

Lisa Sideris

Modern Science and the Varieties of Evolutionary Enchantment

In 2002, a Christian pastor named Michael Dowd and his science writer wife quit their jobs, sold their possessions, and bought a van that they decorated with symbols of a Jesus fish kissing a Darwin fish. Dowd's recent book, *Thank God for Evolution*, is the centerpiece of a movement that recasts scientific accounts of the origin of life in mythopoeic form, as an enchanted "epic of evolution," a creation story common to all, believers and atheists alike. Also called "The Great Story" or "The Universe Story," the movement has gained great momentum and is highly regarded in some academic circles. Advocates of the new story hope to usher in an "Eozoic Era" that recognizes the Universe as a "communion of subjects, not a collection of objects." The Epic of Evolution is only one of many forms of evolutionary enchantment currently in vogue.

What explains this newfound enthusiasm for evangelizing and enchanting evolution? Complaints against Darwinian theory (particularly "neo-Darwinist" worldviews) as disenchanting gave urgency to the quest for a "new story" that recaptures wonder and awe, and allows humans to feel "at home" in the universe. In this project, I identify the factors contributing to the perception of Darwinism as a disenchanted, ethically impoverished account and construct a critical taxonomy of the varieties of re-enchantment proffered as alternatives. Such attempts are partly a reaction to recent popularizers of evolutionary biology and critics of religion (so-called new atheists such as Richard Dawkins). Dawkins' name is invoked whenever theologians lament our modern loss of enchantment; yet Dawkins maintains that science allows mystery (though not magic), and some of his works explicitly celebrate the human "appetite for wonder." But wonder at *what*, exactly? Are there appropriate and inappropriate objects of wonder? Wholesome and unwholesome forms of enchantment? Is science primarily a wonder-enabling or a wonder-*dispelling* enterprise? What connects wonder or enchantment to ethical engagement? These are some of the questions driving my research. The rich history of concepts of wonder and enchantment suggests that answers to these questions have shifted over time, but that the questions themselves have long been central to natural history, natural philosophy, and theology. I differentiate between two basic, historically persistent forms of enchantment, both associated today with Darwinian perspectives. One type wonders at a reality beyond or outside ourselves—the more-than-human-world (for some, this is a secular form of wonder; for others, wonder is ultimately a response to divinity). I develop and defend a secular form of Darwinian enchantment that entails enchantment without design or teleology; here, wonder is a response to such features as *spontaneity*, *transformation*, *fortuity*, and *contingency*, over and above qualities of perfect order and adaptation, stability, or purposiveness in nature.

A second type of enchantment also has clear historical precedents. It takes not *nature* per se but *science*—and sometimes the scientist—as deserving of wonder. This form expresses awe and wonder at the human creation of knowledge, the mind's ability to make sense and order of our world. In contrast to the first type, wonder is understood here as largely self-eliminating: the quest for knowledge that wonder sets in motion entails that wonder ultimately ceases. Vestigial wonder remains, only insofar as human structures of explanation, rather than natural phenomena, are reasserted as wonder's

proper objects. What critics who assail modern science for disenchanting the world fail to see is that these “neo-Darwinians” are not purveyors of disenchantment; they are deeply enchanted. Like Dawkins, sociobiologist E. O. Wilson feels a powerful enchantment with structures of knowledge and the human mind, over and above the natural world.

Wilson’s *Consilience* lays out his “Ionian Enchantment,” the “great enchanting goal of the unification of knowledge” driven by belief in an orderly world explicable by a handful of laws. In a peculiar twist, what Wilson termed the “evolutionary epic” is now embraced missionary zeal among Epic of Evolution proponents who offer their Epic as a sacred narrative—“science *translated into meaningful story*”—that restores purpose and value to all life forms. By placing the Epic of Evolution movement in wider historical context, my project aims to illuminate the deep historical roots of these forms of enchantment and to suggest why they may be ethically problematic.