



[Charles R. Darwin](#) [1]

1860-1879

C.R. Darwin's *Letters* collected by the [Darwin Correspondence Project](#) [2]

Darwin manifested his religious opinions in a moderate way, without taking clear-cut or rigid positions. Moreover, differently from what it is commonly assumed, he did not use the theory of evolution as a scientific evidence to deny the existence of a Creator. Here we present a few letters extracted from the correspondence of the English naturalist reporting some considerations of his about the existence of God and other existential issues connected to religion.

The digital texts have been originally published by the [Darwin Correspondence Project](#) [2]

Letter 2814 – C.R. Darwin to Asa Gray, May 22, 1860

In a letter addressed to the well-known botanist Asa Gray (1810-1888) Darwin affirms that, although he does not believe in the necessity of a design in nature, he finds hard to conclude that everything is the result of “brute force.” Considering in particular how wonderful the universe and the human nature are, Darwin concludes saying that the issue of the origin of such wonderful forms is “too profound for the human intellect.”

Down Bromley Kent

May 22

My dear Gray.

[...]

With respect to the theological view of the question; this is always painful to me.— I am bewildered.— I had no intention to write atheistically. But I own that I cannot see, as plainly as others do, & as I shd wish to do, evidence of design & beneficence on all sides of us. There seems to me too much misery in the world. I cannot persuade myself that a beneficent & omnipotent God would have designedly created the *Ichneumonidæ* with the express intention of their feeding within the living bodies of caterpillars, or that a cat should play with mice. Not believing this, I see no necessity in the belief that the eye was expressly designed. On the other hand I cannot anyhow be contented to view this wonderful universe & especially the nature of man, & to conclude that everything is the result of brute force. I am inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws, with the details, whether good or bad, left to the working out of what we may call chance. Not that this notion at all satisfies me. I feel most deeply that the whole subject is too profound for the human intellect. A dog might as well speculate on the mind of

Newton.— Let each man hope & believe what he can.—

Certainly I agree with you that my views are not at all necessarily atheistical. The lightning kills a man, whether a good one or bad one, owing to the excessively complex action of natural laws,—a child (who may turn out an idiot) is born by action of even more complex laws,—and I can see no reason, why a man, or other animal, may not have been aboriginally produced by other laws; & that all these laws may have been expressly designed by an omniscient Creator, who foresaw every future event & consequence. But the more I think the more bewildered I become; as indeed I have probably shown by this letter.

Most deeply do I feel your generous kindness & interest.—

Yours sincerely & cordially

Charles Darwin

Letter 5307 – C.R. Darwin to Mrs. M.E. Boole, 14 December 1866

In his reply to Mrs. Mary Everest Boole — a lady interested in studying the relationships among science, psychology, education and religion — Darwin speaks of his opinions about the religious implications of natural selection. The naturalist says that he is unable to answer her: he can just say something, as ‘a man in the street’ could do. He would prefer to believe that suffering and evil in the world are due to natural events and human decisions, and not to a divine direct intervention.

Down. Bromley. Kent

Dec. 14. 1866.

Dear Madam,

It would have gratified me much if I could have sent satisfactory answers to yr. questions, or indeed answers of any kind.^{f1} But I cannot see how the belief that all organic beings including man have been genetically derived from some simple being, instead of having been separately created bears on your difficulties.— These as it seems to me, can be answered only by widely different evidence from Science, or by the so called “inner consciousness.” My opinion is not worth more than that of any other man who has thought on such subjects, & it would be folly in me to give it; I may however remark that it has always appeared to me more satisfactory to look at the immense amount of pain & suffering in this world, as the inevitable result of the natural sequence of events, i.e. general laws, rather than from the direct intervention of God though I am aware this is not logical with reference to an omniscient Deity— Your last question seems to resolve itself into the problem of Free Will & Necessity which has been found by most persons insoluble.

I sincerely wish that this note had not been as utterly valueless as it is; I would have sent full answers, though I have little time or strength to spare, had it been in my power.

I have the honour to remain dear Madam

Yours very faithfully

Charles Darwin.

P.S. I am grieved that my views should incidentally have caused trouble to your mind but I thank you for your Judgment & honour you for it, that theology & science should each run its own course & that in the present case I am not responsible if their meeting point should still be far off.

Letter 8837 – C.R. Darwin to N.D. Doedes, April 2, 1873

The main topic of the letter written to Sir. N.D. Doedes, professor at the University of Utrecht, is whether the impossibility of conceiving the universe as arisen by chance may be or not the core argument for the existence of God. Darwin says that he is not able to answer, but he thinks that this type of subject is beyond man's intellect, though man ought to reflect on it.

Down, Beckenham, Kent.

April 2, 1873

Confidential.

Dear Sir,

I am much obliged for the photograph of yourself and friend. I am sure that you will excuse my writing at length, when I tell you that I have long been much out of health, and am now staying away from my home for rest. It is impossible to answer your question briefly; and I am not sure that I could do so, even if I wrote at some length. But I may say that the impossibility of conceiving that this grand and wondrous universe, with our conscious selves, arose through chance, seems to me the chief argument for the existence of God; but whether this is an argument of real value, I have never been able to decide. I am aware that if we admit a first cause, the mind still craves to know whence it came and how it arose. Nor can I overlook the difficulty from the immense amount of suffering through the world. I am, also, induced to defer to a certain extent to the judgment of the many able men who have fully believed in God; but here again I see how poor an argument this is. The safest conclusion seems to be that the whole subject is beyond the scope of man's intellect; but man can do his duty.

With my best wishes for your success in life, I remain, dear Sir, Yours faithfully,

Ch. Darwin.

Letter 11415 – C.R. Darwin to James Grant, March 11, 1878

In this letter to Sir James Grant, a Scottish explorer of South Equatorial Africa interested in botanic and microbiology fields, Darwin says that the strongest argument for the existence of God is the intuitive feeling that there must have been “an intelligent beginner of the universe.” The question remains unsolved when we ask whether such intuition is trustworthy and true.

Dear Sir,

I should have been very glad to have aided you in any degree if it had been in my power. But to answer your question would require an essay, and for this I have not strength, being much out of health. Nor, indeed, could I have answered it distinctly and satisfactorily with any amount of strength.

The strongest argument for the existence of God, as it seems to me, is the instinct or intuition which we all (as I suppose) feel that there must have been an intelligent beginner of the Universe; but then comes the doubt and difficulty whether such intuitions are trustworthy.

I have touched on one point of difficulty in the two last pages of my “Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication,” but I am forced to leave the problem insoluble.

No man who does his duty has anything to fear, and may hope for whatever he earnestly desires.— Dear sir, yours faithfully,

Ch. Darwin.

Down, Beckenham, Kent, March 11, 1878.

Letter 12041 – C.R. Darwin to John Fordyce, 7 May 1879

In replying to the atheist sir John Fordyce, Darwin states he thinks it is absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent theist and an evolutionist at the same time. He says that he has never considered himself as an atheist “in the sense of denying the existence of God,” but rather he would qualify himself as an agnostic.

Down Beckenham | Kent

May 7 1879

Private

Dear Sir,

It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist.— You are right about Kingsley. Asa Gray, the eminent botanist, is another case in point— What my own views may be is a question of no consequence to any one except myself.— But as you ask, I may state that my judgment often fluctuates. Moreover whether a man deserves to be called a theist depends on the definition of the term: which is much too large a subject for a note. In my most extreme fluctuations I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God.—

I think that generally (& more and more so as I grow older) but not always, that an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.

Dear Sir, Yours faithfully

Ch. Darwin

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