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# Darwinian Theory and Vedantic Perspective: An Initial Study

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### Abstract:

The term “selection” which is central to the Darwinian theory is semantically and philosophically problematic. To “select” implies a subject capable of choice—an entity with agency, discernment, and intentionality. In Darwin’s own writings, “natural selection” served as a metaphor, likening nature to a breeder or selector, thus subtly personifying an otherwise blind, impersonal process.

This paper delves into this study from the perspective of Vedantic guidelines. This contradiction is not merely linguistic - it is ontological and philosophical. Evolutionary theory adopts the language of agency while denying the metaphysical reality of agency. From a Vedantic perspective, this renders the framework internally inconsistent and conceptually incoherent.

**Keywords:** Darwinian theory, Natural selection, *Vedānta*, *Brahman*, Consciousness, Ontology

## INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Darwin’s theory of natural selection has provided one of the most powerful explanatory frameworks in the life sciences. With its emphasis on random variation, heritability, and environmental pressures, the theory accounts for the gradual adaptation and diversification of living forms without invoking teleology or divine design. Yet Darwin’s conceptual vocabulary itself is laden with metaphors that suggest agency. Terms such as “selection,” “struggle,” and “fitness” personify nature as though it were a conscious breeder, choosing among alternatives with foresight and purpose. Darwin himself acknowledged the metaphorical nature of this language, but its continued usage has shaped not only biological discourse but also cultural imagination, perpetuating the impression of a hidden intentionality

within an avowedly impersonal process. The term “selection,” which is central to the Darwinian theory, is semantically and philosophically problematic. To “select” implies a subject capable of choice - an entity with agency, discernment, and intentionality. In Darwin’s own writings, “natural selection” served as a metaphor, likening nature to a breeder or selector—thus subtly personifying an otherwise blind, impersonal process.

In fact, this metaphor has initiated an inherent contradiction apparently linguistic in nature, yet it has serious ramifications. This contradiction has ontological and philosophical overtones. It leads to believe that a coherent, directional force operates within biological evolution. However, there is no subject that selects – the Darwinian theory only talks of differential survival and reproduction shaped by environmental contingencies leading to inherited variations. But the language of “selection” persists, covertly importing the semantics of subjectivity into a theory that denies the presence of any subject - no soul, no self, no mind and ultimately no Supreme Consciousness. Evolutionary theory adopts the language of agency while denying the metaphysical reality of agency. From a Vedantic perspective, this renders the framework internally inconsistent and conceptually incoherent.

Furthermore, modern biology increasingly defines life in population-level terms, systematically marginalizing the individual. Evolution, behavior, and even morality are interpreted as emergent properties of statistical aggregates: gene frequencies, fitness landscapes, and reproductive success. Yet this approach overlooks the most essential feature of life: the conscious individuality of living beings.

In physics, all electrons are treated as indistinguishable; in chemistry, one carbon atom is functionally equivalent to another. But life defies such interchangeability. No two individuals - whether cells or sentient beings - are truly identical. Life exhibits qualitative uniqueness at the individual level, rooted not in genetic variation alone, but in inner subjectivity. Statistical models may capture patterns, but they cannot grasp the lived experience of the conscious self.

From the standpoint of *Vedānta*, this is because living beings are not simply arrangements of molecules; they are individual conscious agents (*jīva*), eternal and irreducible, each bearing distinct karmic histories and inner intentionality. To study life purely through population dynamics is akin to studying music by analyzing air pressure - technically informative perhaps, but spiritually blind and qualitatively tone-deaf.

It might be suggested that evolution is characterized as “accidental” or “random,” and that natural selection is a non-random process shaped by heredity. It is quite true that selection is not random in a subjective sense, but the variation upon which it acts - namely, mutation, recombination, and genetic drift - is intrinsically random in the Darwinian framework. Furthermore, no teleological guidance is posited in standard evolutionary theory.

Therefore, from the Vedantic lens, where life is inherently purposeful, hierarchical, and guided by consciousness, this randomness at the heart of evolutionary theory makes it fundamentally

inadequate to explain the origin or evolution of life. Even when updated by molecular biology, the modern synthesis - along with its post-synthetic expansions - remains materially reductionist at its core. It is built on the metaphysical assumption that life and consciousness emerge from non-living matter. This is not just a scientific claim - it is a philosophical premise, and it is precisely this materialist metaphysics, not merely the mechanism of evolution, which needs to be challenged.

There is one more inclination to the Darwinian thought. This is about perishing races which are unable to sustain and organize themselves. To this end, the following references are very helpful to understand:

In an 1881 letter, Darwin wrote:

*“more civilised so-called Caucasian races have beaten the Turkish hollow in the struggle for existence. Looking to the world at no very distant date, what an endless number of the lower races will have been eliminated by the higher civilised races throughout the world.”<sup>1</sup>*

Similarly, in *The Descent of Man* (1871), Darwin predicted:

*“At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate and replace throughout the world the savage races.”<sup>2</sup>*

In fact, these are not incidental remarks but integral to Darwin's anthropological vision.

Darwin's theory was not merely co-opted by racists—it embodied a framework that lent scientific legitimacy to colonial violence and racial extermination. This is not to deny Darwin's opposition to slavery, but to highlight the conceptual dissonance in his views: a moral opposition to bondage coexisting with a cold biological rationalization of genocide as evolutionary necessity.

Philosophical critiques have noted this tension. Jerry Fodor and Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini (2010) argued that “selection-for” is incoherent without a real selector, exposing a contradiction at the heart of Darwinism. Thomas Nagel (2012) has likewise contended that the materialist neo-Darwinian conception of nature fails to explain consciousness, intentionality, and value, rendering it metaphysically incomplete. These concerns reveal that Darwinism, though empirically fruitful, encounters limitations when pressed into the domain of ontology.

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1. [Charles Darwin to William Graham, July 3, 1881, Darwin Correspondence Project, Letter no. 13230, University of Cambridge, <https://www.darwinproject.ac.uk/letter/?docId=letters/DCP-LETT-13230.xml>. Letter quoted in Francis Darwin, *Charles Darwin: His Life Told in an Autobiographical Chapter, and in a Selected Series of His Published Letters* (London: Murray, 1902), 64.]
2. [Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, 2 vols. [1871] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 1:201.]

*Vedānta*, by contrast, begins from an entirely different premise. It regards the cosmos not as a blind mechanism but as the living manifestation of *Brahman*, the Ultimate Reality. Consciousness is not emergent but fundamental, and multiplicity arises from the self-expression of the One. This paper examines the Darwinian notion of selection in light of Vedantic metaphysics, arguing that *Vedānta* exposes the conceptual incoherence of Darwinian ontology and offers an alternative framework in which evolution can be understood as the play of consciousness itself.

## DARWINIAN THEORY AND THE PROBLEM OF AGENCY

Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) introduced natural selection as the mechanism of evolution, a process that in its modern form requires three conditions: *heritable variation, differential survival or reproduction, and consistent environmental pressures*. When these conditions are met, traits that enhance fitness spread within populations, producing adaptive complexity without external guidance. Yet the very term "selection" presupposes a subject, for to select is to choose, to discriminate between options with intent. In artificial breeding, a farmer or breeder deliberately selects desirable traits; Darwin extended this metaphor to nature, suggesting that "natural selection" functions analogously to human agency. But in Darwin's framework there is no selector - only blind processes of elimination. The metaphorical language of agency remains, even as the metaphysical reality of agency is denied, creating an ontological tension. On the one hand, Darwinism insists on an impersonal, purposeless process; on the other, it relies on a vocabulary that imports intentionality. Critics such as Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini (2010) argue that the notion of "selection-for" makes sense only in the context of an actual selector, otherwise it risks collapsing into mere *post hoc* description. Nagel (2012) presses further, contending that materialist neo-Darwinism leaves out fundamental aspects of reality such as consciousness and value, thereby producing an incomplete ontology.

While these philosophical issues remain unresolved, biological science has advanced well beyond simplistic Darwinian imagery. Evo-devo research has revealed the role of conserved genetic toolkits and developmental constraints (Carroll, 2006), while symbiogenesis emphasizes cooperation and merging as central to evolutionary novelty (Margulis, 1967). Epigenetics and niche construction (Laland et al., 2014) show that organisms actively shape their own evolutionary trajectories, challenging a strictly gene-centered perspective. Long-term experimental work, such as Lenski's studies with *E. coli* (Blount et al., 2008; Blount et al., 2020), has demonstrated both the contingency and repeatability of evolutionary outcomes, revealing a complex interplay of chance and constraint. Despite these empirical refinements, the central philosophical problem persists: the origin of consciousness and the presence of purposiveness remain unexplained within a purely materialist framework. It is precisely at this juncture that *Vedānta* offers a radically different perspective, one that situates consciousness not as an emergent epiphenomenon but as the ground of all being.

## THE VEDANTIC VISION OF REALITY

*Vedānta* addresses this question from a vantage radically opposed to Darwinian materialism. Its metaphysics proclaims *Brahman* as the Ultimate Reality - eternal, infinite, and self-existent - who is at once the source, the substance, the inner controller, and the very becoming of all that exists. The cosmos is not a detached machine unfolding without meaning, but the living expression of *Brahman*'s plenitude.

The *Upaniṣads* articulate this truth with crystalline clarity.

The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (3.14.1) affirms:

*sarvam khalvidam brahma* — “all this is verily *Brahman*.”

This statement does not merely suggest that *Brahman* underlies or pervades the universe; it identifies the universe itself as *Brahman* in manifestation.

The *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* (3.1) presents a systematic formulation:

*yato vā imāni bhūtāni jāyante, yena jātāni jīvanti, yat prayanty abhisamvisanti, tad vijijñāsasva, tad brahma iti* — “That from which these beings are born, by which they live, and into which they merge; is the non-dual *Brahman*.”

Here *Brahman* is not only the origin but also the sustainer and the final refuge of all existence.

Further, the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* (6.2.3) deepens this vision with the declaration

*aikṣata bahusyām* — “I am one, and I will become many.”

Creation is not mechanical or accidental; it is the conscious self-expression of *Brahman*, who, remaining one, manifests as many.

The *Īśāvāsyā Upaniṣad* (6) proclaims:

*yastu sarvāṇi bhūtānyātmanyevānupaśyati, sarva-bhūteṣu cātmānam tato na vijugupsate* — “He who sees all beings in the Self, and the Self in all beings, shrinks not thereafter from anything.”

This realization grounds an ethic of compassion, non-violence, and equanimity, born of the recognition of unity amidst diversity.

The *Bhagavad Gītā* (9.4) gathers these strands into a sublime synthesis. *Kṛṣṇa* declares:

*mayā tatam idam sarvam jagad avyaktamūrtinā, mat-sthāni sarvabhūtāni ca aham teṣv avasthitāḥ* — “By Me, in My unmanifest form, is this entire universe pervaded; all beings dwell in Me, and I dwell in them.”

This verse affirms both immanence and transcendence. From this vantage, consciousness (*ātman/Brahman*) is not an emergent by-product of material processes but the fundamental condition of being, the light by which all phenomena are known.

## ONTOLOGICAL TENSIONS AND PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS

The ontological conflict between Darwinism and *Vedānta* is stark. Darwinism, when interpreted metaphysically, denies purpose and subjectivity, viewing life as the contingent outcome of blind processes. *Vedānta*, on the other hand, affirms purpose, subjectivity, and consciousness as intrinsic to reality. The Darwinian metaphor of “selection” exemplifies the contradiction: it employs the semantics of agency while denying the metaphysical reality of agency. *Vedānta* exposes this incoherence by asserting that agency, consciousness, and teleology are not illusory by-products but fundamental principles.

This difference has profound implications. If life is understood solely through Darwinian categories then ethics, values, and consciousness are left unexplained or reduced to secondary phenomena. In *Vedānta*, by contrast, ethical life flows naturally from the recognition of *Brahman* in all beings. The evolutionary struggle for survival, viewed from *Vedānta*, is one aspect of *Brahman*’s cosmic play (*līlā*), meaningful not in terms of reproductive success but in terms of the soul’s journey toward realization.

## CO-EXISTENCE OF DARWINISM AND VEDĀNTA

To dismiss Darwinism outright would be to disregard its immense empirical achievements and its continuing role as the foundation of modern biology. Evolutionary theory has provided indispensable insights into the mechanisms of adaptation, the diversification of species, and the historical development of life on earth. It explains how heritable variations interact with environmental pressures to generate the astonishing variety of living forms, and it does so with a methodological rigor that has transformed our understanding of biology. Yet, the success of Darwinism as a scientific model does not automatically license its transformation into a comprehensive metaphysical worldview. To absolutize Darwinism in this way—interpreting it as the final truth about the nature of existence—is to exceed the boundaries of its empirical competence.

*Vedānta*, by contrast, does not stand in opposition to empirical science. Rather, it situates scientific discoveries within a wider ontological and metaphysical horizon. For *Vedānta*, the processes described by evolutionary biology are real within the phenomenal realm (*vyāvahārika-sattā*), but they do not capture ultimate reality (*pāramārthika-sattā*). Biology may describe how forms emerge, adapt, and change, but *Vedānta* asks why there is an ordered cosmos in the first place, what sustains its continuity, and what underlies the very possibility of consciousness. In this way, Darwinism provides the proximate, empirical account of the evolution of forms, while *Vedānta* supplies the ultimate grounding of these processes in *Brahman*—the unchanging reality that becomes the manifold universe.

A genuine dialogue between Darwinism and *Vedānta* therefore requires epistemic humility on both sides. Darwinism should not be expected to answer metaphysical questions that lie beyond

the scope of empirical method—questions of meaning, purpose, or consciousness. Likewise, *Vedānta* should not be reduced to a scientific hypothesis subject to falsification in the same way as a biological theory; rather, it should be recognized as a philosophical vision of reality, one that addresses dimensions of existence science cannot reach. When understood in this complementary manner, the two perspectives invite a pluralistic approach in which empirical knowledge and metaphysical insight are not mutually exclusive but mutually illuminating. Darwinism explains the mechanics of change in living forms, while *Vedānta* reveals the ultimate reality that pervades, sustains, and transcends those forms.

## CONCLUSION

Darwinian natural selection, while indispensable as a scientific theory, carries within it a conceptual tension: it denies agency yet relies upon agency-laden metaphors. *Vedānta*, with its affirmation of *Brahman* as the source, sustainer, and essence of all that exists, reveals this tension and offers a metaphysical framework in which consciousness is primary and purpose intrinsic. Where Darwinism explains adaptation and change in the phenomenal order, *Vedānta* explains existence itself as the manifestation of *Brahman*. Darwinian notion of extermination of disorganized and non-sustainable races has eventually led to mass extinction by several races living on racial pride. This is of course a false notion, yet an adopted one. Thus, this magnificent theory has been misused more than it is used constructively. *Vedānta* on the other hand proposes a framework that expects well-being for all. Thus, to eliminate this tension, a dialogue between these perspectives, far from being antagonistic, illuminates the limits of reductionist materialism and the enduring relevance of *Vedāntic* wisdom for a richer understanding of life, consciousness, and reality.

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### Brief Profile of the Author:

**Prof. Anurag Mishra** is an accomplished academician and researcher with over 30 years of teaching and research experience in Computer Science, Electronics, and related fields. With a robust background in Physics (B.Sc. and M.Sc.) and advanced degrees in Computer Technology and Applications (M.E.) and Electronics (Ph.D.) from the University of Delhi, he has contributed significantly to both academia and industry.

Prof. Mishra has published over 75 refereed papers and Invited talks in high-impact journals, international conferences, and book chapters, focusing on Information Security, Digital Rights Management, and image classification for forensic applications. He holds two international patents on security algorithms, authored three books with international publishers, and edited five volumes for Springer. His recent endeavors include exploring medical applications using deep convolutional neural networks and image and video forensics.

Prof. Mishra has organized many Springer and IEEE international conferences in collaboration with foreign higher education institutions. He runs two international research collaborations in Australia. A member of IEEE and the Institute of Informatics and Systemics (USA), Prof. Mishra is also a reviewer for prestigious journals such as IEEE Transactions and Elsevier. He has served as a consultant for the Ministry of Education, Government of India, and is currently Visitor's nominee for a central university. His dedication to curriculum development, research collaborations, and teaching spans B.Sc., M.Sc., B.Tech., and M.Tech. programs, making him a highly regarded figure in his field.

**Dr. Vandana Sharma** 'Diya' is currently serving as Assistant Professor in the Department of Philosophy at Zākir Ḥusain College, University of Delhi. She also serves as an advisory member of the Censor Board, Ministry of Broadcasting and Information. Dr. Sharma has conducted research on Kedarnath Dham under the Central Sanskrit University, Ministry of Culture. She is a former Residential Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, a former Post-Doctoral Fellow of the Indian Council of Social Science Research, and a former Junior Research Fellow of the Indian Council of Philosophical Research.

Dr. Sharma specializes in Indian philosophy, with particular expertise in *Advaita Vedānta*, *Śaivism*, and *Yoga*. She has authored six books, published with reputed publishers including Motilal Banarasīdās, Chaukhambā, and Cambridge Scholars, London. She has also published 28 research papers in Scopus-indexed journals, including Elsevier and Philotheos. Her accolades include the 'Svāmī Prāvānanda Best Book of the Year Award 2019–20' at the Asian-African Philosophical Congress and the Indian Philosophical Congress (2020). She has contributed an encyclopedia entry on H.H. Sri Sri Ravi Shankar in Paranova of Indian Philosophers and Thinkers. Dr. Sharma has represented India at the World Congress of Philosophy held in Greece (2013), China (2018), and Rome (2020).

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