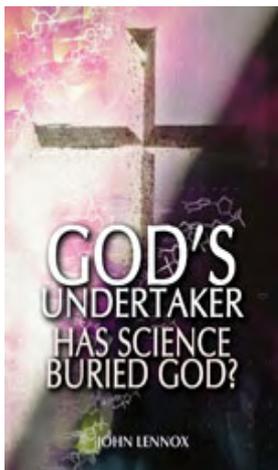


BOOK REVIEW



John C. Lennox

God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God? ↗

Paperback: 192 pages

Lion Hudson, 2007

ISBN-13: 978-0825461880

Reviewed by U. Mohrhoff

Once upon a time “creationism” denoted simply the belief that there was a Creator. The notion that there is an intelligent cause behind the universe is as ancient as philosophy and religion themselves. The fact that “creationism” has now come to imply a whole additional raft of ideas, the most dominant of which is the notion that the earth is only a few thousand years old, has provided those who reject any notion of intelligent causation with a soft target.

John Lennox hits back. For one thing, he won't let himself be lured into debating whether “intelligent design” is science or not. The question is as silly as the question whether atheism is science or not. The real questions are: Is there any scientific evidence for intelligent origination? And more broadly: which worldview sits more comfortably with science — theism or naturalism/atheism?

Demography doesn't provide the answer. We have naturalist thinkers telling us that science has eliminated God, and we have theists telling us that science confirms their faith in God. Both positions are held by competent scientists in nearly equal measures.

In its eleven chapters, *God's Undertaker* addresses those questions from different angles. The first chapter examines the roots of science. At the heart of all science lies the conviction that the universe is orderly. Melvin Calvin, Nobel Prize-winner in biochemistry, believes that this conviction originated in the belief that the universe is governed by a single God. According to C.S. Lewis, “Men became scientific because they expected law in nature and they expected law in nature because they believed in a lawgiver.” This

makes sense, and among those who concurred (or would have concurred) we find Francis Bacon, Galileo, Kepler, Pascal, Boyle, Newton, Faraday, Babbage, Mendel, Pasteur, Kelvin, Maxwell, and Whitehead.

The doctrine of creation was important for another reason: thinking had to be freed from the Aristotelian method of deducing from fixed principles how the universe ought to be. The shift to an empirical methodology was made easier by the notion of a contingent creation — God could have created the universe any way he liked. So Galileo went and looked — and got into trouble with the Roman Catholic Church. Yet contrary to the familiar atheist propaganda, what got him into trouble was his criticism of Aristotle, which enraged the *secular* philosophers. Galileo enjoyed a great deal of support from religious intellectuals. The astronomers of the powerful Jesuit educational institution, the Collegio Romano, initially endorsed his astronomical work and fêted him for it. Galileo's scientific arguments were not threatening to the Church. They threatened the all-pervading Aristotelianism of the academy.

Galileo wanted to decide theories of the universe on the basis of evidence, not of argument based on an appeal to *a priori* postulates in general and the authority of Aristotle in particular. And so he looked at the universe through his telescope and what he saw left some of Aristotle's major astronomical speculations in tatters. Galileo observed sunspots, which blemished the face of Aristotle's "perfect sun". In 1604 he saw a supernova, which called into question Aristotle's "immutable heavens". (p. 23)

Lennox makes no excuse for the Church's use of the Inquisition to muzzle Galileo, nor for subsequently taking several centuries "rehabilitating" him. But he rightly insists that Galileo's troubles started with the academic professors trying to influence the Church authorities to speak out against him — at least so Galileo wrote in a letter to the Grand Duchess Christina.

The debate between T. H. Huxley and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce — like the conflict between Galileo and the Church — has been hyped up and shamelessly used as a weapon in the battle between naturalism and theism. Once again Lennox sets the record straight.

The second chapter examines the uses and abuses of the word "science." Consider this: in his review of Carl Sagan's last book, Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin writes:

We take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs. . . in spite of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories, because we have a prior commitment. . . to materialism. It is not that the methods and institutions of science somehow compel us to accept a material explanation of the phenomenal world but, on the contrary, that we are forced by our *a priori* adherence to material causes to create an apparatus of investigation and a set of concepts that produce material explanations, no matter how counter-intuitive, no matter how mystifying to the uninitiated. (p. 35, Lennox's ellipses)

"Moreover," Lewontin continues, "that materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine foot in the door." What Lewontin means, Lennox points out, is that "we *materialists* cannot allow a Divine foot in the door." This is a tautology. Anyone familiar with

the absurdities produced by modern cosmology can only shake his/her head in desperation. As an illustration, consider these excerpts from a recent article in the *New York Times*:¹

... you yourself reading this article are more likely to be some momentary fluctuation in a field of matter and energy out in space than a person with a real past born through billions of years of evolution in an orderly star-spangled cosmos. Your memories and the world you think you see around you are illusions.

This bizarre picture is the outcome of a recent series of calculations that take some of the bedrock theories and discoveries of modern cosmology to the limit. Nobody in the field believes that this is the way things really work, however. And so in the last couple of years there has been a growing stream of debate and dueling papers, replete with references to such esoteric subjects as reincarnation, multiple universes and even the death of spacetime, as cosmologists try to square the predictions of their cherished theories with their convictions that we and the universe are real. The basic problem is that across the eons of time, the standard theories suggest, the universe can recur over and over again in an endless cycle of big bangs, but it's hard for nature to make a whole universe. It's much easier to make fragments of one, like planets, yourself maybe in a spacesuit or even — in the most absurd and troubling example — a naked brain floating in space. Nature tends to do what is easiest, from the standpoint of energy and probability. And so these fragments — in particular the brains — would appear far more frequently than real full-fledged universes, or than us. Or they might be us. . .

If you are inclined to skepticism this debate might seem like further evidence that cosmologists, who gave us dark matter, dark energy and speak with apparent aplomb about gazillions of parallel universes, have finally lost their minds. But the cosmologists say the brain problem serves as a valuable reality check as they contemplate the far, far future and zillions of bubble universes popping off from one another in an ever-increasing rush through eternity. . .

In an interview Dr. Linde described these brains as a form of reincarnation. Over the course of eternity, he said, anything is possible. After some Big Bang in the far future, he said, "it's possible that you yourself will re-emerge. Eventually you will appear with your table and your computer." But it's more likely, he went on, that you will be reincarnated as an isolated brain, without the baggage of stars and galaxies. In terms of probability, he said, "It's cheaper."

Another myth is scientism, the view Peter Atkins expresses by saying that "[t]here is no reason to suppose that science cannot deal with every aspect of existence." Lennox counters:

The statement that only science can deliver knowledge is one of those self-refuting statements that logicians like Bertrand Russell love to point out. All the more surprising that Russell himself appears to have subscribed to this particular view when he wrote: "Whatever knowledge is attainable, must be attained by scientific methods; and what science cannot discover, mankind cannot know." In order to see the self-contradictory nature of this statement we simply have to ask: How does Russell know this? For his statement is not itself a statement of science and so if it is true then (according to the statement it-

1 Dennis Overbye. Big Brain Theory: Have Cosmologists Lost Theirs? January 15, 2008.

self) it is unknowable — and yet Russell believes it to be true. (p. 40)

What makes science look ridiculous is the exaggerated claims for science that some scientists make. In the words of Nobel Laureate Sir Peter Medawar,

There is no quicker way for a scientist to bring discredit upon himself and upon his profession than roundly to declare — particularly when no declaration of any kind is called for — that science knows, or soon will know, the answers to all questions worth asking, and that questions which do not admit a scientific answer are in some way non-questions or “pseudo-questions” that only simpletons ask and only the gullible profess to be able to answer. (p. 41)

In the third chapter, devoted to reductionism (methodological, epistemological, and ontological), Lennox agrees with philosopher Richard Swinburne that the very success of science in showing us how deeply ordered the natural world is, provides strong grounds for believing that there is a deeper cause for that order. This deeper cause is not an explanatory stopgap.

The point to grasp here is that, because God is not an alternative to science as an explanation, he is not to be understood merely as a God of the gaps. On the contrary, he is the ground of all explanation: it is his existence which gives rise to the very possibility of explanation, scientific or otherwise. It is important to stress this because influential authors such as Richard Dawkins will insist on conceiving of God as an explanatory alternative to science — an idea that is nowhere to be found in theological reflection of any depth. Dawkins is therefore tilting at a windmill — dismissing a concept of God that no serious thinker believes in anyway. Such activity is not necessarily to be regarded as a mark of intellectual sophistication. (p. 47)

However much I agree with the second part, Lennox hasn't convinced me that God's existence is the best explanation of the possibility of explanation — unless God is the best explanation of whatever lies beyond the ken of science; but this cannot be his meaning since he surely would not deny the possibility of a more differentiated approach. Nor do I agree with his argument that polytheism constitutes a perversion of an original belief in One Creator God. In Europe, the deep psychological origins of polytheism are obscure, but in India they are well documented.² The gods of the Vedas are first of all powers of *one* cosmic creative consciousness inherent in *one* divine being and assisting humans in their spiritual evolution.

Lennox rightly accuses Dawkins of a logical fallacy, but then he commits one himself. Dawkins dedicated *The God Delusion* to the memory of Douglas Adams with this quote: “Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it?”

Take the Douglas Adams quote cited by Dawkins above. It gives the game away. For it shows that Dawkins is guilty of committing the error of proposing false alternatives by suggesting that it is either fairies or nothing. Fairies at the bottom of the garden may

2 Sri Aurobindo, *The Secret of the Veda* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Puducherry, 1998) and “A Defence of Indian Culture” in *The Renaissance in India* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Puducherry, 1997).

well be a delusion, but what about a gardener, to say nothing about an owner? The possibility of their existence cannot be so summarily dismissed — in fact, most gardens have both. (p. 39)

Lennox commits a similar fallacy by suggesting that when it comes to explaining the comprehensibility of nature, there is no viable alternative to the extra-cosmic deity of the Jewish Christian theology. What the comprehensibility of nature suggests is a certain affinity between human intelligence and a Creator or Creatrix. This leaves plenty of room for more coherent and less conundrum-ridden theologies.³

Lennox's criticism of ontological reductionism is again to the point. Like scientism, it is self-destructive. If thoughts are replaced by patterns of electro-chemical events in a brain, then they can be neither right nor wrong. As John Polkinghorne writes,

The very assertions of the reductionist himself are nothing but blips in the neural network of his brain. The world of rational discourse dissolves into the absurd chatter of firing synapses. (p. 56)

Ontological reductionism carries with it the corollary that there is no reason to trust our minds when they tell us anything at all (for instance, that ontological reductionism is true). Attempts to derive rationality from irrationality are as futile as attempts to lift oneself by one's bootstraps or to construct a perpetual motion machine.

The fourth chapter deals with design issues arising in and from physics and cosmology. Lennox justly chides Paul Davies for writing plain nonsense (he puts it more politely, though). Davies confesses that

I have never liked the idea of divine tinkering: for me it is much more inspiring to believe that a set of mathematical laws can be so clever as to bring all these things into being. (p. 63)

What could possibly be meant by a set of mathematical laws being clever or bringing the universe into existence? On top of this he supplies us with another false dilemma — as if our choices were limited to divine tinkering and clever creative mathematical laws! But then Lennox puts forth his own false dilemma:

Our answer to the question of why the universe is rationally intelligible will in fact depend, not on whether we are scientists or not, but on whether we are theists or naturalists. Theists will argue that. . . the intelligibility of the universe is grounded in the nature of the ultimate rationality of God. (p. 61)

As if theism implied the ultimate rationality of God! Bare-bones theism is a belief in the existence of at least one god — nothing more, nothing less. Theism does not depend on how many gods one believes in, nor on how "god" is defined, nor on whether God is (or the gods are) rational. It is certainly convenient to hold God responsible for the rational aspect of the world, but then who or what is responsible for its irrational

3 See, for example: Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Sri Aurobindo Ashram Publication Department, Puducherry, 2005); Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin* (Ohio University Press, Athens, OH, 1984).

aspect? At the risk of producing another false alternative, I maintain that a rational God cannot account for the world's incomprehensible aspects but requires an irrational complement; only a suprarational or arational Creator or Creatrix is capable of accounting for both aspects.⁴ At the very least, God must be separate from the world, so that the irrationality in the world can be blamed on the world rather than on its creator.⁵ This is one of the reasons, and certainly not the least, for the dualistic nature of theism.⁶

If the world has a suprarational Creator or Creatrix, then both theism and naturalism are wrong, for each is committed to its own brand of rationalism. This may well account for the apparent futility of the debates between theists and naturalists. The need of the hour is to move beyond rationalism. A suprarational Creator or Creatrix can encompass the world the way consciousness encompasses its content, can constitute the world as well as transcend it. A suprarational nature can fashion the world out of God's own substance without causing the least dent in God's transcendence.

Regarding the wealth of so-called "anthropic coincidences," Lennox writes:

Some scientists and philosophers maintain that we ought not to be surprised at the order and fine-tuning we see in the universe around us, since if it did not exist then carbon-based life would be impossible, and we would not be there to observe the fine-tuning. In other words they use the anthropic principle against the inference of design. However, as philosopher John Leslie points out, "that sounds like arguing that if you faced a firing squad with fifty guns trained on you, you should not be surprised to find that you were alive after they had fired. After all, that is the only outcome you could possibly have observed — if one bullet had hit you, you would be dead. However, you might still feel that there is something which very much needs explanation; namely why did they all miss? Was it by deliberate design? (p. 72)

According to Leslie, the only way to avoid a theistic conclusion is to believe in some "multiverse" hypothesis. Here Swinburne has the right answer: "To postulate a trillion-trillion other universes, rather than one God, in order to explain the orderliness of our universe, seems the height of irrationality." (p. 73)

The fifth chapter deals with design issues arising in and from biology. There Lennox writes,

The idea that God and biological evolution are mutually exclusive alternatives implies first of all that God and evolution belong to the same category of explanation. But this is

4 See the previous footnote.

5 In its definition of "theism," the Templeton-funded *Science and Religion in Schools Project* (<http://srsp.net/>) states that "God is separate from the world, of which God is Creator."

6 In its definition of "theism," the Public Broadcasting Service (<http://www.pbs.org/>) states that "the existence and continuance of the universe is owed to one supreme Being, who is distinct from Creation. For this reason, theism proclaims a dualistic relation between God and the world, wherein God is a being who controls events from outside of the human world."

plainly false. . . Evolution purports to be a biological mechanism, and those who believe in God regard him as a personal Agent who, among other things, designs and creates mechanisms. (p. 87)

Correction: evolution doesn't purport to be anything. It is part of natural history. It is the Darwinists who claim (i) that evolution can be explained in terms of natural selection, and (ii) that natural selection is a biological mechanism. (See the article "Fodor on Adaptationism" in *AntiMatters* 1 (2) ♠ for reasons why natural selection should not be considered a *mechanism*.) Furthermore, the claim that "those who believe in God regard him as a personal Agent who, among other things, designs and creates mechanisms" is demonstrably wrong. I, for one, believe in God (albeit not that of Jewish Christian theology), and I do *not* visualize Her as designing and creating mechanisms. What I visualize is that by subjecting Her creative energy to what appear to be inflexible laws, She creates what appear to be mechanisms, which appear to be designed. All of these appearances exist in the eye of the rational beholder. And while they do correspond to certain subordinate, instrumental aspects of Her creative action (which appear to be all there is to it because they are all we can rationally grasp of it), they are the least important and by no means at the heart of Her action.

Concerning the pseudo-mechanism of natural selection, the distinguished biologist Lynn Margulis has this to say:

Like a sugary snack that temporarily satisfies our appetite but deprives us of more nutritious foods, neo-Darwinism sates intellectual curiosity with abstractions bereft of actual details — whether metabolic, biochemical, ecological, or of natural history. (p. 94)

Lennox's own criticism of selectionism starts out as follows:

Suppose that naturalism is true. Then, *merely as a matter of sheer logical necessity*, it follows that some kind of evolutionary account must be given for life, apart altogether from any evidence which may be offered to support it. (p. 96)

When will we learn to distinguish between (i) evolution as a fact of natural history and (ii) the neo-Darwinist account of evolution, and when will we learn to state clearly which of the two we mean? Naturalism does not simply imply that "some kind of evolutionary account must be given for life"; it implies that a *specific* account of the evolution of life must be given, namely the neo-Darwinist account. Lennox's phrasing is misleading — perhaps not intentionally — inasmuch as it suggests that simply by giving an evolutionary account of life one reveals one's commitment to naturalism. Nothing could be further from the truth. As Lennox is well aware, there are evolutionary accounts of life that are anything but naturalistic. One reveals one's commitment to naturalism by giving a neo-Darwinist account of the evolution of life.

In the contemporary scientific world we thus have the very unusual situation that one of science's most influential theories, biological macro-evolution, stands in such a close relationship to naturalistic philosophy that it can be deduced from it directly — that is, without even needing to consider any evidence. . . This circumstance is extraordinary since it is very difficult to think of another scientific theory that is in a similar position. Think, for example, of trying to deduce Newton's theory of gravitation or Einstein's the-

ory of relativity or the theory of Quantum Electrodynamics from a philosophical principle or worldview, whether materialistic, naturalistic or, even, theistic. (p. 96)

As a matter of fact, it is possible to deduce the well-tested laws of physics in their entirety — the Standard Model plus the general theory of relativity — from a theistic world view, as I have demonstrated repeatedly.⁷ Does this render the Standard Model or the general theory of relativity suspect?

In the following three chapters (6–8) Lennox rehearses the standard but nonetheless valid arguments against neo-Darwinism brought forward (not only) by ID theorists,⁸ whom some naturalists appear to be unable to distinguish from young-earth creationists. In the last three chapters (9–11) he discusses the uses and misuses of information theory in evolutionary biology. In this context Nobel Laureate physicist Robert Laughlin, whose research is on those properties of matter that make life possible, and who is not an advocate of intelligent design, deserves to be quoted:

Much of present day biological knowledge is ideological. A key symptom of ideological thinking is the explanation that has no implications and cannot be tested. I call such logical dead ends anti-theories because they have exactly the opposite effect of real theories: they stop thinking rather than stimulate it. Evolution by natural selection, for instance, which Darwin conceived as a great theory has lately come to function as an anti-theory called upon to cover up embarrassing experimental shortcomings and legitimize findings that are at best questionable and at worst not even wrong. Your protein defies the laws of mass action — evolution did it! Your complicated mess of chemical reactions turns into a chicken — evolution! The human brain works on logical principles no computer can emulate? Evolution is the cause! (p. 149)

Lennox sees two kinds of explanatory gaps: those that are eventually closed by science and those that are *revealed* by science. Naturalists keep promising us that even the latter will eventually cede to scientific explanation. Yet the more we learn, the hollower

7 For nontechnical accounts see “The Veil of Avidya” (presented at the *International Seminar on Understanding Consciousness: Recent Advances*, The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Kolkata, 18–20 January 2008), “Wrong reasons and right reasons why contemporary physics favors a spiritual world view” (presented at the *World Congress on Psychology and Spirituality*, New Delhi, 5–8 January 2008), “Inside the Spirit Matrix” (presented at *Approaches to Mind Sciences Emanating from Indian Culture*, conference organized by the Department of Psychology, University of Delhi, January 27–29, 2007), “The Physics of Sachchidananda” (presented at *The Collective Yoga of Man: A World in Process*, conference held at Auroville, January 12–14, 2007), “Particles, consciousness, volition: a Vedantic vision” (*AntiMatters* 1 No. 1), “Psychology all the way down” (presented at the *National Conference on Indian Psychology, Yoga, and Consciousness*, Pondicherry, December 10–13, 2004). For technical accounts see “Quantum mechanics explained” (2006, quant-ph/0607005) and “Why the laws of physics are just so” (2002, *Foundations of Physics* 32 No. 8). All papers and presentations can be downloaded from this page: <http://thisquantumworld.com/papers.htm> ↗.

8 See, for instance, William Dembski and Jonathan Wells, *The Design of Life* (reviewed in this issue).

their promises sound. Charles Whitehead⁹ once wrote that “[i]f there were any shift in our own world-view, much of what we call ‘evidence’ would decamp from the old paradigm to the new in a most disloyal manner.” The “brights” may be genetically prevented from noticing it, but the evidence is already decamping massively. Was isn’t obvious yet is the shape the new paradigm will take. Lennox asks if science has buried God. Perhaps it is not science that has buried God but God who has buried himself. Evolution might well be the process of His resurrection.

9 “Everything I Believe Might Be a Delusion. Whoa!” (*Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 11, No. 12, 2004, pp. 68–88).