humanist, whose pen-name was George Eliot. In the English translation of his book 'The Essence of Christianity', Feuerbach writes 'Whatever is God to a man, that is his heart and soul'.

The argument against god being expressed by Feuerbach is first recorded as having been made by the philosopher Xenophanes over 2,500 years ago. He pointed out that the Ethiopians believed their gods were black and the Europeans believed their gods were white. He used this as evidence that gods are invented by people and joked that, if horses and lions had gods, they would be horse and lion shaped!