

CHAPTER FOUR

CREATION AND VALUE FROM A DARWINIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

In his *Life of Zeno*, Diogenes Laertius records that the Stoics divided philosophy into three component parts: Logic, Ethics and Physics (DL 1925, Vol. II, sec. 40). At the same time, using the similes of an animal (composed of bones, flesh and soul), an egg (composed of shell, white and yoke) and a garden (composed of fence, crop and soil) they held that none of these parts could be separated out from one another, but were “mixed together”.

Throughout his long and distinguished career, Robin Attfield has both recognised and demonstrated this interconnectedness of philosophy—the fact that any position taken will have ramifications elsewhere. And nowhere more so than in his recent book *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* (hereafter Attfield 2006), in which these connections are teased out with great subtlety, particularly regarding the interplay between physical (including metaphysical) and ethical positions. The result is an imposing and ambitious structure—a fitting subject, therefore, to take as the focus of my “critical appreciation”.

Another feature of Attfield’s philosophising is his willingness to engage with issues that matter fundamentally to how we live our lives, whether this be the formulation of a cosmological vision, or the question of how we find meaning in our working lives (e.g. Attfield 1984). One undertakes any critical appreciation of his work therefore with the genuine prospect of instruction and, it may be, of some vertiginous realisation that will require a shift in perspective, a prospect that marks one of the perennial enticements of philosophy. It is in this spirit that I offer the following remarks, which constitute an attempt to identify key points at

which the argument of *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* fails to carry me along, and then to get to grips with, and understand, our points of disagreement. The claims to be examined are as follows:

- (i) that the cosmological argument can be re-worked into a form that supplies strong grounds for believing in a creator who is “eternal, independent, uncreatable and indestructible” (Attfield 2006, 94);
- (ii) that belief in creation and belief in evolution—specifically, evolution by natural selection—are compatible:

the interim conclusions are that Darwinism and theism are compatible and co-tenable, that Darwinism does not undermine all the varieties of the Design Argument, let alone the grounds for theism, and that good grounds remain for endorsing theism as well as Darwinism (Attfield 2006, 121);

- (iii) that the design argument may be re-worked into a form that offers real corroboration for the hypothesis of a (beneficent) creator—this is “the argument from value”;
- (iv) hence, that evolution may be understood as purposive:

a reconstructed argument to the purposiveness of evolution can open, therefore, with all the varieties of intrinsic value manifest in the actual world... Since these are just the states that a loving creator, desirous of what is intrinsically valuable or desirable, could be expected to seek to generate, there is good reason to regard evolution as having such desirable, complex states as an end or goal (Attfield 2006, 162);

- (v) and finally, that a fully meaningful life is likely to be one enhanced by a cosmic vision such as when we understand nature to be the gift of a creator and understand ourselves in the role of stewards of the planetary biosphere and thus of the fruits of creation:

for those who endorse belief in creation... [cosmic gratitude] can be recognised as due to the creator, whose gifts and generation of value form the framework that gives life its meaning.(Attfield 2006, 205).

(Expressed in Stoic terms, a soil that is not enriched with a religious vision may yield little in the way of fruit.)

Part I

For his re-working of the cosmological argument, Attfield uses the Principle of Sufficient Reason to argue that the existence of material objects requires explanation, since this is a state of affairs that could have been otherwise. Further, since nothing in the material world is capable of providing such an explanation, there has to be an explanation of the material world which lies beyond natural agents and agencies: hence, “Nothing less than a creator will do” (Attfield 2006, 95). The existence of such a creator on the other hand, is not subject to the same requirement, since it makes no sense to ask for a reason for the existence of an uncreatable being. The argument involves an appeal to Nozick’s elucidation of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, which in Attfield’s formulation states that “there is a sufficient reason for whatever could have been otherwise, except where there is a sufficient reason to the contrary” (Attfield 2006, 57). A subsidiary argument is that in the absence of a creator, the probability of a life-permitting universe is zero or at best “metaphysically improbable” (Attfield 2006, 107-8).

Now of course there will be explanations for why some particular material objects exist rather than others, but it is not clear that we need to step outside the realm of ordinary preceding material circumstances for an explanation in each particular case. But the question at issue here is whether some explanation is required for why there are material objects at all: “for the claim that God is the creator of the world is introduced, in part, to explain there being material things rather than there being none” (Attfield 2006, 57). In effect, then, the creator is introduced, in part, to explain why there is something rather than nothing.

For present purposes, we shall put on one side questions about whether the posited explanation is satisfactory, and how an immaterial being is supposed to bring material things into existence, in order to focus on the prior question of whether an explanation is called for in the first place. Attfield argues that it is, appealing first to the Principle of Sufficient Reason as articulated by Nozick, and second to the unquestionable fact that the existence of material things is clearly a state of affairs that could have been otherwise, a fact which generates the reasonable expectation that there must be some explanation for why things are as they are.

However, before accepting that this state of affairs must have some explanation, one is bound to ask, in light of Nozick’s formulation, whether there truly is no sufficient reason for supposing the contrary. And contrary to what Attfield appears to argue (Attfield 2006, 58, cf. also, 95) it is unclear that there can be an explanation for why there is something rather

than nothing, or—if there were nothing—for why there was nothing rather than something. Or, to put it in Nozick’s terms: despite the fact that, whether there was something or nothing, this situation could have been otherwise (there could have been nothing or there could have been something), there does appear *prima facie* to be sufficient reason for supposing the contrary. The sufficient reason to the contrary might be formulated as follows:

- a) either there is something or there is nothing;
- b) either there being something or there being nothing is self-explanatory, or it is explained by something other than itself;
- c) therefore, if, as Attfield appears to hold, there being something or there being nothing is not self-explanatory, the only thing available to explain there being something is there being nothing, and the only thing available to explain there being nothing is there being something;
- d) but there being nothing cannot explain there being something and there being something cannot explain there being nothing;
- e) (d) appears to constitute sufficient reason contrary to the supposition that there must be an explanation for there being something or there being nothing;
- f) accordingly, there is no reason for supposing, and every reason for not supposing, that the existence of material objects, *per se*, requires explanation in terms of something other than themselves.

A second consideration that appears to support the first is this. Attfield contends that even where the Principle of Sufficient Reason is qualified to exclude cases where “there is sufficient reason for there being no sufficient reason”, the principle “remains strong enough to cover sets... whose members are existing beings which can be caused to exist” (Attfield 2006, 94). But then we must note that if there were a cause of the existence of the set whose members are existing beings which can be caused to exist, then that set would in turn be an existing being that can be caused to exist. In that event, the question arises whether the set would be a member of itself. If we say that it is, then its cause would be a cause of the member of the set rather than of the set. Hence the class “cause of the set” would remain empty, however often the procedure was repeated. If we say that it is not, then we generate a new set that in turn requires a new cause, and in doing so generate a never-ending requirement.

What the above arguments appear to open up is a crucial distinction between a situation that could have *been* otherwise, and a situation that could have been *caused* to be otherwise. For if such a distinction can be

sustained, then we can see how a failure to observe it might make the demand for an explanation of why there is something rather than nothing seem reasonable. However, to repeat the point in a somewhat more formal way, from “it is possible that not-p”, there is no compelling step that I can see to “it is possible that, for some X, X brings it about that not-p”.

Of course, even if the above reasoning is sound, it would not amount to a disproof of the creation hypothesis. For Attfield could insist that an immaterial being is an alternative to nothing, as a possible explanation for the existence of material things. However, I believe this would be a departure from the spirit of the argument. For if I understand Attfield’s position correctly, I believe he is claiming that if we follow the logic of *ordinary* explanation through, we are obliged to recognise that an extraordinary explanation obtains in this one special case—when we are trying, as we must, to explain the very existence of material things. Thus, the possibility of an extraordinary explanation—the explaining of the existence of material things by appeal to an immaterial thing—is the conclusion to the argument, and cannot be introduced as a premise. My simple reply is that if we follow the logic of ordinary explanation through, what we appear to find is that there cannot be an explanation for the very existence of material things.

As regards the subsidiary argument—that in the absence of a creator, the probability of a life-permitting universe is zero or at best “metaphysically improbable”—just two thoughts must suffice. Both involve setting aside the claim, which has been contested above, that in the absence of a creator the probability of a life-permitting universe, or indeed any universe, is zero. One is that, if there is a universe at all, then any possible state of that universe, including one that permits life, is equally improbable as any other, given the complexity of the processes that will have brought it about. The other is that to talk in unqualified fashion of the “probability of life” is as problematic as talking of the “probability of the eye”, and for similar reasons. For as Richard Dawkins has ably demonstrated (1988, ch.4), the question is not how an eye might arise from what is not an eye, but how it might arise from what is almost an eye. And this, evolution by natural selection might plausibly hope to explain. Just so, the question about life is not how it might arise from non-life, but how it might arise from what is almost life.

Part II

Attfield is in good company when he claims that belief in a creator and belief in evolution are compatible, for as he himself notes (Attfield 2006,

86), Darwin says much the same thing. Furthermore, Darwin's drift towards agnosticism in later life seems to have been unconnected with his long-held belief in evolution by natural selection (as Attfield again notes; 2006, 87). At the same time, Darwin does remark, in a letter written to a German student towards the end of his life, that "Science has nothing to do with Christ, except in so far as the habit of scientific research makes a man cautious in the admitting of evidence" (F. Darwin 1902, 57). What this suggests is that we need to mark a distinction between the content of Darwinism (or more relevantly perhaps "neo-Darwinism")—essentially the belief in evolution by natural selection—and Darwinism as the expression of a particular habit of scientific research that "makes a man cautious in the admitting of evidence". We might label this latter "methodological Darwinism".

With regard to Darwinism in the former sense, there is little difficulty in admitting the compatibility, but with regard to Darwinism in the latter sense, matters are a little more complicated. For if belief in a creator implies the availability of evidence, the question turns on whether there is indeed evidence for a creator. Hence the question of the compatibility of the two positions cannot be answered as an independent question in its own right, but rests upon the outcome of other issues that are the subject of this paper, such as whether the re-workings of the cosmological and design arguments that Attfield proposes are successful. So far as Darwin himself is concerned it has to be said that in the latter part of his life, at any rate, he rarely wavers from the view that "the whole subject is beyond the scope of man's intellect" (*ibid*, 57).

From these reflections, and pending the outcome of other discussions, one has to conclude that there is some doubt as to whether Darwinism in the latter sense is compatible with belief in a creator, since this implies the admitting of evidence, though it may well be compatible with some degree of faith in a creator, prompted perhaps by "the deep inward conviction and feelings which are experienced by most persons", and to which Darwin readily admits that he is susceptible (*ibid*, 60). At the same time, he makes it abundantly clear that he "cannot see that such inward convictions and feelings are of any weight as evidence of what really exists" (*ibid*, 61).

Part III

A major highlight of *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* is its bold reconstruction of the design argument, conducted in chapter 8 and built upon Keith Ward's "argument from value" (Ward 1982, 89-120). According to this reconstruction,

design on the part of a purposive and loving creator is a reasonable interpretation of the immense amount of value in the world as we find it (Attfield 2006, 151).

This statement throws into relief the central importance to the argument at this point of the concept of value. In doing so, it also throws into relief a potential point of vulnerability in the argument. For in the first place, the argument assumes an objectivist understanding of value judgements. In the second place, the argument assumes that we can form an estimate of “the amount of value in the world”. And both assumptions may be questioned. We shall discuss each in turn.

First, it seems clear that both the argument from value, and the argument to the purposiveness of nature which depends on it, do indeed presuppose the adoption of an objectivist account of value. For only on this assumption will the argument have unconditional force. On a perspectival view of value judgements, for example, the argument from value to God will become dependent on the value perspective that is adopted, as will the argument to the purposiveness of nature. Hence the arguments will have only conditional force. Now Attfield himself will certainly agree with this assessment, and is more than ready for it. For he has long been a stout defender of the objectivist account, rejecting all others as in various ways inadequate; and now is not the occasion to rehearse all the possible arguments and objections that bear on such a major topic. But it is, perhaps, an occasion to set down the reasons why I, for one, have (so far) been unable to concur with his stance on this matter.

As a preliminary point we should be clear that our discussion primarily concerns ascriptions of intrinsic value expressed by means of “value-judgements” (these must be distinguished from statements of the form “A is of value to X”, which may for the most part be construed as empirical claims assessable in the normal way as objectively either true or false). Along with his stout defence of the objectivity of value judgements, Attfield has equally stoutly resisted perspectivism; but only, it seems to me, in a rather casual formulation of that position—as the view that what is valuable is what is valued from a certain perspective. To this he rightly objects that something can be valuable without being valued at all. For intrinsic value is to be defined in terms of “what there is reason to desire, cherish or foster in virtue of the nature of the state or object concerned” (Attfield 2001, 152; see also Attfield 2006, 154), and what there is reason to desire, cherish or foster may be something that no one ever has valued, does value or ever will value. However, it is not clear why perspectivism can not be understood, rather, as the view that there may be different perspectives on what there is reason to cherish. Thus, Eric Katz (1985,

253, n.28) thinks there is reason to cherish the small-pox virus. David Schmidtz (1998, 64) does not. Is there really an objective fact of the matter here? (One might add to this a certain puzzlement as to how a value-judgement can be advanced in the absence of any perspective from which the value judgement is made. Note that the puzzlement concerns value judgements only, not ascriptions of truth in general.)

Clearly, nothing can be settled by rhetorical question, so let us pursue the objectivity path and see where it leads. Initially, it leads to a problem of determinacy. For whilst A might think there is reason to cherish X, B might think there is reason not to cherish X. And these two thoughts are not in contradiction to one another. But if both are construed as objectively true, then the question of whether the small-pox virus, or any other entity concerning which there may be competing reasons, is valuable, becomes indeterminable. Alternatively, one may take the view that one position is wrong. And indeed, one must take this view if one position is described as the view that there is reason to cherish X, while the other is the view that there is no reason to cherish X, since these positions do contradict one another. But then we encounter what seems to me a serious conceptual difficulty.

To see this, consider what might be called “the Caligula problem”. The Roman emperor Caligula is reported to have been particularly fond of tearing the wings from flies. One might imagine this being elevated into a national sport. One might even imagine it being declared the be-all and end-all of existence—a life without the activity is just not worth living. If values are objective, in the sense that they hold true no matter what humans may or may not believe, this accords values the status of facts. In that event, and even though no one with the possible exception of Caligula believes such a thing, it could in principle be a fact that tearing the wings from flies is the be-all and end-all of existence. For that is the way with matters of fact. Despite what we all think we have every reason to cherish, in principle the truth could prove otherwise. Since the problem arises from the resolve to separate what there is (objectively) reason to cherish from what anyone, anywhere, might think they have reason to cherish, the only solution to the problem that I can see is to resort to perspectivism. From a perspectivist viewpoint, there could be no such fact, because values, as distinct from facts, are essentially matters of judgement made from some perspective or other, and as such are ever open to critical scrutiny. But a judgement such as Caligula’s would not long stand scrutiny. The point is that the human perspective contains the resources with which to critique Caligula’s predilection—at least one must fervently hope and believe that it does.

But suppose for the sake of argument that these objections should turn out to be unfounded. Nevertheless, another source of difficulty remains. This concerns what grounds there might be for confidence in the assertion that “there is an immense amount of intrinsic value in the world”. On the one hand, it seems to me that Attfield does an excellent job in disposing of many of the objections that have been raised to the belief in a beneficent creator that are based on the undoubted existence of “evil” in the world, both moral and natural (Attfield 2006, ch.7). In particular, he makes a persuasive case for saying that

we have no reason to believe that a world with a better balance of good over evil than the actual world is possible, or that the actual world is not a world that a good God would create (Attfield 2006, 141).

On the other hand, in support of this claim he cites Reichenbach’s observation that the task of showing that a world with a better balance of good over evil is possible “cannot easily be accomplished, and is suited to nothing less than an omniscient mind” (cf. Reichenbach 1982, 116). Precisely so. But the same surely applies to the task of showing that a world with a better balance of good over evil is not possible. Thus, while Attfield rightly denies the necessity for attempting to demonstrate that this is the best of all possible worlds, the belief in a beneficent creator does require us also to believe both that there is a preponderance of value in the world, and that no greater preponderance could possibly have been brought about. But it strikes me that to provide evidence for both these propositions is a very tall order indeed, and that if we go with W. K. Clifford’s admonition always and everywhere to apportion our belief to the evidence (1947, 77), then the only reasonable stance to take is that of agnosticism.

Nothing daunted, Attfield does indeed take on the task of defending both these propositions, but with uncertain success. Reviewing such natural evils as waste, pain, suffering and aspects of parasitism and predation, he convincingly demonstrates that these are necessary features of a system that is to produce all that we find valuable in the world. But this is some way short of demonstrating, or even providing in itself the slightest reason to believe, that there is a preponderance of good over evil in the world, and this, over an indefinite stretch of time. It is difficult to envisage the cosmic calculation that would provide such evidence; nor is it clear that the concept of value can bear the weight that is being put upon it. This is not to deny the possibility of, indeed the practical necessity for, comparative judgements of value: shoes for Janet, or gloves for John, on this month’s budget? But these are localized judgements, presupposing

limited resources, specific attachments and finite projects; they do not readily translate to the cosmic canvas. The class of valuable things, in all its manifold and various forms, admits of no obvious commensurating unit. And even if we take an apparently simple case—a comparison of the intrinsic value of the life of the cuckoo and the life of mistletoe respectively, which Attfield claims to be able to “include in the reckoning, alongside their various impacts, good and bad” (Attfield 2006, 130)—the nature and basis for such a reckoning remains elusive. Nor is there clear agreement that the phenomenon of suffering should even enter into such a calculation. There are, after all, respected viewpoints which hold that no amount of benefit can justify the suffering of even a single sentient creature.

Part IV

Many have tried to discern a trend in evolution, whether this is towards diversity, merely, as claimed by Aldo Leopold (1949, 216), or more ambitiously towards complexity or even consciousness (Ward 2004). Attfield’s ascription of purpose to evolution is both more modest and more subtle. Building on the argument just discussed, the trend is said to be towards the generation of intrinsic value. Indeed, in arguing that the laws of nature themselves may be thought to be designed precisely with the prospect of bringing about a cosmos imbued with value, he is taking a leaf out of Darwin’s own book, in particular the “Essay on Theology and Natural Selection”. Here, Darwin suggests that “the laws of transportation were created with reference to successive development” which Attfield glosses (quite plausibly) as the suggestion that “the laws of nature could have been so devised that the various species would develop from one another over the course of time” (Attfield 2006, 84-85) although, as he goes on to note, this was not Darwin’s eventual view.

However, for reasons adumbrated elsewhere (Holland 2009, 506-509), a full blown neo-Darwinian understanding of evolution offers distinctly infertile territory for the discerning of trends, whatever their destination. On this reading, what Darwin affords us is the truly amazing—but at the same time, astoundingly humdrum—possibility that the world as we know it came about largely as a result of innumerable and wholly unremarkable everyday events (“largely”, because we now believe that several catastrophic events also played their part.) Where we are now—the current state of the world—is simply where a purely historical, happenstance process has left us. Thus the only “law” that evolution follows is what John Herschel called “the law of higgledy-pigglety”, as recorded by

Darwin in a letter to Sir Charles Lyell (Burkhardt 1996, 208). The conclusion I draw is that a neo-Darwinian belief in the sole operation of natural processes can only ever justify the recognition of a *de facto* trend—that is, a trend for which there is no underlying explanation; it can never justify us in postulating a direction and therefore can never justify us in detecting purposes.

To consolidate this objection a little more formally, let us temporarily discount our earlier objections, and allow that the universe does indeed manifest a preponderance of value. It bears remark that Darwin himself in fact concurs with this view, remarking on “the generally beneficent arrangement of the world”; but interestingly, he attributes this arrangement not to design but to “the effects which we might expect from natural selection” (F. Darwin 1902, 59). Attfield argues that where we have ended up—that is, in a world imbued with value—was where we were likely or even obliged to end up. My objection, leaning on the understanding of Darwin that I have tried to outline, is that in a world of radical contingency there could be no such guarantee. I would argue as follows:

- [i] according to neo-Darwinists, evolution is characterised by happenstance and radical contingency;
- [ii] the appropriate model of change in such a process is “the random walk”—a stochastic process whereby each next step is determined by pure chance;
- [iii] where you end up following a random walk is pure chance;
- [iv] it was pure chance that we ended up with a world of value;
- [v] therefore, the existence of value cannot have been the result of design.

It should be noted that the appeal to chance in no way implies the abandonment of explanation. For a chance event or situation is precisely one in which everything that contributes to the event or situation is explained, thus leaving no further explanation necessary for the event or situation itself.

Now it has been claimed, for example by Ward and also by Attfield, that the issue turns on what is the most reasonable, or best, explanation for the preponderance of value in the world—the appeal to chance, or the appeal to design. Both Ward and Attfield affirm the latter (Attfield 2006, 163). But if the choice lies between a form of explanation, each step of which is readily intelligible, and a form of explanation that is acknowledged to lie beyond human comprehension, then I must demur.

Part V

Finally, it is an underlying theme of *Creation, Evolution and Meaning* that a fully worthwhile life is most likely to be attained under the hypothesis of a divine and beneficent creator, with all that this implies. I have elsewhere given reasons for questioning this claim (Holland 2009). In sum, they are:

- a) that the prior stipulation of a purpose to human existence detracts from, rather than enhances our ability to lead individually purposeful lives;
- b) that the prior assurance of a “solution” to the problem of suffering—an assurance that whatever the degree and kind of suffering in the world, it will ultimately be redeemed—not only makes suffering into what it is not, namely a “disvalue” that can in principle be cancelled out, but also obliterates the kind of courage that would be called for to face up to the possibility of irredeemable suffering;
- c) a prior guarantee that meaningful lives are possible removes what can be seen as one of the most central and challenging features of the human condition, the fact that the question of whether meaningful lives are possible lies in the balance (*op. cit.* 515-516).

But a further reason emerges in light of our preceding discussion. As previously argued, it would appear that meaningful lives lived under the creator hypothesis do rather presuppose both that there is a preponderance of value in the world, and that no greater preponderance could possibly have been brought about. On this view, then, the possibility of a meaningful life becomes hostage to a value calculus of cosmic proportions that lies well beyond our human capacities. It is therefore a stance upon which we cannot possibly place any reliance. Or so it has been argued. Without the creator hypothesis, on the other hand, and fully acknowledging that worthwhile lives cannot be lived in solipsistic indifference to our cosmic plight, it can plausibly be argued that a sufficiency of value, merely, is the plausible and attainable backdrop for the living of a meaningful life. And given this sufficiency of value, of which we can reasonably be assured, then perhaps worthwhile and meaningful lives can be lived in the merest of circumstances, such as the presence of some other, human or non-human, to love. My conclusion is that far from enhancing the prospects for a meaningful life, the creator hypothesis casts the possibility of such a life into the greatest of doubt.

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