Can a Darwinian be a Christian?

I. Background Reading

A. Prologue (1-11) A nice introduction to the themes of the book with some historical anecdotes he will refer back to later in the text. You should be familiar with them.

B. Darwinism (ch. 1, 12-32) We will be discussing a few points from this chapter (especially 12-28) to state clearly what it takes to be a Darwinian (to endorse a Darwinian view of the evolution of life). Pages 28-32 are less important. Read for a general sense of sources of disagreement among those who would still count, for the purposes of our question, as a Darwinian.

C. Christianity (ch. 2, 33-48) This chapter is probably not that crucial for most of us as we probably already have a pretty decent sense of what it is to be a Christian. But you might want to check out the final pages on the Enlightenment and Christian reactions to it (42-48) if you are not familiar with this period in the history of Christianity as the reaction to Darwinism is a part of this historical context. So, this chapter is thoroughly optional!

II. Origins (ch. 3, 49-67)

A. How do both Catholicism and Protestantism stress the need for a non-literal reading of scripture, in part, to accommodate the discoveries of science? (50-56) How, in particular, did this lead to a reading of Genesis that, by the time of the nineteenth century, easily accommodated new scientific understandings of the age of the earth?

B. Fundamentalism and Darwinism (56-60)

1. Why does Ruse believe that the Fundamentalism that began to emerge in the nineteenth century, in particular in America, began to stress a literal reading of Genesis? (56-58)

2. How does Ruse suggest that a Fundamentalist Christianity that requires the rejection of Darwinism (and other related scientific ideas) is theologically unacceptable? (58)

3. How does Mayr argue that a Fundamentalist Christianity that requires the rejection of Darwinism is a threat to science? How does he respond to Plantiga’s suggestion that it is not “irrational or irresponsible or stupid” for a Christian to reject scientific accounts of the age of the earth? (59)

4. How should we understand the significance of Ruse’s historical remark that Fundamentalism is not “traditional Christianity”? (59-60)

C. The origin of life (62-67)

1. Ruse says he is of “two minds” on the question as to whether a Christian can insist that the origin of life is a mystery that can only be explained by a supernatural intervention by God. What are these “two minds”? Why does he, in the end, argue that, at the very least, the Christian should remain “agnostic on the question of the origin of life”? (65-66)

2. Why does he think that “nothing terribly important (for the Christian) rests on this scientific matter (of life’s origin), either way”? (66-67)

III. Humans (ch. 4, 68-93)
A. The Soul (74-82)

1. What is it about the Christian doctrine of the soul that creates problems for the Darwinian? (74-75)

2. Darwinian Reductionism (77-80)
   a. What is the “core belief” of reductionism and in what way is Darwinism reductionistic? (78)
   b. How is the Darwinian not committed to “saying that the brain is nothing but a bunch of particles?” How does the concept of “order” play an important role in reductionism? (79)

3. Souls, Aristotle, Darwin (80-82)
   a. What are the two Christian ways of thinking about the relation between the soul and the body? (80-81)
   b. How does the Thomistic-Aristotelian conception of the soul provide a possible basis for bringing Christian ideas of the soul and Darwinian conceptions of the evolution of human nature together? What problems remain? (81-82)

B. Contingency and Purpose (82-93)

1. How does the contingency of evolution for the Darwinist create a point of potential conflict with Christianity? (82-84)

2. What are the four possible solutions to this conflict, according to Ruse? (84-88)
   a. What is the first empirical solution he mentions? How does Dawkins concept of an “arms race” and the idea that organisms cannot evolve in every possible direction suggest a sense of direction to evolution? (85-86)
   b. What is the second empirical solution he mentions which appeals to the “vastness of the universe”? How does it suggest that our evolution may not be a matter of pure chance? (86)
   c. What is the first theological solution he mentions? How do its advocates believe that “quantum indeterminancy leaves open a space for God to act in a positive fashion”? (86-87)
   d. What is the second theological solution he mentions, the “Augustinian solution”? How does God being “outside time” make it possible for both evolution to work in contingent ways and God to have purposefully brought humans into existence? (87-88)

3. Darwinian Direction (88-91)
   a. How does Ruse conclude, on the basis of his examination of the two mechanisms for evolutionary progress (see above 2a) that “the Christian can find in Darwinism some support for the belief about the special significance of humans and the probability of their appearance”? (89-91)
b. What is the significance of his qualification: “Even if arms races do work, there is a large gap between comparative and absolute progress.” (91)

4. The Augustinian Option (91-93)
   a. How does Ruse rather quickly dismiss the quantum indeterminancy solution? (91-92)
   b. Granting the plausibility of the Augustinian solution, what remaining problems does he see confronting the Darwinian Christian who accepts this solution? (92)

IV. Naturalism (ch. 5)
   A. Miracles (94-98)
      1. What does it mean to call Darwinism a naturalistic theory? What is a scientific law? (94-95)
      2. In what way are miracles (to which the Christian is committed) understood as, in some sense, violations of scientific laws? How does Ruse suggest we need not understand miracles as literal violations of the laws of nature? Aside from wanting to be consistent with science, what are the distinctively theological reasons for embracing this “miracle-compatible-with-law stance”? (95-97)
      3. How does Ruse argue that an understanding of miracles as literal violations of the laws of nature is not ruled out by Darwinian naturalism? (97-98)
   B. Atheism (98-100)
      1. Why does Philip Johnson believe that Darwinism’s commitment to naturalism necessarily leads to atheism? (99)
      2. How does Ruse argue Johnson is wrong by distinguishing between metaphysical naturalism and methodological naturalism? (99)
   C. Augustinian Science (100-106)
      1. What does Plantinga mean by “Augustinian science” and why does he think that it is necessary to avoid the denigration of Christianity into “second class knowledge” (101)? How does Ruse respond to Plantinga’s concern by admitting a “tendency to characterize science on the basis of subjects like Darwinism and then to denigrate everything which does not fit the pattern,” but also stressing that “this is surely only a tendency.” (102)
      3. How does Plantinga argue that Darwinism encourages a “liberal attitude on miracles” which unjustifiably refuses to recognize the possibility that God may have acted directly in his creation of life in a way that defies naturalistic modes of understanding? What do Plantinga and Ruse mean by “science stoppers” and how are miracles, understood as literal violations of the laws of nature, science stoppers? How does Ruse respond to
D. Naturalism Self-Refuting (106-110)

1. How does Plantinga argue that a Darwinian account of the evolution of our reasoning and cognitive powers undermines our confidence that those powers are able to “tell us the truth about the world”? (106-107)

2. How does Ruse accept that an evolutionary account of our reasoning and cognitive powers gives us reason to suspect that some of our beliefs about the world are deceptive, but still argue that “we could not be deceived all of the time”? (107-108)

3. Plantinga suggests that we could be deceived about everything and not know it with his example of the factory workers who are wearing spectacles which lead them to believe everything is red (when it isn’t really)? How does Ruse argue against this suggestion? What is the point he is trying to make when he writes, “Unfortunately we can never check that everything is true-seeming-but-not-really. We can never get outside our evolution-produced bodies. So in a way it is difficult to know precisely what one might mean by saying that our thoughts are all totally mistaken.” (109)

V. Freedom and Determinism (ch. 12)

Note: there are a few references in this chapter to preceding chapters we are not reading on sociobiology. I believe the points he is making with these references are clear enough on their own, but if you have any problems with them we’ll try to clear things up in class.

A. Free Will and Predestination (206-209)

1. What problem does human freedom raise for Christians, in particular, in relation to God’s omniscience? What is the “standard response” of Christians to this issue? (206-208)

2. What problem does human freedom raise for science, in particular, in relation to the applicability of the laws of nature to all of nature including human action? How do “compatibilists” try to reconcile freedom and determinism? How do these compatibilists argue that a lack of determinism does not give rise to freedom? (208-209)

B. Genetic Determinism (211-213)

1. What does Ruse mean by “full-blooded genetic determinism” (211) and how does it preclude freedom? How does the example of the wasp (Sphex) illustrate full-blooded genetic determinism? (211-212)

2. How does the difference between “cheap rockets” and “expensive rockets” illustrate the difference between full-blooded genetic determinism (the cheap rockets) and the role genes play in the lives of human beings (the expensive rockets)? How do the expensive rockets, even though they are causally determined, “have a dimension of freedom”? (212-213)

D. Levels of Desire (213-215)
1. What is the difference between “first-order desires” and “second-order desires”? (213-214)

2. What does it mean to say that “A person’s will is free only if he is free to have the will he wants”? (214)

3. How does the analogy to a chess machine help to illustrate first-order and second-order desires? Does the fact that our second-order desires may be “hardwired - genetically determined, if you will” create problems for this account of freedom? How does Ruse suggest it doesn’t? (214-215)

E. Is the compatibilist account of freedom Ruse develops in this chapter enough for the Christian? (215-216)