



# Isaac Mayer Wise, Cosmic Evolution, and the Problem of Evil

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## CHAPTER SIX

# ISAAC MAYER WISE, COSMIC EVOLUTION, AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

DANIEL R. LANGTON

### Introduction

The question of God's action or inaction arises in a variety of theological contexts, such as the problem of evil, or natural theology, or God's providential will in human history. But in contrast to Christians, Jews have not been interested in either natural theology or even the problem of evil, relatively speaking. Traditional Judaism is famously disinterested in theology *per se*. Nor have Jewish religious thinkers been much interested in evolution, as Geoffrey Cantor and others have shown; in the main, Jews in the century or so since Darwin have been concerned with other more pressing issues, such as assimilation, anti-Semitism, and Zionism (Cantor and Swetlitz 2006). Elsewhere I have discussed two American-Jewish thinkers, namely, Mordecai Kaplan and Hans Jonas, who bucked this general trend and who wrote substantial theological works on evolution that also attempted to address the problem of evil (Langton 2013). That they were able to offer such theologies can be explained at least partly by their reformist, or revisionist orientations. In the present essay we will focus on another non-Orthodox American Jew, who, writing many decades earlier, prepared the conceptual ground for them. For Isaac Mayer Wise, too, engagement with scientific evolutionary theory led to a reconsideration of the problem of suffering in nature and in history—and to redefinitions of both the Jewish God and of the nature of divine action.

The North American Reform rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise (1819–1900) was born in Bohemia, part of the Austrian empire, and received a traditional education in Prague. He emigrated to the US in 1846 aged 27, where he became a congregational rabbi, eventually settling down in

Cincinnati. He has been described as the father of Reform Judaism in the United States and it is certainly the case that he was in the vanguard of synagogue reform, introducing among other things mixed pews, choral singing and confirmation; he founded in 1854 and edited the English language journal *The Israelite*, which became the leading organ for Reform Judaism; he compiled the standard Reform prayer book, *Minhag America* in 1857; and he was behind the establishment in 1875 of the Reform Jewish rabbinical training college, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati.

It was in Cincinnati in the autumn and winter of 1874-5 that Wise gave a series of public lectures, excerpts of which were published in *The Israelite* and also in Cincinnati daily papers including *The Enquirer*, which a year later were published as the book *The Cosmic God: A Fundamental Philosophy in Popular Lectures* (1876). Cherry has suggested that “*Cosmic God* lacks a strong Jewish flavour, at least in comparison to the European Jewish responses to Darwin from this period” (Cherry 2001, 163). And while it is true that that Wise frequently cites the Bible, he rarely mentions the rabbinic literature or articulates what could be regarded as a Jewish position, as such. However, as we shall see, it is possible to trace the influence of Jewish mysticism in some of his ideas, or at least in the language he used to present them. Throughout his life, Wise was concerned to encourage the integration of his congregants with the non-Jewish world around them, to reassure them that in the New World there was no need to perpetuate the Old World fears of Christianity. It is not surprising, then, to see him engaging with Darwin’s ideas, and, although he was very much concerned about the implications of Darwinism, his approach was to offer an alternative evolutionary theory that would avoid their unpleasant consequences for theology, rather than to censor them. His style was formal, dense, quite technical, occasionally bombastic, and very wide-ranging, drawing heavily upon German idealism, biological science, history (both Jewish and profane), and biblical literature for countless examples to illustrate his philosophical points. For the most part, Wise offered a reasonable treatment of the scientific literature although there was, as we shall see, a tendency to argue from gaps in contemporary knowledge in order to find a space for his Cosmic God. Wise’s is one of the earliest Jewish critiques of evolutionary theory. That makes it all the more remarkable that his book represents one of the most substantial treatments of the subject, one that is both a protest against materialistic Darwinian theory, but also a very deliberate attempt to provide an alternative theory for his Jewish congregation.

## Critique of evolutionary theory

Wise was not only one of the earliest Jewish respondents to biological evolutionary theory, but probably one of the best informed, as is clear from the systematic critiques he generated. Darwin's was the most prominent of several competing theories that he considered and rejected for a variety of reasons. The barrage of criticism he proffered against Darwinism proper fell into three categories: a marshalling of contemporary scientific criticism of the theory, a socio-political argument against its practical consequences for societal morality, and a sustained philosophical critique of its materialist foundations.

Wise's scientific concerns, the first category of complaints, reflected well on his understanding of the contemporary scientific literature. He complained of five problematic hypotheses of Darwinism, "none of which is supported by facts, and all of which must continually co-operate to produce new species." These included the apparently inexplicable emergence of life (the hypothesis of "unknown creation of the first type"); the incredible variability of organisms and their ability to adapt themselves to "all changes of conditions" (the hypothesis of "unlimited variability");<sup>1</sup> the central idea of natural selection that the failure of some organisms to compete successfully against others would result in their destruction or stagnation (the hypothesis of "the combat of existence"); the inheritability of beneficial adaptations (the hypothesis of "descendency"); and the way in which an adaptation of one or more organs would result in changes and re-adjustments to ensure harmonious function of the whole organism (the hypothesis of "the law of correlation").<sup>2</sup> (Wise 1876, 108-109) Other scientifically-grounded complaints include the lack of evidence of evolution or transmutation in the historical record covering several millennia, in the existing fossil record, and in the study of embryonic development.<sup>3</sup> (Wise 1876, 111-112) He also denied that scientific

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<sup>1</sup> Wise takes Baumgarten's germ-theory of evolution, which viewed 'periodical metamorphosis of germs [or embryos]' as the mechanism for transmutation, as problematic in a similar way. As in the case of Darwinian theory, Wise argued that it failed to make the case that a mechanism that generated *variation* within a species could likewise cause *speciation* as such.

<sup>2</sup> Wise refers to a number of scientists in support of his criticism, noting 'Every one of those hypotheses... has been refuted by Naegeli, Baumgartner, Wigand, Lange, Von Hartman and others'.

<sup>3</sup> Wise drew upon a range of scholars and scientists, including Cuvier and Agassiz, who argued that 'within the bounds of human knowledge of historic and prehistoric ages, no change of type or species has been noticed.' The evidence of

observation confirmed claims that nature's bounty was so limited as to provoke a "war of nature", or that there had been a common human ancestor of bestial origins. (Here Wise reveals the common contemporary mistake in regarding Darwinian theory, when applied to the human race, in purely hierarchical, progressive terms. Thus he calls on the Darwinists to "render it plausible that the monkey changed into an Ethiopian, the Ethiopian into a Mongolian, and he into a Caucasian." To counter such an idea Wise dedicates a full chapter to the differing anatomy of apes and men, and another to the distinct psychology of animals and humans.) (Wise 1876, 50, 52-53) Such arguments would have been familiar to anyone engaged in the scientific debates at that time.

The secondary category, namely, the socio-political critique of evolutionary theory, has been viewed by some commentators as the motivation for Wise's entire study. As Cherry sees it, it was the mechanistic assault on dignity and sanctity of humanity that was the prime motivating factor in rejecting Darwinism (Cherry 2001, 159). Wise certainly believed that mechanical forms of transmutation of species reduced the human to an ape, a hypothesis which he scorned with the label Homo-brutalism:

Some men of learning and genius like Messrs. Vogt, Haeckel, Moleschott, Huxley, Darwin, Buechner and others, have imposed a hypothesis on science, which reduces man, on the scale of organic beings, to an ape, casually and mechanically improved, or some similar animal, no longer extant as a living organism or dead fossil, i.e. an imagined animal, one constructed by phantasy on the strength of induction, legitimate, or illegitimate, is supposed to have been the ancestor of man, and several kinds of apes. The monkeys not having improved themselves from casual and mechanical causes unknown, are still irredeemable monkeys. Some of them, however, having casually and mechanically gone through a series of improvements and changes, then by laws of inheritance and correlation have become human beings, and with them the history of mankind begins.

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both living and fossilized lifeforms failed to persuade, 'Not mere fissures but gaps which, can not be bridged over, separate the [world's living] species in numerous instances... The same precisely is the case with the fossils.... for there also the transition forms are missing, and no trace of genetic unity is left.' The evidence of embryos was unconvincing because while 'it is maintained that the embryo runs through all phases of organisms as it ancestors did in their natural development from species to species' there was no reason to make the logical jump to suggest that 'this ideal semblance of those various stages to certain animals [should be] converted into a proof, that the higher organism must have evolved from those lower organisms'.

Permit me to call this main hypothesis Homo-Brutalism, as it has hitherto been given no name at all. (Wise 1876, 47)

Wise's condemnation of what he regards as the theory's hostility to the hard-won Enlightenment values of "inalienable and inborn rights, equality, liberty and the pursuit of happiness", even accounting for the theory's popularity in Europe in that ("because it props up the aristocracy"), would have resonated well with his North American audience. What was on offer was the amoral, even immoral, vision of social Darwinism:

In a moral point of view the Darwinian hypothesis on the descent of man is the most pernicious that could be possibly advanced, not only because it robs man of his dignity and the consciousness of pre-eminence, which is the coffin to all virtue, but chiefly because it presents all nature as a battleground, a perpetual warfare of each against all in the combat for existence, and represents the victors as those worthy of existence, and the vanquished ripe for destruction.

So might is right, the cardinal sin is to be the weakest [sic] party. If this is nature's law, and man is an improved beast, then war to the knife, perpetual war of each against all, is also human law, and peace in any shape is illegitimate and unnatural. Therefore in all cases of expulsion, assassination or slaughter, among individuals or nations, the vanquished party was doomed in advance, by a law of nature; and the victors having enforced the laws of nature are neither culpable nor responsible for their deeds. (Wise 1876, 51)

The third category of complaint included a set of profoundly misguided and mistaken philosophical assumptions, which, crucially, Wise perceived as underlying both the scientific and the socio-political errors. He therefore spent most of his critical attention in the book upon the materialistic assumptions that underlay Darwinian theory. In this context, for example, he mockingly accounts for the theory's heavy reliance upon chance or "blind irrational Fate" in terms of the materialist urge to usurp God (Wise 1876, 50). He explains the current failure to explain how discrete evolutionary improvements in an organism's physiology could harmonize with the rest of the organism in terms of the refusal to acknowledge a psychological rather than a mechanistic cause (Wise 1876, 113). And he denies that sexual selection, which he regards as a matter of will or choice, can be reconciled with mechanistic assumptions that characterise Darwinism (Wise 1876, 113, 117). Darwinism could only be saved, he suggested, once the purely mechanistic and materialist assumptions of many of its proponents were abandoned. If one focused upon Darwin's theory of sexual selection or his Lamarckian-influenced

conception of acquired characteristics through force of will, then the centrality in life of the mental, of the idea, of the will, would be obvious. He argued,

[W]ith Mr. Darwin the origin of species depends entirely on the presence of will in every individual of the two kingdoms of organisms. The ornaments and improved songs of the male bird, for instance, are purposely acquired to please and captivate the attention of the female; which demonstrates will. Prehensile organs and defensive appendages grow out of the animal's body, according to Darwinism, by the repeated exertions of the animal's will. In fact, the whole system of Darwinian evolution is based upon the principle of teleology, carried into every detail or organism, always tacitly postulating the presence of active will in every organic individual. If we could accept Darwinism as an established fact, teleology and the existence of will would be proved *eo ipso* [by the thing itself]. Therefore if the Darwinists subscribe not to Schopenhauer's dogma – i.e., will is the world's substance – they must anyhow admit its inherent and permanent existence in every organic being. (Wise 1876, 129)

### **Overview of the Cosmic God and Evolution**

In basic terms, Wise offered a Jewish-pantheistic form of the vital force theory of evolution. As an idealist, he believed that the universal or fundamental substance was non-material or “psychical”. Ultimately, matter could only be held together by something he called at different times the “central force” or “active force” or “vital force”. He understood this vital force to be a function of an intelligent divine will. As such, the act of creation was, in effect, the divine assertion of this force so as to counteract matter's tendency to dissolve or separate. This had implications for Wise's biological theory, which rested on what he called the two “fundamental laws of creation”, namely, differentiation and evolution. As he explained: “Differentiation signifies the individuation of beings from and by the universal substance; and evolution in this connection signifies the systematic and rising succession of organisms from the lowest to the highest in the process of individuation.” (Wise 1876, 114) Thus the story of life was the story of the emergence of a hierarchical order of stable living forms from dead matter, achieved by the work of the divine vital force, which had eventually culminated in the self-conscious, moral beings known as men. The God that Wise had in mind was, to a degree, to be identified with both vital force and with nature itself, although God was also greater than these (Wise 1876, 163). In this way, his pantheistic Cosmic God offered an alternative theory to Darwinism in that it was a

theory of the transmutation of species with a teleology defined in terms of divine action.

According to Wise, vital force worked as a kind of organising or coordinating principle for all other forces working within and upon an organism. Through the process of differentiation, it generates individual organisms within individual, stable species. He wrote:

Evidently we have before us in every living organism a force which governs the others for this specific purpose. Every constant relation of elements or bodies to one another, points to an overruling force in action for this specific purpose. In the organic kingdoms, the immense variety of elementary relations to form and, sustain here a tree, there a shrub, here an herb and there a blade of grass, here a mollusk, there a radiate or articulate, here a reptile, fish, bird, or mammal, and there a man, all made up of the same elements, governed by the same forces, necessitates us to adopt an overruling force which subjects matter and force, in order to assume this shape and no other, to be so large at its birth and grow so far and no farther, have this form, surface and color and, no other, develop and live so long and no longer. All these limitations and modifications point to a special force at work which we call vital force. This vital force bears no similarity to the other natural forces, to electricity, light, heat, sound, or mechanical motion... Every plant and every animal develops its arch type with a certain degree of freedom and variability, which must be the effect of a cause not at work in the inorganic world, for which we have no better name than vital force. (Wise 1876, 94-95)

In fact Wise did have a better name for this phenomenon, namely: God. It is the fact that he could see the same teleological, ordering force at work in geology, biology and human history that convinced him that he was dealing with a truly cosmic force. And having established that divine action affected the cosmos, Wise was also clear about that purpose and where it is headed: from dead matter to life, and from unconscious to conscious life, and from conscious to self-conscious life. For Wise, evolution represented the account of how the divine vital force animates and awakens matter, and then guides organic life along the inevitable path that will lead to man, that is, to the self-conscious individual capable of free moral judgment; and at this moment, the psychical cosmic force is seen to have liberated itself from its material constraints (Wise 1876, 114). This account resonates with another scholarly interest of Wise's, namely Jewish mysticism. In Lurianic Kabbalism, a fragmented and broken godhead is dispersed throughout creation. The divine sparks animate the creaturely vessels or *kelipot* in which they find themselves and remain there until a mystical reunion takes place, when the godhead is restored to



itself. Likewise, he suggested, the divine vital force, which is woven throughout the natural world, but not of it,

overcomes and metamorphozes matter gradually and systematically prepares organic buds on the tree of life, unfolds them to blossoms of consciousness, and ripens them to fruits of self-consciousness. Conscious centers are produced by the same force which created the material substance, preserves and governs it, and individuates itself therein. It is the psychical force becoming itself again. It is its victory over matter. (Wise 1876, 171)

Thus Wise saw mankind as the culmination of the long history of the work of vital force, and, as such, the culmination of the evolutionary process. All of evolution “centers on man”, and all evolutionary developments had been perfected in him—Wise makes a brief aside here to point out that Jewish authorities were wrong to think of winged angels as superior: “When the fathers imagined a higher order of beings, viz.: the angels with wings, because man is debarred of these organs of the bird, they did not take into consideration that human hands controlled by human mind are far superior to wings” (Wise 1876, 116). In Wise’s imaginative reworking of the six days of creation, during which the divine vital force transformed dead matter to living matter, to conscious animals, and finally to self-conscious, moral humans, the seventh day marked an important transition. In his own account of the creation myth, there were seven stages that correlated with the seven days of the Genesis account.<sup>4</sup> These he described as (i) an almighty impulse that compressed and united the elementary particles to generate (ii) a radiating fireball looked like the sun, which slew off material that became the planet earth. This cooled down and was covered with liquid water, allowing (iii) the emergence of organic life. In time, primitive life evolved to become (iv) conscious animals. With this stage, it was possible to say that “the force captivated in matter attempts its liberation, after it had overcome inert matter to the extent that organic formation had become possible.” (v) The earth fell into its proper orbit, and the gloomy carbon atmosphere cleared to reveal the celestial lights. It was now covered with rich vegetation, its land and ocean populated with

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<sup>4</sup> Wise does not attempt to match up exactly his seven stages to the seven days of biblical creation, but the parallels are clear. According to Genesis 1, God created light on the first day, divided the water from the waters on the second day, generated vegetation on the third day, revealed the celestial lights on the fourth day, generated animal life in the water and air on the fifth day, generated animal life on the land, including man, on the sixth day, and rested on the seventh day.

radiates, mollusks, and articulates, fishes, amphibians, and birds. One might say that “[t]he primary force materialized in the earth is reunited with the cosmic light.” (vi) “Constant types” or fixed species were now established, and mammals emerged, eventually including self-conscious humans. With this, “The primary force becomes self-conscious itself again, in the self-conscious man.” (vii) Human history began. And with human history, the work of the divine vital force can, in a sense, rest, because humans take over and continue its work.

It is the Creator’s Sabbath. The work of liberation from matter and the triumph over it, begins in man, by him, and for him. He works on to accomplish the subjugation of matter, the resurrection of self-conscious spirit, the triumph of life over death, of light over darkness, of self-conscious intelligence over blind and inexorable powers of darkness; of freedom, love, and happiness over cold and barren necessity. This is the creation of history, the progress of the primary force to self-conscious existence in the human family... (Wise 1876, 161)

## **History, the Will, and the Problem of Evil and Suffering**

The Cosmic God posited by Wise is not the God of Jewish tradition, nor quite the first cause of the philosophers. It represents rather a kind of Jewish pantheistic god, worked out in both natural and human history, although the Jewish element is usually played down. One of the key problems in presenting a theistic evolutionary theory, however, is the problem of evil, that is, accounting for the wastage and suffering that evolution appears to entail. Here it is possible to trace the influence of Jewish thought on Wise in relation to Jewish mystical concepts once again. In this case, Wise appears to draw upon the Luranic kabbalistic concept of *tsimtsum*, that is, the idea that in creating the world, God withdrew or contracted Godself so as to make the space for the world, which is other from Godself. In kabbalism, this contraction functions to produce a conceptual space in which freewill is possible and which accounts for the hidden nature of God. For Wise, divine contraction is likewise part of the fabric of the universe, although its function is different in that, when complemented by expansion, it acts as a signature for the action of vital force in biology and history.

The contraction or compression, we have noticed as the continuous activity of the primary [vital] force, of the impulse imparted originally to inert matter. Expansion, is the inherent tendency of matter, to dissolve into its primary elements, to fall apart and become cosmic... We observe the

same fundamental action in the cell or even protoplasm, contraction and expansion, and by it accretion and secretion, internal motion and external limitation. This is the fundamental function of all organic life. Then it reappears in animal instinct, in man's selfishness and social nature, as well as his struggle for personal freedom and patriotism, to be at the same time an independent individual and a dependent citizen of a large, populous, and powerful community, which is the primary cause of all history, with its two similar elements of conservatism and progressionism. It is always the same fundamental principle of contraction and expansion, only that a variety of new functions of the same cause become phenomenal under new circumstances. (Wise 1876, 157-158)

But if biology and history are both guided by the vital force, and if, at some level, the vital force is to be identified with the divine, then how does one reconcile what we know about God's goodness with what we know about the enormous suffering in nature and in human history, both of which Wise indexes at considerable length? (Wise 1876, 121, 142-143) Before seeing how Wise approaches the problem of evil in these two contexts it will be useful to look a little more closely at the way he understands the relation between biology and history.

The first thing to say is that Wise sees biology and history as different stages of creation. As he puts it, "With man's appearance on earth, physical creation closed and mental creation began; the pedestal was finished and the statuary was placed upon it." (Wise 1876, 159) We have already considered the idea of teleology in biology, and hinted that Wise sees the same developmental force at work in history. This force worked at overcoming the material tendency towards dissolution and break-down, although in this context Wise initially gave it another name: the Logos of History.

The law of history is progressive, and man not only remains in quality always the same, but the vast majority is conservative and opposed to every progressive step.—Yet history preserves all that is good, true, and useful, continually increases its stock, spreads, utilizes and promulgates it, contrary to the will of the masses, and in spite of all egotism and prevailing stupidity...

And yet no man schemes it, none does it with forethought and conscious design, it is all, contrary to human will and prediction, still done by human agency. Who designs this grand and marvelous drama of history, chooses the actors, shifts the scenes and conducts its execution, if man does not do, not will, not contemplate it? There is but one answer to which reason is necessitated; and this is the Logos of History does it in its invisible, silent and ever efficient power, and this Logos of History is not only extra-human, it is super-human, because it designs shapes, and puts

into execution the destinies of all men and all generations, it presides over man, and all must submit to its laws.

And now human reason turns upon gross materialism and says: "Here is teleology in history, to deny it is madness. Here is end, aim, design, purpose, and proper execution, not by one or all men, but independent of all."—There must be will and intellect extra-human, superhuman, universal and bound to no organism. It is identical in its laws with the extra-organic will and intellect, in nature, hence both, are one and the same spiritual force. All your construction of atoms and atomic forces will positively not account for the existence of one sensation, much less for the grand drama of history; and the last resort, after all, is the existence of an extra-mundane spirit, as far as matter is concerned, which is no more unknowable than force or matter. (Wise 1876, 94-95)

Having established that, from the perspective of the divine vital force, history is simply an extension of biology into the human realm, it is remarkable, then, that Wise does not regard the problem of evil or suffering as analogous in the two contexts. In the first case, that of suffering and waste of life in nature, he does hazard a kind of greater-good rationale, namely, that death was a necessary part of the lengthy process of evolution. As Wise saw it.

Every plant or animal that dies adds to the bulk of organic matter, and renders higher conditions of organism possible. Therefore after a sufficient bulk of animal matter had been laid up in the household of nature, and vital force, as the formal principle, had advanced to the organization of the perfect cell, that force could now bring forth everywhere, as the state of the ocean, land and atmosphere admitted, organisms adapted to each age and condition of the earth and its various parts. (Wise 1876, 115)

But his preferred approach was to argue fiercely for a reconsideration of an antiquated, anthropomorphic conception of the God of the Bible and Jewish tradition (Wise 1876, 121). This was entirely in keeping with Wise's place as one of the founding fathers of US Reform Judaism, although his particular conception of the Cosmic God, whose ways are truly not our ways, was by no means a classic illustration of Reform Jewish theology and had little direct influence on his congregation or students.

On the other hand, when it came to explaining evil and suffering in human history (and for this he included examples from biblical history and the modern histories of Germany, France, and the USA), Wise suggests

that suffering on a national, although not an individual, scale may well be the result of the Logos rewarding morality and punishing immorality:

It is not as clearly manifested in the life of the individual, and may not be enforced as rigidly; but nations, history and consciousness agree, live, grow, and flourish on their virtues; suffer, decline, or perish of their vices, and all that by agencies perfectly natural, though controlled by super-human causes. (Wise 1876, 141)

In this way, Wise could have his cake and eat it. The awful loss of life and suffering that characterized the natural world and the historical lives of many individual humans pointed to the need for a reformed Judaism with a radically revised conception of God, which was the only way to escape the traditional paradox of a good God creating a world filled with evil. At the same time, this waste of life in the natural world and the suffering of nations could both be used to support the idea of a moral deity. After all, death on a massive scale was an inevitable part of the evolutionary process which had led to the greater-good of a being capable of free moral choice, and the fates of nations pointed to a just God of History who appeared to reward and punish them according to an recognizable standard of morality. Apparently, Wise did not see this tension in his treatment of the problem of evil.

### **An Alternative to Science and Religion: A New Philosophy?**

Wise was profoundly influenced by German idealism, although he preferred to call himself an adherent of “spiritualism”. As he saw it,

In materialism, matter is the substance, and the forces inherent in matter create, preserve and govern all which is in this universe mechanically and automatically. In spiritualism, spirit or mind is the substance, and the forces which create, preserve and govern all things in this universe, are manifestations of the will of that spirit, mind or intelligence. (Wise 1876, 71)

He insisted that one should not confuse the materialistic method of natural sciences, which was laudable, with materialism as a philosophy, which was not. As such, his book is as much a polemical critique of materialism as it is an exploration of theistic evolutionary theory. He focuses the worst of his ire on the inadequacy of materialists to account for thought and self-consciousness (Wise 1876, 12, 13, 22), and to solve the mind-body

problem (Wise 1876, 24). Of course, Darwin's attempt in *The Descent of Man* "to place man into the background of all animals" was an illustrative example of widespread influence of "the school of modern materialism" (Wise 1876, 83).

Never one to hide his light under a bushel, Wise suggests that his work was "a fundamental philosophy, from which the various philosophical disciplines can be derived". Keenly aware that he was writing at a time of conflict between science and religion, he believed that he offered a corrective to both materialistic science and naive theology, arguing that it would only be when the discrepancies between the sensual (which formed the basis of materialistic science) and the mental (by which he meant both philosophy and theology) were resolved, that truthful knowledge could be attained (Wise 1876, 5, 14). He was convinced that the truth of reality was to be sought, and could be uncovered, in the reconciliation of different approaches.

Harmony in the elements of our knowledge is the criterion for truth... As long as science and philosophy contradict one another in any point or points, their disharmony proves inaccuracy or incompleteness of cognition on the one side or the other, and the necessity of correction. Their harmony is the only criterion of truth in our possession. (Wise 1876, 10, 14)

Specifically, Wise's philosophy offered a new conception of God, which "is not the God of vulgar theology nor is it the God of Spinoza or Locke", that is, it was not the God of Jewish tradition, nor of pantheism, nor of the first cause. In contrast, he believed that his argument for what he calls the Cosmic God had the power to undermine the inroads of atheism unlike previous attempts to philosophize God. At the heart of his theory, as has been noted already, is a panentheistic conception of the divine as an eternal cosmic animating or ordering force, which interpenetrates every part of nature even as it extends beyond it.

The universe, with the exception of matter, which is a very small fraction thereof, appearing to me synonymous with Deity so that the present volume is in the main a new evidence of the existence of Deity, I have called it The Cosmic God, in whom and by whom there is the one grand harmonious system of things, in whom and by whom nature is a cosmos and no chaos. (Wise 1876, 6)

What he achieved was less systematic or persuasive than he had hoped. But Wise is important to us as one of the earliest Jewish interlocutors with Darwinism, and because he established a precedent for later Jewish

thinkers to use evolutionary theory as the basis by which to explain suffering. In particular, Mordecai Kaplan's Jewish process theology would develop more rigorously the idea of God as an impersonal force shaping nature, and Hans Jonas' would attempt to harmonise scientific knowledge of biology with kabbalistic interpretations of God's activity in accounting for free-will. Arguably, such panentheistic approaches are the distinctive contribution of Judaism to the creation-evolution debate. Furthermore, and of much greater significance for Jewish thought, it would not be going too far to say that Kaplan and Jonas would both apply Wise's idea of a Cosmic God to that ultimate expression of Jewish suffering, the Holocaust (Langton 2013).

## Conclusion

For the pioneering Reform rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, God was to be identified with, but not limited to, both the natural world and the vital force that ordered it. This vital force pushed in the direction of the evolution of self-conscious, ethical beings who would become partners with God. In practice, human partnership with God was achieved by ensuring ongoing moral progress in the realm of history and the unfolding story of civilization, thereby complementing divine vital force's work in the biological realm. Wise's panentheistic Cosmic God represented a radical revision of Jewish tradition away from an anthropological image of God who acted in history, towards a divine process or principle that actively governed nature but which was expressed in history through human agency.

When it comes to the problem of evil, Wise's approach was unorthodox, even incoherent, for he attempts to account for suffering in nature and in history in such a way as to retain a sense of divine morality, even if that God is to be described in terms of a non-personal process. God was presented both as (a) an impersonal force that ordered the cosmos, and in this way escaped moral judgment, and (b) as a moral entity whose integrity could be defended if one took into account the greater good of the emergence of moral beings which was only possible through the suffering and wastage of evolution, and if one recognized historically the punishment of wicked nations for their crimes and misdemeanours.

Finally, it is worth noting that Wise was convinced that the religion-science debate had left Jewish tradition and its ethical teachings enriched by the insights offered from evolutionary theory and that new ways had to be found to express the relationship between theology and science. For the author of *The Cosmic God*, this reconciliation of the best of both worlds is

best achieved, in practice, by stripping science of what he saw as its materialist tendency to ignore teleology, and by removing much of anthropological imagery of Jewish tradition and theology.

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