

[Great Minds](#)

Are We Accidental or Intended? Thornton Wilder and the Antipathy toward Darwin

[David Jensen](#)

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Thornton Wilder wrote his acclaimed novel *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* more than sixty years after the world was first dismayed by Charles Darwin's great discovery. Was Wilder prompted to write his book because the world in 1925 was *still* disturbed by Darwin? The answer seemed obvious to me at first. However, after a second reading and after looking into the author's background and his own statements about his aim in the book, I am now less certain that the ongoing hostility toward the theory of evolution would have been foremost in his mind. Still, whatever Wilder thought he was doing in creating his masterpiece, it is hard not to read his story as a clever allegory about the tenacity of theism and how people shrink from reality in general and from the theory of evolution in particular. If Wilder were alive today (he died in 1975) to disagree with that interpretation, I'd like to think he could be talked into it.

Anyone who has read *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* might remember pondering the cryptic titles of Wilder's opening and concluding chapters: "Perhaps an Accident" and "Perhaps an Intention." *Accident* versus *intention* is precisely the debate that has been raging between science and creationism since 1859 when Darwin stunned and appalled his readers by showing in detail how a succession of blind and pointless accidents could have created our world.

Wilder stated the issue central to his book like this: "Either we live by accident and die by accident, or we live by plan and die by plan." He clearly found it interesting that people don't like thinking of themselves as pointless, unintended accidents. Therefore, he made up this little story about a character named Brother Juniper, a Franciscan monk, who traveled to Peru in the 1700s to save the souls of indigenous people. There he witnessed what surely looked like a pointless accident—a collapsing bridge that killed some people—and proceeded to wear himself out trying to prove that the collapse of the bridge was actually intended by God as part of some brilliant and benevolent plan.

Brother Juniper seems perfectly modeled on the typically hapless critic of the theory of evolution who insists on seeing intelligent design in the world. Brother Juniper dismissed the abundant evidence all around him "that belied the notion of a guided world." Yet he was forced to concede ruefully that "the discrepancy between faith and facts is greater than is generally assumed" and that "doubt springs eternal in the human breast." So he fell to "dreaming of experiments that would justify the ways of God to man." Alas, the experiments he devised to prove that "we live by plan" only trailed off into more uncertainty.

The Scopes Monkey Trial was dominating newspaper headlines in 1925, precisely when Wilder first conceived of his book. We know that he was fascinated by the theory of evolution. In light of the view of human nature expressed in his story, it seems likely that Wilder would not be at all surprised today that millions of people, nearly a century after the trial, continue to reject the theory of evolution. Depending on how *evolution* and *creationism* are defined, estimates of the number of people now clinging to some form of creationism range from perhaps 40 percent to nearly 90 percent of the global population.* That so many

creationists endorse various versions of “theistic evolution” is just one complication among many that make it difficult to assess the current extent of the rejection of Darwin (more later about theistic evolution and other failures to digest the theory of evolution).

Accident vs. Intention

Before surveying the history of the resistance to Darwin and discussing Brother Juniper’s relationship to it, it might be helpful first to examine the crucial concepts of accident and intention that are the focus of Wilder’s story. Consulting any dictionary, we find that *accident* and *intention* are defined in terms of each other. Accidents presumably have causes, but by definition the cause of an accident can’t be an intention (leaving aside for now that an intention can lead to an unintended consequence, a type of accident). Whether or not anything can be considered inherently accidental (whatever that could mean—particle physicists and molecular geneticists grapple with such questions), we experience things as accidental when they seem unintended or unplanned, depart from a reliable norm, disappoint an expectation, or defeat an intention.

Clearly, a totally affectless state of mind devoid of desire and appetite could not generate a preference or an intention and would never be motivated to enact an intention. Thus, intentions are possessed by conscious agents exhibiting something analogous to human—or, more broadly, to animal—cognition, appetite, and emotion. To employ the agency model of explanation is to explain things by attributing specific intentions to conscious agents who have emotive and appetitive preferences and a will to enact them.

It should be no surprise that for millions of years before humans showed up, animals were preoccupied with explaining things in terms of the agency model. Studies of animal behavior have shown that nothing is more crucial to an animal engaged in staying alive and achieving success in the mating game than correctly anticipating the intentions of other animals—both friends and enemies. As an animal living among other animals, I instantly sense that returning the gaze of another animal—locking eyes with another agent—could be profoundly fateful for us both. We animals need to know each other’s intentions. Depending on the intentions at play, our encounters could very well lead to significant outcomes ranging from getting a meal to becoming a meal ... or to sex, or the gain or loss of social status pursuant to sex. Animals not only read intentions but signal them: dogs by wagging, cats by blinking, people by smiling. As animals, we humans easily relate to a dog’s logic when it is barking at a thunderstorm, even if (thanks, finally, to science) most of us do not share the dog’s apparent belief that a hostile intention is animating the storm.

Darwin’s shocking discovery was that the agency model—the model essential to an animal’s navigation through life—is useless in advancing our understanding of a world that seems to have come about not by intention but by a long succession of “accidents” (blind, pointless, and unintended). Improving our knowledge through science has required that we overcome and set aside the default model of explanation installed in our animal brains. That we find it difficult to do this is at least partly what Wilder’s book was about: Brother Juniper refused to acknowledge that the agency model is of drastically limited applicability. This is exactly the refusal exhibited by die-hard animists everywhere, including the animists who call themselves theists.

“Who did it and for what purpose?” This is the question stubbornly lodged in the animist mind, and it remains eternally lodged there even after scientists have demonstrated in case after case that there are better ways—if ultimately less satisfying to us as animals—of framing questions.

Following Darwin and other scientific epiphanies, geologists today don’t look for intentions when they try to explain earthquakes meteorologists don’t waste time looking for the hostile motives behind thunderstorms or hurricanes; researchers cure infectious diseases without achieving the slightest insight into the hopes and inner yearnings of viruses; and chemists don’t dwell on the purposes and plans of molecules. At a time when so much has been powerfully explained and illuminated by science, it often seems as if there is “nobody home” in this scientifically disclosed, alien reality in which pointlessness reigns and things happen for no purpose pursuant to no agent’s plan, benevolent or otherwise. Post-Darwin, we seem to be living in a world unsupportive of Brother Juniper’s yearning for an existence governed by purpose and structured by a teleological dimension.

Blind is a word Darwinians use often. “Evolution is blind to the future,” wrote Richard Dawkins. Daniel C. Dennett described natural selection as “a mindless, mechanical, algorithmic process—wasteful, blind, blundering.” The world seems ultimately to operate mindlessly, unintentionally, “accidentally.” Assessed scientifically, even people themselves often appear to be less like agents than blindly driven automatons who walk around hallucinating to themselves that they are self-respecting agents pursuing intentions when, under close examination, they often look more like conceited robots. In short, the history of scientific progress seems like a story of finding less and less for the agency model to explain, of largely abandoning, or at least sometimes greatly

supplementing, agency explanations when vastly better explanations are found. Astonishingly, it sometimes appears as if this might turn out to be true even when the subjects under investigation are agents themselves. The concept of agency is indeed seriously restricted in its range of application if it fails ultimately to explain even the behavior of agents.

Those who remain loyal to agency, on the other hand, insist on giving it wide applicability and primacy. Sometimes they imagine that there are no accidents and no coincidences unconnected to the deliberate machinations of some lurking mastermind animated with intent. In a world explained exclusively by agency, even clouds move across the sky in pursuit of some goal. And clouds only exist in the first place pursuant to some agent's kindly intent to provide us with rainwater. And people exist in their present form only because a brilliant designer with intentions blessed us with thumbs to make us handier and with eyelids so we sleep better; this designer was moved by benevolence aforethought. But sometimes this benevolent designer gets angry and has other intentions. The televangelist minister Pat Robertson says earthquakes happen because of God's intention to inflict punishment on a society so corrupt and debased that it permits same-sex marriage. There is nothing accidental about earthquakes, he thinks, and I can hear Brother Juniper cheering Robertson's foray into geological science.

Although collapsing bridges, volcanic eruptions, thundering avalanches, devastating floods, and asteroid impacts might seem superficially like blind accidents, advocates for the agency model say this is only because we haven't understood the intentions of a Great Intender lurking behind the scenes. All things happen for a purpose in a world animated and driven by intention, or so say the persistent projections and demands of our animal brains, reinforced by our being born of, and nurtured by, Great Intenders (solicitous parents) who are sometimes supportive and sometimes punitive. Compared to the richness and explanatory power of science, the agency model in so many of its applications is such a simplistic, eternally unprovable, gratuitous, poverty-stricken, paranoia-generating assumption about the world, reducing everything to the mode of explanation we animals seem to have been born with and are reluctant to transcend. Brother Juniper was its determined champion.

Philosophical Influences

Wilder was immersed in (if not entirely persuaded by) the philosophy of Existentialism that was formulated first by Friedrich Nietzsche expressly in reaction to Darwin. The single most famous thing about Nietzsche was his grand announcement that, thanks to Darwin, the agency model of explanation—God in this case—was dead. In showing how our world might be better explained by blind accident than by intention, Darwin killed off God and raised devastating doubts about the applicability of the agency model. Nietzsche accepted what Brother Juniper could not.

Existentialism was carried on in the twentieth century by the famous French philosopher and atheist Jean Paul Sartre. Wilder, swimming in the same post-Darwinian cultural stream as Nietzsche and Sartre, was Sartre's friend and served as a translator of his books. In his most-read book, *Nausea*, Sartre argued that if the world is truly accidental and without preferences, life is not only meaningless and so forth but positively nauseating. Sartre would have claimed that this particular flavor of nausea is a kind of primal, epistemological intuition that was not at all initiated by the deductions from a mere naturalist's observations of animals and plants. Instead, it is unpleasantly rooted in all of us on a supposedly more profound, ontological foundation. Yet it seems obvious that both Sartre's and Nietzsche's cheerless perspectives (like Wilder's?) were prompted by the cultural angst generated by the implications of modern science and, in particular, by the theory of evolution with its vision of absent intention and apparent pointlessness. Sartre's ontology was bringing up the rear in the train of ideas set in motion largely by Darwin.

Darwin himself was obviously feeling unhappy, if not nauseated, by the implications of his theory when he wrote this: "I cannot see evidence of design and beneficence. There seems to me too much misery in the world." More than a century before Darwin, Brother Juniper, wanting so badly to believe in a "guided world," begged to differ on exactly this issue. You can anticipate Darwin like that if you are a fictional character created to voice opposition to Darwin. If in fact Wilder wasn't thinking about the resistance to Darwin when he created Brother Juniper, he could have been (and maybe should have been).

Following Darwin—at virtually the same time that Nietzsche was declaring God dead—the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky expressed the worry that anything is permissible if God doesn't exist. In other words, if things are accidental and not intended, then obviously it can't very well be intended that we should behave one way rather than another, properly rather than improperly. So why not behave badly?

Dostoevsky didn't like what he saw as the moral implications of evolution and much preferred the account given by Alfred Russel Wallace—sometimes said to be the codiscoverer of evolution—who didn't like the moral implications of Darwin's version either. Wallace parted with Darwin by simply stipulating that, somehow, evolution is intended and not accidental. Evolution is purpose-driven; it is goal-oriented; and the goal all along was humanity at the pinnacle of creation—not all specimens of humanity, mind

you, just those of us who behave properly. Those who behave improperly are retrograde specimens who should be ashamed of themselves for willfully thwarting the “intention” inherent in evolution. By turning Darwin upside down—embracing intention, and denying the all-pervading, driving, dominant role in evolution played by utterly blind accidents—Wallace thought he had reconciled science and religion and had provided for the objectivity of moral values.

Perhaps by a process of elimination (it’s not likely he was familiar with Wallace), the evangelist Billy Graham hit upon the very same solution to this vexing problem of how to impersonate an intelligent person while still believing in theism. The solution? Claim that you agree with the theory of evolution while turning it upside down like Wallace did. Evolution is compatible with theism, said Graham, because “scientists realized that the world they were studying was so complex and so well designed that it couldn’t possibly have happened by chance. It had to have had a designer.” By misrepresenting scientists and failing to grasp how stupefyingly, unintelligently designed the world is, Graham’s theory of evolution puts intention back on the throne. Accidents—mindless, brainless, random, pointless—that happen “by chance” are of no account in Graham’s version of evolution.

Similarly, Robertson outraged many of his followers by claiming to support the theory of evolution. But, again, his rendition was the upside-down version proposed by Wallace—evolution as an intended and not accidental process. The Graham/Robertson version has been called “theistic evolution,” a pathetic oxymoron according to both scientists and even many creationists who are disgusted with Robertson for failing to see how completely incompatible evolution is with theism. Conveniently for him, Robertson’s version of the theory of evolution is, as we’ve seen, compatible with his habit of attributing earthquakes to God’s punitive intentions. Again, I can hear Brother Juniper applauding.

In 1994, Pope John Paul II announced to the world his church’s belated realization that, yes, evolution had actually happened. But read the small print in his announcement! Once again, it was evolution upside-down, evolution driven by intention. And at a certain point in our evolutionary past, claimed the Pope, God intervened in a really hands-on way by injecting souls into people—immortal ones, not surprisingly. Yes, we have immortal souls, says the Pope’s theory of evolution, and we absolutely didn’t get them by accident: they were injected deliberately on purpose for a purpose. The Pope cited no peer-reviewed biological studies in this announcement of his revision of Darwin.

Also turning Darwin upside-down is the kind of Brother Juniper who appeals to astrophysics. According to one variation of what has been called the “anthropic principle” or the “fine tuning argument,” if the universe had been a trillionth of a degree different in temperature during the first second of the big bang, we wouldn’t exist today. Therefore (if you follow what passes for the argument’s logic), the universe from the start must have been intentionally “fine-tuned” (deliberately, on purpose) to produce humans. The Orpheus Principle might be a better name for it. Orpheus was a character in Greek mythology who thought it was only because he was so charming that the sun came up in the morning. The Egocentric Principle (if it’s flattering, it must be true) might be a better name still. Whatever best to call it, this illusion of an assist from astrophysics has been welcomed by advocates of the agency model who suggest that it was Darwin who had it upside-down, and we really *are* intended! Yet the fine-tuning argument establishes nothing beyond what we already know beyond any doubt—that some things are contingent on other things. This is no surprise and in no way establishes that any of these things were intended. Again, as in Wallace’s case, the anthropic principle is simply stipulating to be true what is desired to be true.

Also turning Darwin upside-down are the many environmentalists who say that of course they believe in evolution. They say this even as they appeal to a nurturing agent they call “mother nature in her wisdom.” If only humans would stop impacting nature, they say, nature on its own would create a benign and sustaining paradise on our planet. They have apparently forgotten that if nature is blind, it doesn’t have wisdom. Mother Nature in her wisdom sounds a lot like the kind of agent with intentions that Darwin got rid of—not merely an agent with intentions but an agent with benevolent intentions. How un-Darwinian can you get? Darwin killed off intention in nature, yet intention keeps getting resurrected even by people who want you to believe they agree with Darwin.

If you don’t turn Darwin upside-down by reinstating intention in evolution, you are stuck with this as your account of objective moral truth: “An illusion fobbed off on us by our genes in order to get us to cooperate with each other (so that our genes survive).” No less of a Darwinian authority than E. O. Wilson said that, agreeing (but only to a certain extent) with Dostoevsky’s bleak assessment of the moral implications of the theory of evolution.

And then, following decades of intellectual stress and ferment in the wake of Darwin, there suddenly erupted in newspapers in 1925 all the headlines about the Scopes Monkey Trial, just as a young Thornton Wilder was arriving at the point in his career when it was time to start writing books. It’s difficult to believe that the headlines played no part at all in prompting Wilder’s story

about a bridge in Peru and the pointlessness of existence, yet evidence that he was inspired by the trial—or even influenced slightly by it—is hard to find.

When his book was published in 1927, it was not the year's best seller. That was *Elmer Gantry* by Sinclair Lewis, which was much less subtle in its trashing of happier sentiments, so Lewis received numerous death threats. One pastor thought that shooting Lewis might be going too far, suggesting instead that five years in prison would be the appropriate punishment for such blasphemy. By comparison, Wilder was nothing if not subtle; the last words in his book, often celebrated and quoted, are vaguely (if unaccountably) upbeat. So nobody threatened to shoot him.

Brother Juniper's fate was not so happy. His earnest but doomed attempt to prove that the world is intended and not accidental implied, blasphemously, that proof was needed. For this heresy the church burned him at the stake. Even hinting to people that they might be accidental can get you in trouble. Knowing this, Darwin delayed publishing his findings, and he seriously considered keeping his theory to himself. More than a century and a half after Darwin, people in the millions—perhaps billions—will tell you it's too bad he didn't keep it to himself.

The Debate Continues Today

In 1970, more than two centuries after a fictional Brother Juniper's desperate attempt to find the intentions behind pointless accidents, Peru was hit by an actual pointless accident—a colossal earthquake with five times the destructive power of all the earthquakes combined in Peru over the past five centuries—killing eighty thousand people and leaving a million homeless. Anthropologist Barbara Bode spent a year in Peru studying the reactions of the survivors and published her findings in the terrific book *No Bells to Toll*, which reviewers compared favorably to that other great disaster story about Peru, Wilder's book. Bode was mindful of this parallel and reported that the survivors of the earthquake were just like Brother Juniper, so desperate were they to see the intention behind the accident. Peruvians were all agreed that the earthquake was a *castigo de Dios* (punishment from God), but they could not agree about what was being punished. Some said improper sexual behavior was what had made God mad. Others claimed it was the idolatry of Catholics or the blasphemy of Protestants. In a shocking heresy in such a Catholic country, some suggested it was overpopulation that God was upset about, so he killed off the excess. Or maybe the arrogance of the United States in putting a man on the moon in 1969, one year before the earthquake, had outraged God, so somebody needed to suffer as punishment. Maybe France detonating a nuclear bomb out in the Pacific Ocean two days before the earthquake was what had finally pushed an exasperated God over the edge. Whatever had caused God to wax punitive, some Peruvians actually felt proud of themselves for being chosen to suffer, comparing themselves to Christ who had suffered for our sins.

Bode's inventory of such theories is exhaustive, but she found not a single Peruvian open to the theory that an event as monstrous as this earthquake could have been a mere unintended accident. If pointlessness as dispiriting, random, arbitrary, and destructive as that is what nature is all about, the implications were apparently as depressing for Peruvians as for Brother Juniper. And most depressing of all might have been the lurking, unspoken dread that Darwin could have been on to something.

* See Laurence Wood's "Why Is Creationism So Persistent" (Free Inquiry, April/May 2014) for a discussion of the extent of creationism around the world and in the United States.

David Jensen

After getting degrees in geology and then philosophy, David Jensen accidentally became a photographer in eastern Oregon.

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