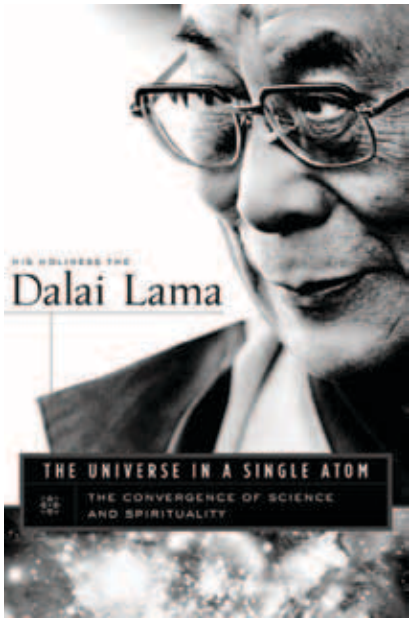
Dalai Lama—Nobel laureate Darwinism critic

A review of
The Universe in a Single Atom
by Tenzin Gyatso
Morgan Road Books,
New York, 2005



Jerry Bergman

Tibetan Buddhism's renowned spiritual leader is called the Dalai Lama, a title comparable to that of the Pope in the Roman Catholic Church. The 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, has spent much of his life studying evolutionary theory and discussing it with leading scientists. He published his conclusions in his 2005 book *The Universe in a Single Atom*. In this book he is respectful, but very critical, of Darwinism and, especially, of its implications.

For his many achievements Gyatso was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1989. He was also awarded the 2012 $1.7 million Templeton Prize for his accomplishments. The Templeton Foundation recognized him for his "long-standing engagement with multiple dimensions of science" and for having "vigorously focused on the connections between the investigative traditions of science and Buddhism", encouraging "serious scientific investigative reviews of the power of compassion and its broad potential to address the world's fundamental problems."[1] This award is ironic because the Templeton Foundation has declined to support either creationism or Intelligent Design.

Interested in science since boyhood, Gyatso learned all he could from books and his teachers. He was tutored in evolution by some of the most eminent scientists in the world, including professors at MIT and other leading universities.[1] To understand the limitations and dangers of Darwinian theory, the Dalai Lama wrote an insightful chapter on evolution titled, 'Evolution, Karma, and the World of Sentience'. His original bias was openly toward evolution due to his Buddhist religious upbringing, in which evolution was part of his theology, but as he learned more about the theory he became increasingly opposed to it on both moral and scientific grounds:

> "Just as I never found the Abhidharma [Buddhist] cosmology convincing, I have never really been persuaded by the Abhidharma account of human evolution as progressive 'degeneration'. One of Tibet's own myths of creation tells how the Tibetan people evolved from the mating of a monkey and a fierce ogress, and of course I'm not convinced by that either!" (p. 111).

He defined evolution as answering such questions as why is the

> "… human body so different from a rock that it can support life and consciousness? The modern biological response to this question turns on the notion of the emergence of higher levels of properties corresponding to higher levels of complexity in the aggregation of the material constituents. In other words, modern biology tells the story through an increasingly complex aggregation of atoms into molecular and genetic structures; the complex organism of life emerges simply on the basis of material elements" (pp. 97–98).

He added that "central to Darwin's theory of evolution" is that natural selection acts on

> "… random genetic mutation and [the] subsequent competition between organisms leading to the 'survival of the fittest' or, more correctly, the differential reproductive success of some organisms versus others. Every trait in an organism is subjected to the constraints of the environment. Those organisms which thrive best within these constraints and in competition with others, and which have the most offspring, are deemed better adapted and thus better equipped to survive. As the most suitable features are continuously selected in a given environment from among the variations produced by random mutations, the species of living beings transform" (p. 100).

He continues, writing that biologists often claim that

> "Darwinian evolution is the conceptual underpinning of modern biology. The theory of evolution, and in particular the notion of natural selection, provides the big picture of the origin of diverse life-forms … the theories of evolution and natural selection are attempts to account for the miraculous variety of living things" (pp. 97–98).

Photo: Ondřej Žváček

Figure 1. The palace of the Dalai Lama in Tibet.

His problem with this worldview includes his difficulty with the idea that the

> "… spectacular richness of life and the huge differences among the many species are explained by the scientific idea that new forms are created by the alteration of present forms, with the added idea that those features best suited to a given environment will be passed on to subsequent generations, while those features not essential to survival die out" (pp. 97–98).

His reasons for doubting the materialist explanation of life's development include the major questions about how and why life originated, how compassion, altruism and sentience could have evolved, and even whether Darwinism is testable science: "Despite the success of the Darwinian narrative ... I am not persuaded that … Darwin's theory … answers the fundamental question of the origin of life" (p. 111). He points out that another problem is

> "Darwin's theory does not explicitly address the conceptual question of what life is. This said, there are a number of key characteristics that biology understands to be essential for life, such as organisms being self-sustaining systems and naturally possessing some mechanisms for reproduction. In addition, the key definitions of life include the ability to develop away from chaos and toward order, which is called 'negative entropy'" (pp. 99–100).

He added that "Genetic mutation is … thought to be the engine for evolution at the molecular level" (p. 101) and according

> "… to the current story of the origins of organic life, shortly after the earth itself came into being, molecules of RNA (ribonucleic acid), themselves highly unstable, came into being and self-replicated without assistance. By natural selection, tougher and more durable molecules—molecules of DNA (deoxyribonucleic acid, the fundamental repository of genetic information)—emerged from RNA. Imagine … during the millions of years of copying this book, every now and then some small errors creep in just as—in the hundreds of years of copying it by hand—small scribal errors, misspellings, and substitutions of words enter the text of the *kangyur*. These errors may be perpetuated in subsequent copying, which then introduces new copying variations" (p. 103).

Gyatso adds that evolutionists believe "the occurrence of genetic mutations, regardless of how natural they may be, remains entirely random" (pp. 103–104). Gyatso then elaborates his dissatisfaction with the idea that all genetic variations are ultimately due to random events. He cites Karl Popper, who was one of his many teachers, who

> "… once commented that, to his mind, Darwin's theory of evolution does not and cannot explain the origin of life on earth. For him, the theory of evolution is not a testable scientific theory but rather a metaphysical theory" (p. 112).

Furthermore, natural selection theory

> "… maintains that, of the random mutations that occur in the genes of a given species, those genes that promote the greatest chance of survival are most likely to succeed. However, the only way this hypothesis can be verified is to observe the characteristics of those mutations that have survived" (p. 111).

This amounts to the truism that "because these genetic mutations have survived, they are the ones that had the greatest chance of survival" (p. 111). Gyatso concludes one problem with this theory is that "a certain circularity [exists] in the notion of 'survival of the fittest'" (p. 111). By this he means that evolution teaches the fitter animals are more likely to survive, and how do we know they are fitter? The answer is because they survived. Of a group of animals, those that have survived are labelled more fit; those that died from disease or were successfully hunted by other animals were obviously less fit.[2]

After his discussion of how natural selection is supposed to operate on genetic mutations to make evolution work, he adds that it is a mistake to conclude randomness, as orthodox evolution teaches, accounts for life, concluding that this "strikes me as

unsatisfying. It leaves open the question of whether this randomness is best understood as an objective feature of reality" (p. 104).

The Dalai Lama opined that a 'hidden causality' must be responsible for life in contrast to the 'scientific view', which is a metaphysical assumption—but "no more so than the assumption that all of life is material and originated out of pure chance" (p. xiv).

He opposes materialism

The Dalai Lama opined that many persons accept the

> "… assumption that the scientific view of the world should be the basis for all knowledge and all that is knowable. This is scientific materialism …. . This view … assumes that the data being analyzed within an experiment are independent of the preconceptions, perceptions, and experience of the scientist analyzing them" (p. 12).

Furthermore, underlying the materialistic view

> "… is the assumption that, in the final analysis, matter, as it can be described by physics and as it is governed by the laws of physics, is all there is. Accordingly, this view would uphold that psychology can be reduced to biology, biology to chemistry, and chemistry to physics" (p. 12).

A major difficulty with this view is "these ideas do not constitute scientific knowledge; rather they represent a philosophical, in fact a metaphysical, position [just] as the view that an organizing intelligence created and controls reality" (p. 12).

He adds that another major problem "with a radical scientific materialism is the narrowness of vision that results and the potential for nihilism that might ensue. Nihilism, materialism, and reductionism are … all problems from a philosophical and especially a human perspective, since they can potentially impoverish the way we see ourselves" (p. 12). He reasons that

> "… whether we see ourselves as random biological creatures or as special beings endowed with the dimension of consciousness and moral capacity will make an impact on how we feel about ourselves and treat others. In this view many dimensions of the full reality of what it is to be human—art, ethics, spirituality, goodness, beauty, and above all, consciousness—either are reduced to the chemical reactions of firing neurons or are seen as a matter of purely imaginary constructs" (pp. 12–13).

Gyatso concludes that the clear danger of materialism is that this worldview reduces humans

> "… to nothing more than biological machines, the products of pure chance in the random combination of genes, with no purpose other than the biological imperative of reproduction. It is difficult to see how questions such as the meaning of life or good and evil can be accommodated within such a worldview. The problem is not with the empirical data of science but with the contention that these data alone constitute the legitimate ground for developing a comprehensive worldview or an adequate means for responding to the world's problems. There is more to human existence and to reality itself than current science can ever give us access to" (p. 13).

Furthermore, because scientific knowledge is not complete this fact alone clearly recognizes the limits of scientific knowledge and

> "… only by such recognition can we genuinely appreciate the need to integrate science within the totality of human knowledge. Otherwise our conception of the world, including our own existence, will be limited to the facts adduced by science, leading to a deeply reductionist, materialistic, even nihilistic worldview … . The problem arises when reductionism, which is essentially a method, is turned into a metaphysical standpoint" (pp. 206–207).

Darwinists claim that "the Darwinian theory of evolution ... gives us a fairly coherent account of the evolution of [the diversity of] human life on earth." As a result of his philosophical and scientific analysis, Gyatso determined major valid reasons exist to justify his dissatisfaction with Darwinism. For example, if the

> "… mind is reducible to matter [as evolution teaches, it] leaves a huge explanatory gap. How do we explain the emergence of consciousness? What marks the transition from non-sentient to sentient beings? A model of increasing complexity based on evolution through natural selection is simply a descriptive hypothesis, a kind of euphemism for 'mystery', and not a satisfactory explanation" (p. 131).

Although he is a Buddhist, these same concerns are those of Christian creationists.

Explaining altruism

The Dalai Lama noted yet another major problem is that "Darwinism's focus on the competitive survival of individuals ... has consistently been unable to explain altruism, whether in the sense of collaborative behavior, such as food sharing or conflict resolution among animals like chimpanzees or acts of self-sacrifices" (p. 112). The problem is especially serious because altruism is observed across species. For example, "a honeybee will sting to protect its hive from intruders, even though the act of stinging causes it to die; or the Arabian babbler, a type of bird, will risk its own safety to warn the rest of the flock of an attack" (p. 112). The 'why it matters' question is critical because of evolutionists' unwillingness to fully

Photo: Sharry Goldman

Figure 2. A Damaraland mole rat shown above is one of many examples that illustrate Gyatso concern about the major problems with the evolutionary 'kinship selection' theories used in an attempt to explain altruism.[3]

> "… engage the question of altruism is perhaps the most important drawback of Darwinian evolutionary theory, at least in its popular version. In the natural world, which is purported to be the source of the theory of evolution, just as we observe competition between and within species for survival, we observe profound levels of cooperation" (p. 114).

Evolutionists attempt to explain this common observation by the kin selection theory, the idea that evolution favours the reproductive success of an organism's genetic relatives, even at a cost to the organism's own survival. The theory argues that natural selection selects for those persons who sacrifice their life so their genetic relatives can live. The problems with this theory include the fact that a large number of examples exist where an organism sacrifices its life and no possible benefit could possibly accrue to the organism's genetic relatives.[4] Furthermore, it does not explain altruism expressed toward complete strangers, nor the origin of the behaviour that, once existing, can be beneficial for genetic relatives. It must exist first and will not be selected for until it confers a survival advantage to ones genetic relatives.

He notes that just as we observe examples of

> "… aggression in animals and humans, we observe acts of altruism and compassion. Why does modern biology accept only competition to be the fundamental operating principle and only aggression to be the fundamental trait of living beings? Why does it reject cooperation as an operating principle, and why does it not see altruism and compassion as possible traits for the development of living beings as well?" (p. 114).

If 20th-century's widespread belief in social Darwinism and the many terrible effects of applying eugenics to society resulting from it has anything to teach us, it is that humans have a dangerous tendency to turn ideas that we construct about ourselves into self-fulfilling prophecies. One example is that, insofar as we think of ourselves as nothing more elevated than beasts, then we will be influenced to act and treat each other bestially. A major concern is that

> "… more dogmatic Darwinians have suggested that natural selection and survival of the fittest are best understood at the level of individual genes. Here we see the reduction of the strong metaphysical belief in the principle of self-interest to imply that somehow individual genes behave in a selfish way … . As it stands, the current biological model [of evolution] does not allow for the possibility of real altruism (p. 113).

The Dalai Lama concludes with a discussion of how the 'Darwinian account' ignores as 'unexamined' the deep enigma of science: "Until there is a credible understanding of the nature and origin of consciousness, the scientific story of the origin of life and the cosmos will not be complete" (p. 115).

Conclusion

Gyatso is a major world figure who has spoken out forcefully on some of the problems of Darwinism and as effectively as any major Christian or Jewish creationist. He often does so with greater clarity and concreteness than many Christians, leaving little room for those who may be inclined to second-guess and reinterpret ambiguous expressions. He illustrates the fact that it is not naïve biblical literalism that prevents people from accepting Darwin's worldview, but an understanding of the implications of the theory.[1]

This could be one reason why the Dalai Lama, who is from an entirely different religious tradition and unconstrained by Christian beliefs, feels free to boldly discuss his doubts about the validity and negative implications of orthodox Darwinism. It is not only Jews, Christians and Muslims who conclude that material explanations fail to address the mystery of life's origin and human consciousness.

Although schooled in Darwinism and reared in a religion in which evolution is a central doctrinal belief, the Dalai Lama came to realize that the theory has clear worldview, moral, and scientific problems which he has documented in his writings and lectures.

References

1. Klinghoffer, D., Darwin Critic Wins the Templeton Prize; Congratulations to Dalai Lama, www.evolutionnews.org/2012/03/darwin_critic_w058001.html, Accessed 29 March 2012.
2. This is partly semantic word-play, and depends on the definitions used. The tautology argument distracts attention from the major weakness of neo-Darwinism—the source of the required new information. See creation.com/dontuse#tautology.
3. For a discussion, see point 3 at creation.com/altruism-and-kin-selection.
4. See creation.com/altruism-and-kin-selection, creation.com/atheism-no-objective-morality, and creation.com/altruism-and-kin-selection.