The vast majority of our contemporary naturalists hold the opinion that the true cause of those exquisite and marvellous adaptations of nature for which, when I was a boy, men used to extol the divine wisdom, is that creatures are so crowded together that those of them that happen to have the slightest advantage force those less pushing into situations unfavorable to multiplication.

C. S. Peirce, 1893

Peirce held that all inquiry begins with an ‘irritation of doubt’, an irritation that disturbs some existing ‘mass of cognition’ (§1.4.1). In this chapter I am concerned with the way in which some aspects of the mass of cognition constituted by the Christian tradition may appear to be called into question by Darwinian evolutionary biology. The Judaeo-Christian tradition generally holds, for example, that human beings have a special place in creation, a role that includes in some way contributing to bringing the purposes of creation to fulfilment. The picture that emerges from the scientific study of living things in the light of contemporary Darwinism, on the other hand, is one in which humans are (merely) one evolved animal species among others. The Hebrew and Christian scriptures witness to a God who acts providentially within the world, but Darwinism offers an account of the mechanisms and processes behind the unfolding of the history of life in which the need to invoke non-natural explanations of the outcome seems to have progressively diminished. And the chanciness

---


of the evolutionary process is such that, if the ‘tape of evolution’ were to be re-run, humans might not even appear in the story.³

As I mentioned in my Introduction, doubts such as these provided the source of the ‘irritation’ that originally motivated the present inquiry. It may seem odd that examination of the sources of my original ‘irritation’ has been deferred until this mid-point of the book, given that substantial parts of my response to that irritation of doubt have already been put in place. The justification for this strategy lies in the non-foundationalist structure of my overall argument. The elements of the philosophical-theological framework that I am constructing are closely inter-related and mutually supportive of each other. Broadly speaking one might say that the three main elements of the framework are a doctrine of God (Chapter 2), a doctrine of humanity (Chapter 3) and a doctrine of creation (Chapter 5). All three elements draw on Peirce’s metaphysics and semiotics, which therefore had to be introduced at the outset (Chapter 1). For heuristic and explanatory purposes it has been convenient to deal with these key elements in that order. This does not imply that I see, for example, the doctrine of the Trinity as having epistemological priority over, say, reflection on the Incarnation. (Discussion of this and related issues of theological methodology will be deferred until Chapter 6.) Similarly, the fact that the epistemological structure of my argument does not have to be built up from the bottom but, rather, hangs together as a network of hypotheses, means that it has been possible to wait until now to consider issues that, in the development of my own thinking, were starting points for the inquiry. The contents of this chapter are preparatory for the development of the Peircean approach to the theology of creation that I shall propose in the following chapter, hence its appearance at this point in the book.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. In §4.1.1 I suggest that the challenges posed by evolutionary theology to Christian theology can be thought of in terms of three main themes: evolutionary continuity, historical contingency, and ontological naturalism. I further suggest that each of these themes turns out to correspond loosely, but perhaps not entirely coincidentally, to a distinct phase in the development of Darwinian evolutionary biology. In §4.1.2 I