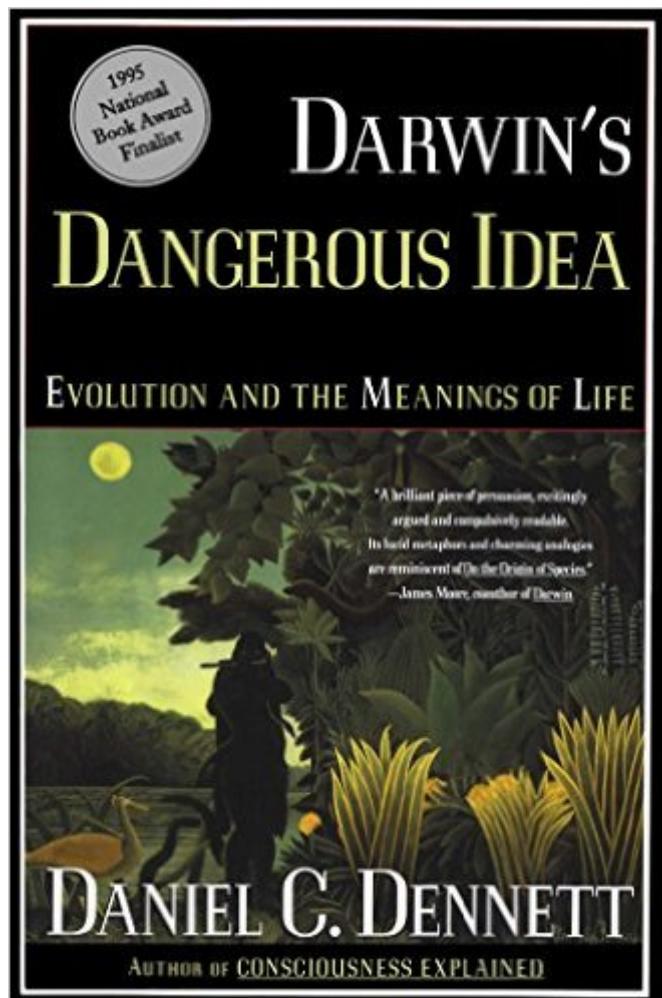


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Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution And The Meaning Of Life



Synopsis

In a book that is both groundbreaking and accessible, Daniel C. Dennett, whom Chet Raymo of The Boston Globe calls "one of the most provocative thinkers on the planet," focuses his unerringly logical mind on the theory of natural selection, showing how Darwin's great idea transforms and illuminates our traditional view of humanity's place in the universe. Dennett vividly describes the theory itself and then extends Darwin's vision with impeccable arguments to their often surprising conclusions, challenging the views of some of the most famous scientists of our day.

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Customer Reviews

Darwin's idea is very very simple; it goes like this.1-Organisms pass their characteristics on to their descendants, which are mostly but not completely identical to their parent organisms.2-Organisms breed more descendants than can possibly survive.3-Descendants with beneficial variations have a better chance of surviving and reproducing, however slight, than those with non-beneficial variations.4-These slightly modified descendants are themselves organisms, so repeat from step 1. (There is no stopping condition.)That's it. That's all there is to Natural Selection: a simple four step loop; a mindless algorithm that displays no intent, no design, no purpose, no goal, no deeper

meaning. This simple algorithm has been running on Earth for four billion years to produce every living thing, and everything made by every living thing, from the oxygen atmosphere generated by plants to the skyscrapers and music created by man. Dennett writes that it is the algorithm's complete mindlessness that makes Darwin's idea so dangerous. Dennett devotes the major portion of his book to aggressively arguing the above. He reviews how the algorithm could have "primed life's pump" eons ago and spends some time on describing evolution and biology. He argues that biology is engineering and thus reducible to algorithms. He also explains how simple algorithms can lead to computers that play brilliant chess and here he makes an important distinction: brilliant chess doesn't have to be perfect chess. There is in fact an algorithm to play chess perfectly: examine all possible moves and discard all moves that do not lead to a win.

An online friend with similar interests, Steven Haines, recommended Daniel C. Dennett's book *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* to me some time ago. (Last year, as I recall). So enthusiastic was/is he over it, that he actually sent me a copy! After reading the book--and it took me weeks rather than days to do it--I have to say that I have mixed feelings about it. On the one hand I definitely found it dense with information, a thorough critique of Darwinism and its modern variants, and certainly a very interesting work. On the other hand I found it very slow and difficult reading. The book doesn't simply lay before the reader the author's observations and research on his topic like so many others. In fact Dennett himself points out this fact in his introduction when he notes that the volume is a book on science not a work of science. As he rightfully notes, "Science is not done by quoting authorities, however eloquent and eminent, and then evaluating their arguments (p. 11)." What he does do is describe the topic of Darwinian evolution and its impact on society, then presents the observations and research of diverse professionals in the field, critically dissecting them for the benefit and edification of the reader. It should be noted that Dennett is not himself an anthropologist or biologist, but he is trained in critical analysis. As Distinguished Arts and Sciences Professor at Tufts University and director of that institution's Center for Cognitive Studies, he is considered a philosopher whose specialty is consciousness as high-level, abstract thinking and is known as a leading proponent of the computational model of the mind. As such he is also considered a philosophical leader among the artificial intelligence (AI) community.

Recently, a poll on the most notable figure of the previous millennium placed Charles Darwin in fourth place. That's three short of the mark. No concept has been as wide-reaching and influential as the idea of evolution through natural selection. And this book should follow right behind. It is

clearly the second most important book published. Dennett's approach deals with Darwin's idea in a philosophical and logical framework instead of a biological one. He declares it the 'universal acid'. Indeed, how does one contain the such a revolutionary notion of change over time? It has affected every aspect of the cosmos from astrophysics to quantum theory. Dennett points up better than anyone that if we truly wish to know what we are in the scheme of things, Darwin's idea is the place to start. The point of this book is, of course, that Darwin's concept hasn't been universally accepted. Even those who acknowledge evolution may still contest Darwin's mechanism of natural selection through adaptation. Dennett's analysis of iconoclast Stephen Gould's 'punctuated equilibrium' is delightfully scathing, but precisely on the mark. The role of the heretic is to threaten orthodoxy, whether or not the orthodoxy is false. Gould, after trying for a generation to scupper orthodox Darwinism, is here demonstrated to have failed miserably. His attacks, however, have frightened the orthodox without weakening the structure of natural selection. Dennett's superb critique of "punctuated equilibrium" isn't a call for blind adherence to orthodoxy, but instead demonstrates the strengths of Darwin's analysis and why Gould's iconoclasm is misleading. Gould's response to Dennett's clear review of the reality of Darwinism has been petulant stubbornness rather than sound scholarship.

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