The meaning of the world's meaning

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Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World
by George Levine
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In *Darwin Loves You: Natural Selection and the Re-enchantment of the World*, George Levine attempts to portray Charles Darwin's theories as a

model of the view that the world has meaning that is not endowed by some god—a so-called 'non-theistic enchantment'. The author pursues two aims in this work. The first is to counter the conventional understanding of Darwin as a primary disenchanter of the world and to suggest instead that his work has contributed to a radical re-enchantment of the world. The second is to demonstrate that there is not a necessary connection between Darwin's beliefs and the conventional cultural assumptions about them, and that their cultural and ideological implications and applications are historically contingent. Levine attends to Darwin with the eye of a literary critic, which acts to stray off the beaten path of technical and literal formulations of Darwin's views. Instead, his life is explored

and contrasted with what others have (falsely) claimed about him.

Levine starts by setting up the book's overall argument that the popular understanding of Darwin—as projecting a world that is disenchanted, mechanized, insensitive and reducible to a mere formula of heartless competition—needs to be qualified. He then performs a detailed criticism of Victorian and contemporary interpretations of Darwin. Levine supports a certain kind of naturalism and at the same time asserts that value and meaning are inherent in the world. This leads him to invoke the naturalist Darwin, who found in nature the emotional and spiritual resources to give value to life—an "alternative form of enchantment".

Levine then makes a mainly biographical case for his own interpretation of Darwin. He examines how Darwin formulated the theory of sexual selection, not only to gain support for the book's overall argument but also to make the point that, despite much social and cultural influence, the theory outstrips the cultural limits that allowed for its very production. It is here that Levine takes up most directly the argument for enchantment—rather than emptying the world of value, Darwin sensed it as full of meaning, richly laden with endlessly beautiful and assorted variations, adaptations, anomalies and behaviours. The epilogue then superficially highlights some of the philosophical topics implied by Levine's overall argument: theodicy (an attempt to reconcile the existence of evil and God), the intelligent design challenge to evolutionary theory, and conceptual matters surrounding the meaning of 'meaning'.

Contrary to Levine, I consider the book's title unfortunate, as it is obviously meant to compete with the Christian slogan 'Jesus loves you'. My displeasure with the title articulates a deeper dissatisfaction with the book's overall argument. Either Levine's view of enchantment is trivial or it is not

useful. In the case of the former, it is clear that there is no contradiction between being a scientist and being full of awe in the face of nature's achievements. Albert Einstein was convinced that every scientist needs such a feeling of awe to be a good scientist. But, with reference to the meaning of disenchantment in the sense introduced by German sociologist Max Weber, such a personal attitude towards the world is not necessarily related to the debate between a theistic and a non-theistic enchantment.

The alternative is that Levine's interpretation of enchantment is not really useful, because it is of no relevance in the debate over how to understand Darwin. There are two reasons for this. First, today's Darwinism is not the same as Victorian Darwinism, as Levine points out. Second, to understand Darwin and his view of the world as full of value and meaning does not address theistic objections to a certain kind of Darwinism. Is it not a fallacy simply to assume that theistic enchantment implies the rejection of evolutionary theory? It might be of personal or historical interest to present Darwin like the modern St Francis of Assisi—who expressed an appreciation of Brother Sun and Sister Moon, for example—but it seems much more necessary to deal with theologians who are completely committed to evolutionary theory and yet insist that the world only has meaning when it has purpose. For these reasons, Levine's Darwin matters less than he should. The very existence of *Darwin Loves You* is itself a wonder that can be considered an enrichment of the world's meaning—if one is inclined to accept Levine's re-enchantment interpretation of Darwin.

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