

Reply to Holland ...

The Meaning of Life and Darwinism

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ABSTRACT

While finding no fault with Darwinism as a scientific theory, this paper argues that there are serious problems for the scientific construal of Darwinism that interprets the universe as nothing but a purely random and contingent flow of events. Life in a godless impersonal universe is beset by contingency, alienation, despair, failure and fragility. Notwithstanding Alan Holland's claim that we can evade these problems through self-affirmation, I argue that human beings can achieve meaningful lives only by acknowledging our dependency and accepting the authority of values we did not create.

KEYWORDS

Contingency, God, futility, meaning, alienation

We all need our lives to be meaningful. If our lives are futile or ultimately meaningless, we will lack one of the principal ingredients of a fulfilled and worthwhile life. How threatening to the human aspiration to a meaningful life is the standard Darwinian (or neo-Darwinian) view of our place in the scheme of things?

A distinction needs to be made at the outset, between what one might call the scientific and the cosmological construals of Darwinism. Construed as a purely scientific theory, modern Darwinism asserts that random mutation and natural selection are the key to understanding the biological world: the amazing diversity of natural species came about through the cumulative effect, over millions of

years, of countless tiny genetic variations which were passed on because they conferred an advantage in the struggle for survival. As a philosopher who is strongly sympathetic to a theistic worldview,¹ I have no quarrel whatever with this Darwinian theory. Indeed, if random mutation and natural selection are in fact (as seems highly likely) the true mechanisms² whereby life developed and diversified, it would be as absurd for a philosopher to ‘quarrel’ with this truth as it was for the philosophers and theologians of the seventeenth century to take issue with Galileo’s heliocentric account of the planetary system.³

Distinct from Darwinism as a scientific theory, however, is what one might call ‘cosmological Darwinism’, or perhaps ‘Darwinistic naturalism’. This is the view that the natural processes uncovered by Darwin and his successors, coupled with the physical and chemical processes uncovered by the other branches of science, comprise *all the reality that there is*. Now this is not a piece of science, but a piece of *scientism*: it is the metaphysical claim (which could not possibly be established scientifically) that we inhabit a ‘closed’ cosmos, that there is *nothing* apart from the big bang, and the physical and (eventually) biological processes that emerged from it, or have subsequently evolved from its debris. And together with this assertion of a brute, utterly contingent cosmos, typically goes an insistence on its *blind, purposeless* and *random* character. We humans (on this kind of naturalistic picture) are a by-product of the vast, remorseless, ultimately random unrolling of brute contingency, and it is vain to hope that there is any ultimate purpose behind it all, or that there is anything about ultimate reality that could possibly be redemptive or salvific.

We need to make sure, then, when we use the label ‘Darwinian’, whether we are referring to the highly impressive explanatory achievements of Darwinian biological science, or whether we are talking about the metaphysical picture of human life as nothing more than an accidental by-product of a vast chain of random and impersonal processes. The latter picture (as I suggested in my book *On the Meaning of Life*)⁴ is both inherently bleak and deeply threatening to our aspiration to live meaningful lives. Alan Holland, in a stimulating recent paper much of which is taken up with discussion of my views, appears (though without explicitly distinguishing between Darwinism as a scientific theory and Darwinism as a piece of metaphysical cosmology) to agree wholeheartedly with me about the bleakness of the latter picture. Noting that the current state of the biosphere is ‘simply ... a product of pure happenstance’, he declares that ‘in a Darwinian world there is no respite from the random and no guiding star to which we can hitch our hopes for a meaningful life’. And he concludes that ‘the Darwinian world is every bit as random, contingent, remorseless and bleak as Cottingham ... and others describe it to be.’⁵

What do we do about this bleakness? Clearly, this is a moral or existential question, not a scientific one. One response is to place one’s hope in a theistic world picture, which, as I put it, ‘locates our human destiny within an enduring

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moral framework'.⁶ Holland articulates an alternative, purely secular, response, which argues that 'the difficulty of living a meaningful and worthwhile life under the Darwinian world view is less severe than ... appears at first sight'.⁷

Let us consider five troubling obstacles to finding meaning in a random, Godless universe, namely *contingency, alienation, despair, failure and fragility*. (I here identify some of the central themes in *On the Meaning of Life*, which Holland has acutely picked up on in his discussion.)

Regarding the first obstacle, *contingency*, Holland argues that 'there had better be contingency in the moral framework'; for since conditions change over time, then how we should act must correspondingly change (for example, tribal loyalty may have been at a premium in an earlier stage of our development, while environmental stewardship was largely irrelevant; whereas today the opposite is true). Just as Darwin did before him, Holland seems to me here vastly to underestimate the hostages to moral anarchy that are offered in this ready capitulation to contingency. For what is concealed here is an ultimately deflationist conception of morality. Once the historical and developmental contingency of our moral impulses is allowed, then instead of providing us with insight into ultimate meaning and value, our faculty of moral judgement becomes simply a product, or by-product, of how our ancestors happened to have evolved in the struggle for survival. In the course of Chapters 4 and 5 of the *Descent of Man*, which are about the evolution of our moral sensibilities, Darwin drops a highly significant phrase – the 'so-called moral sense'.⁸ His essentially reductionist approach sees conscience, and other so-called 'higher' impulses, as merely one or more of a plethora of natural feelings that have developed under selection pressure. Altruism and self-sacrifice, for instance (to take one example he discusses) may have arisen because tribes in which this trait is prominent 'would be victorious over most other tribes, and this would be natural selection'.⁹

But this approach undermines everything that has traditionally been associated with the idea of eternal moral values – their objectivity, universality, necessity and (in the end) their normativity. *Objectivity*: it is vital to the idea of morality that does not depend merely on our subjective drives and preferences (which may change, or be corrupted). *Universality*: conceptions of virtue do of course differ in different epochs and tribes – something that Darwin makes great play with – but there can still be core moral values that hold always and everywhere. The wrongness of slavery, for example, or the goodness of compassion, may not universally acknowledged in all lands or all historical periods, but that does not prevent their reflecting perfectly objective and universal truths about virtue and value. (Compare scientific laws, which hold universally, but are certainly not acknowledged everywhere and always.) *Necessity*: cruelty does not just *happen* to be wrong, but is wrong in all possible worlds. We may of course transgress such fundamental norms, and often do, but they are, as the

nineteenth-century logician Gottlob Frege put it in a rather different connection (discussing the truths of logic and mathematics) rather like ‘boundary stones which our thought can overflow but not dislodge’.¹⁰ And finally *normativity*: moral principles exert an authoritative demand or call upon us, whether we like it or not. Darwin tries to wriggle out of this when he speaks deflatingly of ‘the imperious word *ought*’. ‘The imperious word *ought*’, he says in the *Descent*, seems merely to imply the consciousness of the existence of a rule of conduct, *however it may have originated*.¹¹

But notice the disturbing implications of this idea. If our ethical conceptions are a product of a purely contingent concatenation of events, if they might have been otherwise, then it begins to look as if they might be *overridable*. As Friedrich Nietzsche put it, in the *Genealogy of Morals* (published not too long after Darwin’s *Descent*) once we start to think about the conditions under which man invented the value judgements good and evil, we can start to ask *what value do these value judgements themselves possess*.¹² It is no accident that Bernard Williams’s conception of ethics, and his scepticism about what he called ‘the morality system’, was strongly influenced by Nietzsche, and his idea that, once we accept that ethics has a genealogy, a contingent history, this frees us from acknowledging the authority of so called eternal moral values.¹³ Nietzsche’s sinister conclusion was that we can, if we are strong enough, decide to *invert* eternal moral values. In a godless universe, where God is ‘dead’, then we are not subject to any higher authority, and so questions of value become merely a function of the projects we autonomously decide to pursue. So (as Nietzsche frighteningly suggested in one of the most disturbed and disturbing passages in Western philosophy) there might be conclusive reasons to steel ourselves *against* impulses of love and mercy, to harden our hearts against compassion and forgiveness, since such sentiments might get in the way of our will to power, or our passion for self-realisation, or some other grand project we happen to have.¹⁴

I now move on to *alienation*. I spoke, in *On the Meaning of Life*, of ‘our feeling thrown into an arbitrary alien world where nothing ultimately matters’.¹⁵ Note that I did not (as Holland incorrectly infers) deny that ‘mattering’ can be quotidian. I meant exactly what I said – that our projects and plans cannot *ultimately* have significance if our world, and our own desires, arose arbitrarily and purely contingently from a random chain of circumstances. We are alienated, unable to be at home in the world, if our most profound moral aspirations, so far from reflecting the true goal ‘wherein lies our peace’ (as Dante put it),¹⁶ are simply drives that we happen to find ourselves with at a given juncture in history, but which might just as well have been otherwise, and might just as well be altered in the future, without any damage to the fabric of morality. For, on the view we are considering, there *is* no truly objective fabric of morality. As John Stuart Mill, contemporary of Darwin, put it, conscience is merely ‘a feeling in our mind, a pain more or less intense ... encrusted over with collateral associations

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derived from the recollections of childhood'. This, he implies, is enough to dissolve away any normative aura – 'the sort of mystical character which ... is apt to be attributed to the idea of moral obligation.'¹⁷ Conscience is merely one feeling among others we happen to find inside ourselves. A more alienating and subversive picture of our deepest moral impulses could not be imagined.

Concerning the third of our five troubling features, *despair*, Holland agrees with my view that the absence of hope is powerfully corrosive of meaningfulness in life, but he rejects what he sees as the 'delusional' and 'grandiloquent' hope of the theist in the ultimate triumph of the good. I am certainly sympathetic to his moving claim that there are forms of hope that are 'still and small and quiet'; and indeed, I would not at all take the theistic view to imply that the value of the modest quotidian exercises of virtue and resolution are to be swept away in the name of some baroque ultimism.¹⁸ On the contrary, I take it to be central to the religious outlook, particularly that of Christianity, that our human pursuit of ultimate value is embedded, incarnated if you like, in the daily struggles to resist despair and orient oneself, often seemingly against all the odds, towards the sustaining source of goodness and light that in much of our lives is dimly, if at all, glimpsed. Hope, we are agreed, is a precious human resource, and it is no accident that it finds its place, alongside faith and love, in the great triad of the traditional 'theological' virtues. Whether there can be an authentic secularised version of this traditional virtue, or only what turns out to be a pale and unsatisfying analogue of it, is a fascinating question, which I have discussed elsewhere, and so will not pursue further here.¹⁹

As for the remaining two aspects that might threaten meaning in a Godless universe, *failure* and *fragility*, Holland argues in the first place that our frequent failure to achieve the goals we set ourselves need not undermine meaning, since 'the presence of some creature to love, human or non-human' may be enough to make a life meaningful; and in the second place he urges that the fragility of a human life 'makes it all the more precious and its self-affirmation, in consequence, all the more meaningful'.²⁰ There are many deep issues raised by these brief comments, so let me just indicate a few that strike me. I would agree about the importance of love as a necessary condition for a meaningful life, but Holland's Lennolesque claim that it is sufficient,²¹ and his added specification the love may be directed towards a 'human or non-human' creature, seem to me very problematic. Did the fact (if it was one) that Hitler loved his dog make his life meaningful? No, I would say, because talk of meaning in life is, as I put it in the book, inescapably evaluative (something which Holland accepts);²² so however fond of his dog Hitler may have been, and even if subjectively speaking, he felt this gave his life meaning, his life was nevertheless a meaningless horror, because he turned away from the good, towards cruelty and bullying and the lust for power.

Perhaps it is in order to deflect this kind of objection that Holland adds the proviso that the life in question must be 'no more than normally sinful'; but this will not do. In deploying the term 'sinful' he helps himself to a religious idea to which he is not, on his assumptions, entitled. What that term suggests is the Judaeo-Christian idea of the absolute primacy of the moral in our lives. We are creatures who can achieve meaningful living only by respecting the objective demands of morality; once that is abandoned, no plans and projects can restore what is lost, however 'autonomously' we may pursue them, however much they may reflect our own 'authenticity' as agents, however much they may generate warm feelings of affection towards our pets, or whatever other types of gratification they may produce.²³ Once this is granted, then we are face to face with the imperative to pursue the good in order to find meaning in our lives. And manifestly that goal is hostage, like any other goal in human life, to all the perils of a contingent and dependent existence, ever liable to be swamped by weakness, mental and physical infirmity, accident, betrayal, oppression, and sheer bad luck.²⁴

This brings us back to fragility. I agree with Holland that, in some elusive sense our fragility does add to the preciousness of our lives; but I do not think that the clue to how it does so is 'self-affirmation'.²⁵ On the contrary, I would say that it is only by looking beyond ourselves, to a goodness that endures and brings triumph out of human weakness, that we can hold on to the hope of meaning. Is the triumph of goodness a fantasy? I can only repeat what I said in *On the Meaning of Life*:

Religious claims about the 'buoyancy' of goodness are very easy to misunderstand. Goodness, in the course of actual human history, is clearly often defeated. When St Paul encouraged his followers to bear adversity with the cry that 'neither death nor life nor ... any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God' [Romans 8: 38], he cannot have meant his words to be construed as the naive assertion that things always work out for the best. The Jewish scriptures, in which he was so well versed, are packed with stories of terrible trials suffered by the innocent, of heroic goodness often crushed by the forces of tyranny and oppression. So the Pauline thought cannot be a piece of slick optimism, but must involve a more subtle understanding of the power of Goodness. A rather less well known passage from his letters perhaps expresses it more tellingly: 'No trial has come upon you that is outside the boundaries of human experience. And God is faithful, who does not let you be tested beyond your capacity, but with the trial provides a way out, the power to endure' [I Corinthians 10: 13]. The resilience affirmed here is evidently not a magical overcoming of impossible odds, but a certain mindset which will not judge the value of sticking to the side of goodness by reference to its success or failure measured in terms of outcome, but which generates the courage to endure, irradiated by hope.²⁶

This stress on the importance of the virtue of courage takes us neatly to the final part of Holland's paper, where he expresses the view (with which many

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traditional theists might concur) that ‘the most meaningful and worthwhile of lives is one that ... calls forth and demands the exercise of courage’. But he then aims to turn the tables on the theist by claiming that the conditions requiring the exercise of such courage ‘are more likely to be encountered in a Darwinist than a providentialist world’.²⁷

Living life with no assurance that it will be worthwhile, calls for more courage, as Holland sees it, than doing so with the belief that all will ultimately be redeemed. I have already indicated, in the long passage just quoted, that I think this misconstrues the mindset of the believer: theistic faith is not a species of naïve optimism about the future. What is more, the narrative of the Gospels, with its story of loving self-sacrifice, surely makes it abundantly clear that a life lived in service to the will of God still requires and calls forth the utmost courage. I think, however, that it is unprofitable to pursue further this question of what kind of life (theistic or atheistic) calls for the greater virtue, since we can surely agree that there are shining exemplars of goodness in both camps.

The deeper point at issue concerns, rather, the implications of seeing oneself in a teleologically structured cosmos: a *creature* brought into being for a purpose. Rejecting this religious picture, in Holland’s eyes, does not erode meaning, but on the contrary ‘liberates us to live individually meaningful lives’. Finding our own meaning and purpose ‘gives ... life a zest, and calls for the most meaningful form of self-affirmation’.²⁸ Here, I think, is the nub of the difference between theist and atheist. For the theist, the swelling of the ego, trying to fill up a world without God, is doomed to burst in the void of empty space. We did not create ourselves, and we cannot create meaning or value, only respond to them. The opposite of the pride which would insist on our own self-affirmation is the acknowledging of *creatureliness*, our dependence on the objective source of being and goodness without which our lives cannot flourish.

Creatureliness, for modern enlightenment man, is a fearful state to acknowledge. And I can understand and sympathise with Holland’s fear that it involves the alienating idea of, as he puts it, ‘living to another’s purpose’.²⁹ Yet if the Christian revelation is true (and this of course takes us beyond philosophy, to the domain of faith), then to be a created is, for a human being, not like being a puppet, not like being manipulated to serve another’s ends, but like being the child of a loving parent. And as every parent instinctively knows, the ultimate goal of parenthood is that not that the child should live ‘to the parent’s purpose’, but that it should grow to achieve the fullness of free and self-determining existence, in knowledge and love of the good.³⁰

NOTES

¹ See Cottingham 2005; 2009.

² Alan Holland (2009) objects to words like ‘mechanical’ or ‘mechanism’ to describe the Darwinian process, observing that there nothing remotely mechanical about the ‘higgledy-pigglety’ operation of natural selection (p. 509). This is an interesting point, but I suspect that more evidence is needed (the discovery of how life develops on other worlds would be decisive) before we can decide just how law-like the operation of the evolutionary process may be.

³ Notwithstanding this, we have unfortunately seen the rise among some theists of so-called ‘Intelligent Design theory’, which attempts to provide an alternative explanation to Darwin’s for the origin of species. This attempt to trespass on the domain of proper science is a signal failure. Firstly, ‘Intelligent Design’ is not a ‘theory’ at all: it has no research programme and no predictions. Second, it gives hostages to fortune: in pointing to phenomena (like the bacterial flagellum) that are supposed to be incapable of explanation via natural mechanisms, it is forced to retreat in confusion when (as appears to be happening) such mechanisms are after all discovered. Third, there is a ‘causal joint’ problem: how are we supposed to inspect and scientifically calibrate the points at which God allegedly adjusts the natural processes? And fourthly, from a theological perspective, it is surely worthier of God to suppose he initially created a cosmos that is “fit for purpose” – capable of bringing forth life and intelligence through its natural mechanisms operating over time – than to see him as having to accomplish his ends by tinkering. I take these points from the excellent discussion by David Fergusson (2009, Ch. 3).

⁴ Cottingham 2003.

⁵ Holland 2009, p. 509.

⁶ Cottingham 2003, p. 62.

⁷ Holland 2009, p. 512.

⁸ Darwin [1871], Ch. 4, p. 143.

⁹ *Ibid.*, Ch. 5, pp. 157–8. Modern evolutionary theorists would see this apparent endorsement of group selection as problematic, but, with the aid of genetic theory, could easily adjust the story, rewriting in terms of the advantages of prevalence within a given population of an individual gene or genes linked to altruistic behaviour.

¹⁰ Frege was talking about the laws of logic, which he regarded as wholly objective, holding independently of contingent facts about human psychology. They are ‘fixed and eternal ... boundary stones set in an eternal foundation, which our thought can overflow, but not dislodge’. Frege [1893], p. 13.

¹¹ Darwin [1871], Ch. 4, p. 140.

¹² Nietzsche [1887], Preface, §3.

¹³ ‘[A] truthful historical account is likely to reveal a radical contingency in our current ethical conceptions. Not only might they have been different from what they are, but also the historical changes that brought them about are not obviously related to them a way that vindicates them against possible rivals.’ Williams 2002, Ch. 2, p. 20.

¹⁴ See Nietzsche [1886], §37, and (for ‘inverting’ eternal values, §203. For further discussion of the issues raised in this paragraph, see Cottingham 2008.

¹⁵ Cottingham 2003, p. 9.

¹⁶ *E’n la sua volontade è nostra pace*. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy: Paradise [La Divina Comedia: Paradiso c. 1310]*, iii, 85.

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¹⁷ Mill [1861], Ch. 3.

¹⁸ I take this term from John Schellenberg's impressive *The Will to Imagine* (2009).

¹⁹ See Cottingham 2006, and in Cottingham (ed.) 2007.

²⁰ Holland 2009, p. 514.

²¹ Cf. John Lennon, 'All You Need is Love' [1967].

²² Cottingham 2003, p. 20; Holland, p. 512.

²³ The references to authenticity and 'projects' allude to an influential conception of a valuable life which aims to cut free from the demands of 'the morality system', and substitute 'necessities that are internal, grounded in the *ethos*, the projects, the individual nature of the agent'. See Williams 1993, Ch. 5, p. 103, and, for some problems faced by this notion, Cottingham 2010.

²⁴ See Williams 1981.

²⁵ Holland 2009, p. 514.

²⁶ Cottingham 2003, pp. 73-4.

²⁷ Holland 2009, p. 515.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 516.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 515.

³⁰ I am extremely grateful to Alan Holland for the attention he has paid to my work. Although the conventions of academic discourse tend to push one into the format of a 'debate', with criticisms and ripostes, I am struck by the large amount of common ground that is shared. I suspect that our respective theistic and atheistic worldviews both arise from wrestling with the same deep problems about the human condition; and the relative merits of those worldviews could not, I think, ever be settled by philosophical argument alone.

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