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5-15-2009

May 15, 2009: Was Darwin a Darwinist?

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Repository Citation

Ledewitz, B. (2009). May 15, 2009: Was Darwin a Darwinist?. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/ledewitz-hallowedsecularism/284>

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Title: Was Darwin a Darwinist?

Date: 2009-05-15T20:43:00.001-04:00

5/15/2009--Well, of course he was. But what kind of Darwinist? For a Daniel Dennett or a Richard Dawkins, evolution is based on chance. This suggests a blind, indifferent universe. Ultimately, then, existence might be thought to be without meaning. Or at least that is the sense they give me. I remember Dennett crowing in March in NYC, "What you are, your presumed self, is actually an alliance of machines in your brain." Darwin may not have been a Darwinist of that sort. Here is the last paragraph of Darwin's masterpiece, *Of the Origin of the Species*: "It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved." There is nothing in this description to demoralize one's hope that existence might be grand and beautiful. And for that matter that there might be a point of evolving "the higher animals." Such a general direction might reflect something more than chance. I don't mean the will of God, but perhaps a tendency built into matter toward consciousness. Anyway, the question of direction, purpose and meaning would have to be left open.