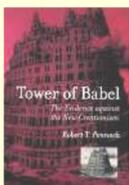


# Healing existential worries

## Robert Pennock's Tower of Babel.

A review by Gert Korthof  
2 May 1999. ( Updated 13 May 2001 )



The main goal of *Tower of Babel* is to evaluate the position of the Intelligent Design Theorists Michael Behe (biochemist), Phillip Johnson (lawyer), William Dembski (mathematician) and Alvin Plantinga (philosopher). Some attention is also given to the views of Young Earth Creationists John and Henry Morris, Old Earth Creationists (Fred Heeren and Hugh Ross) and Theistic Evolutionists such as Arthur Peacocke and Howard van Till. However, with a little exaggeration, this is a book about Phillip Johnson's views.

This book is from a professional philosopher [1]. But not a philosopher who is only interested in the history of ideas starting with Plato and Aristotle and ending with Popper and Kuhn. Philosophy is invoked at the right moments when it is needed for clarifying. There are also elements of story telling and personal details throughout the book. His sources are not only academic books and philosophy journals. Typically Internet sites are listed in the References, Notes and in some places in the text.

The subtitle of the book *The Evidence against the New Creationism* makes it clear that it is a criticism of the 'New Creationism', if you wish an 'attack', but it is not from an atheist. Robert Pennock is a Quaker. So this is not an anti-religious book. He is a theist criticising other theists [10]. Pennock gives a philosophical defence of evolution, so he is also an 'Evolutionist' [2]. In his view evolution is compatible with theism, so he could be a 'theistic evolutionist' or a deist. He does not tell anything about his own beliefs, rather his position must be inferred from the persons he criticises and the way he does it. Since he is also a biologist, he is well qualified for the job. Furthermore he is well prepared to evaluate neo-creationism, because he read their books, went to their meetings and conferences, including a 'guided tour of the Museum of Creation' and discussed with a lot of them personally. He is good at creeping into their skins: who are they? What do they want? What drives them? What are their worries?

The title of *The Tower of Babel* refers to the biblical story of the origin of human languages. Pennock uses the origin of languages to "spell out some of the structural parallels between linguistic and biological evolutionary theory in the hope that it can provide a therapeutic way through the emotional block for those who find it unpleasant or troubling to think of themselves as being descended from prior animal forms." (p. 147). This is one of his original contributions to the Creation-Evolution Controversy. Interesting as the linguistic example may be in itself, I see an underlying motive suggested by the words 'therapeutic' and 'emotional block' and that is a genuine interest in creationist worries. And this is a far more important contribution to the Creation-Evolution Controversy than for example debunking creationists' positive evidence. This concern reappears explicitly in the paragraphs *Calming the Creationist's Fears*, *Evolution Does Not Imply Atheism* and *Can We Seek Meaning Together?* of Chapter 7. As Pennock sees it, creationists fear evolution, because life is without purpose if 'natural evolution' created us. And this should be so because natural evolution is mindless and purposeless [3]. And this derives from the essential random nature of mutations which are the motor of evolution.

"When evolutionary biologists speak of 'evolution', they are not referring to a process that either was or could have been guided by a supernatural Creator" (Johnson,1993,p. 115).[4]

This central conflict between purpose and randomness always seemed to me one of the clearest arguments of Johnson. It is confirmed by the well-known claim of S.J.Gould [9]: rewinding the tape of evolution would not guarantee the re-occurrence of the human species. And Pennock himself quotes Dawkins: "Evolution has no long-term goal"(p. 261). The randomness of the mutational process, the impossibility of 'directed evolution' [8], the lack of a long-term goal, and the long time span before the appearance of humans, all seem to suggest that the designer could not create humans by means of evolution. In Johnson words: it contradicts that "mankind was *designed* and exists for a *purpose*" (Johnson,1993,p. 115).[4]

Pennock does not see it in that way. He does not see randomness as the most important aspect of evolution anyway [5]. Pennock tries to show in at least 4 ways that evolution and randomness are compatible with design:

1. Pennock discovered that Johnson, at least in some passages, admits that evolution is not necessarily atheistic [6]: "one can imagine a Creator who works through natural selection" (p. 336)
2. Dembski is undermined (p. 95): chance and design are not mutually exclusive.[7]
3. Could an omnipotent God not have allowed humans to arise through an evolutionary process while still giving us a moral code to uphold and a purpose to fulfil ? (p. 339). The designer could give us spiritual purpose no matter how we came to be. What appears to be random in our eyes, could be purposeful in God's eyes (p. 335).
4. One conclusion we *can* draw from evolutionary theory is that a Designer is not necessary to explain microevolution and adaptation of organisms. (*Pennock does not include macroevolution and the origin of life in this list!*). However, says Pennock, from the fact that X is not necessary for Y, it does not follow that X does not exist! So from the fact that God is not necessary for evolution, it does not follow that God does not exist. In this way Pennock argues that the fears of creationists for evolution are unfounded because evolution does not imply atheism (even Johnson accepted this, sometimes!) and scientific naturalism is not equivalent to atheism (p. 328).

**"Tower of Babel. The Evidence against the New Creationism"**  
by Robert T. Pennock  
MIT Press,1999  
ISBN 0-262-16180-X  
429 pages  
Contents:  
1. Creation and Evolution of a Controversy...1  
2. The Evidence for Evolution...43  
3. The Tower of Babel...117  
4. Of Naturalism and Negativity...181  
5. Chariots of the Gods...215  
6. Deus ex Machina...277  
7. Burning Science at the Stake...309  
8. Babel in the Schools...343  
Notes...379  
References...399  
Index...413

An alternative view (not present in Pennock) and a way out of the randomness-purpose conflict could be Christian de Duve's point of view: life, consciousness and intelligence are a necessity, given the particular conditions existing on earth [11].

However, creationists still could object that Genesis tells otherwise: the world, plants, animals and humans were deliberately created and not the result of purposeless processes. On the other hand even if the world was created, randomness still exists in nature. We still have the same laws of nature including randomness. We would still have volcano eruptions, lightning and all kind of other natural disasters.

I doubt that Pennock convinces old-fashioned literalists. However any creationist who accepts Pennock's (or de Duve's) argument would be released from the war against evolution and evolutionists. And that makes the road free to seek meaning together. Let's hope that at least some are convinced by Pennock's arguments. If not: is a creation myth really worth a war, considering that the point of creation myths is giving human existence meaning? How far can defenders of one creation myth go in their war against the other creation myth and still have a meaningful life? Is war compatible with a meaningful life and high absolute moral standards? How far creationists *need* to go partly depends on the willingness of evolutionists and atheists to acknowledge that evolution logically does not imply atheism.

Pennock doesn't seek conflict in the *Tower of Babel*. Pennock intentions are honest and peaceful. He tried to take away the '*how and why we came into existence*'-worries, in other words: the existential worries of creationists. □

### Notes:

1. Philip Kitcher is another philosopher who undertook a philosophical analysis of creationism: *Abusing Science. The Case Against Creationism*(1982). This work is not available anymore. The work of another philosopher, Del Ratzsch, *The battle of Beginnings*(1996) is still available.
2. Nowadays 'Evolutionist' is a redundant characterisation of a scientist, just as an 'atomist' (someone who believes all matter is composed of atoms) or 'heliocentrist' (someone who believes planets are orbiting around the sun). Otherwise 'evolutionist' is a biologist/biochemist specialised in evolution. A deist is someone who believes in a God who made the world but has no influence on human lives.
3. See also Note 13 in my review of [Darwin on Trial](#): Johnson believes in a whimsical creator. How could a whimsical Creator give human life meaning ?
4. *Darwin on Trial*(1993). Comment[gk]: then evolutionary biologists are wrong: scientists cannot say anything about the supernatural.
5. In his summary of the four central elements of evolution theory 'randomness' is mentioned only as the second part of the 4th element! (p. 333).
6. I could make the title of my review in Tom Woodward-style: "JOHNSON ADMITS EVOLUTION IS NOT NECESSARY ATHEISTIC!" or: "JOHNSON ADMITS DARWINISM MIGHT BE THE BEST EXPLANATION OF THE DATA !" (p. 209).
7. Dembski's *The Design Inference*(1998) is not in Pennock's references. Pennock send his manuscript in 1998 to the publisher. However there are 3 publicatons of Dembski in the references.
8. I showed in my [review of Denton\(1998\)](#) that DNA cannot be pre-programmed to direct the path of evolution to humans.
9. S.J. Gould(1997) *Full House*.
10. However see Pennock's comments on this statement in the [feedback page](#).
11. Christian de Duve(1995) *Vital Dust. Life as a Cosmic Imperative*.

### Further Reading:

- [Pennock's homepage](#). Includes a link to the online version of the first chapter of *Tower of Babel*. [changed URL notified by Steven Entringer]
- [MIT Press book information](#) includes an online version (pdf) of the first chapter of the Tower of Babel.
- "[Pennock's Primer for Defending Science](#)" a review of *Tower of Babel* by Peter J. Bowler (professor of the history and philosophy of science at Queens University of Belfast and author of many books about Darwin). In this review Peter Bowler doesn't live up to his own standard set in [Evolution. The History of an Idea](#) (1989).
- [Tower of Babel reviewed by Tim Tokaryk](#) (a paleontologist). Posted June 25, 1999 Å. Issue 57 of 'HMS Beagle'. The reviewer appears to have a superficial knowledge of IDT and is strongly biased against creationism.
- [Creationism Evolves](#), Review of *Tower of Babel* by Eugenie C. Scott, Scientific American, August 1999. (Eugenie C. Scott is director of the anticreationist National Center for Science Education).
- [The God of Science: The Case for Intelligent Design](#), a review of *Tower of Babel* by Michael Behe, author of *Darwin's Black Box*. Michael Behe is a Roman Catholic. So Pennock and Behe are both theists. However Behe is anti-Pennock: he apparently found nothing of value in the book. Behe is also strongly opposed to Young-Earth-Creationists, which are also theists. Behe's answer to "Can We Seek Meaning Together?" seems to be: "NO!".
- [The complete review's Review](#) of *Tower of Babel*. Approving review by an anonymous (why?!) but experienced reviewer. (The reviewer probably never read Johnson, Behe or Dembski) [added: 2 Dec 2000]
- "[Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics: Philosophical, Theological, and Scientific Perspectives](#)." by Robert Pennock (editor), Dec 2001;2002, 805 pages, paperback. See Table of Contents at [Barnes & Noble](#). This is a valuable collection of articles pro- and anti-Intelligent Design Creationism. Some scientific articles, but mostly philosophical/theological. Most articles published in a diversity of journals before, some are new.
- [Review by Danny Yee](#). [added: 28 Aug 04]
- A review of Tower of Babel in *Science*, Vol 286, Issue 5444, 1484 , 19 November 1999.
- [Pennock on Dover](#). Robert T. Pennock, who testified for the plaintiffs in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, assesses the outcome of the trial in a recent essay for *Science and Theology News*. [March 20, 2006]
- Review in [Science](#) of *Intelligent Design Creationism and Its Critics* by Kevin Padian.