

ARTICLES

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEORY OF EVOLUTION

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The full import of a particular philosophical view is seldom realized. Some consequences of evolution as it affects man's search for truth are elucidated below.

Since the close of the last century, the theory of evolution has come to be accepted by the majority of the scientific community and the general public. In fact, to reject evolution is now usually viewed as a sign of ignorance or of a system of religious belief totally at odds with reality and out of place in this modern, "scientific" world.

Unfortunately, few have faced the profound and ominous implications of the evolutionary theory as it affects mankind in every area of his humanity. Those few who have considered evolution's conclusions have sought to side-step them by appealing to a baseless optimism concerning human dignity, freedom, perfectibility and his future on this planet. The first objective of this essay is to suggest that evolution is not primarily a scientific theory, but a comprehensive metaphysical world view that implicitly and explicitly has frightening implications in all of the most important categories of human existence: 1) the possibility of discovering truth, 2) epistemology, the search for an adequate basis for knowing, 3) the existence of human freedom, and 4) the meaning of ethics and human dignity.

The second objective will be to indicate the lack of content within evolutionary humanism. This corollary to the evolutionary theory of the origins of life and man has sought to show that on the basis of evolution, mankind can use his accidentally developed freedom of choice to noble, humanitarian purposes, building a better future for himself and his posterity. However, once the inescapable logical conclusions of the evolutionary theory are squarely faced, it will be evident that hope for a better tomorrow built by man's own efforts is nothing more than a wistful dream.

Within the past few decades, a large segment of Christendom has sought to make peace with evolution by trying to steer a course midway between the prevalent view of mechanistic naturalism and the Biblical

account of creation contained in the first chapter of Genesis. While continuing to stress God's initial act in creating the universe and all it contains, they accept evolution as an adequate explanation of His creative activity. Such a view has certain scriptural and scientific difficulties that will not be discussed in this paper. Although such a theistic evolutionary view may be comforting to some, the fact is that the mainstream of evolutionary thinking sees no use for God — not in the origin of the universe, not in the origin and development of life, and not in the origin of man himself. As Sir Julian Huxley has stated, "After Darwin it was no longer necessary to deduce the existence of divine purpose for the facts of biological adaptation."¹

According to the mechanistic, naturalistic evolutionary theory, the universe, life in general, man himself, are all products of a totally impersonal interaction of matter and energy over vast eons of time. The universe as now known is an accident, life is an accident, and man is an accident. In the words of French molecular biologist and Nobel Prize winner Jacques Monod:

Pure chance, absolutely free but blind, [lies] at the very root of the stupendous edifice of evolution....The universe was not pregnant with life nor the biosphere with man. Our number came up in the Monte Carlo game.²

To illustrate the pervasiveness of this atheistic, mechanistic view of life, Theodosius Dobzhansky, renowned geneticist at the Davis campus of the University of California, and formerly of Columbia, in a recent review of Monod's best-selling book *Chance and Necessity*, may be quoted:

He [Monod] has stated with admirable clarity, and eloquence often verging on pathos, the mechanistic materialistic philosophy shared by most of the present 'establishment' in the biological sciences.³

Underlying the evolutionary theory is not just the classic "stuff" of science — conclusions arrived at through prolonged observation and experimentation. Evolution is first an atheistic, materialistic world view. In other words, the primary reason for its acceptance has little to do with the evidence for or against it. Evolution is accepted because men are atheists by *faith* and thus interpret the evidence to correspond to their naturalistic philosophy.

By stressing the accidental nature of origins, evolutionary theory can find no basis for meaning in the cosmos nor in man's very existence, other than what man might, on the basis of chance, be able to find for himself. Charles Darwin in his autobiography understood evolution's serious implications for man. This understanding took the form of the "horrid doubt." He states:

But then arises the doubt, can the mind of man, which has, as I fully believe, been developed from a mind as low as that possessed by the lowest animal, be trusted when it draws such grand conclusions? [The grand conclusion in this context is the evolutionary hypothesis itself].⁴

At the basis of this evolutionary idea was the theory of natural selection, a concept basic to the entire evolutionary edifice. Natural selection, or as Herbert Spencer popularized it — “survival of the fittest” — means simply that certain life forms were able to survive changes in the natural environment because they had evolved through blind chance certain characteristics that enabled them to adapt to those environmental changes.

It is here that Darwin’s “horrid doubt” comes into focus. If living organisms survived only on the basis of mindless natural selection, then it inescapably followed that human reason was also the product of natural selection. As such, the conclusions of human reason could never be known to be true, but only valuable in accord with their contribution to the survival of the human species. To use the language of utilitarian philosophy, truth could only be defined as what works, and not necessarily as what is true.

Such an implication for any meaningful human enquiry can cause a “horrid doubt.” Man is divorced from being able to discover purpose to existence, for he cannot determine if his conclusions are true. Just as obviously, all scientific enquiry is undermined. As noted biologist and loyal Darwinian David Lack has stated:

At this point, therefore, it would seem that the armies of science are in danger of destroying their own base. For the scientist must be able to trust the conclusions of his reasoning. Hence, he cannot accept the theory that man’s mind was evolved wholly by natural selection if this means, as it would appear to do, that the conclusions of the mind depend ultimately on their survival value and not their truth, thus making all scientific theories, including that of natural selection, untrustworthy.⁵

In sum, if natural selection be “true,” then man is hopelessly shut off from a true evaluation of the world around him, from any true understanding of the spiritual, and even from a true understanding of himself.

To the Christian mind such a “horrid doubt” could easily be resolved by rejecting a world view inadequate to account for the origin and nature of the universe, of life, and of man in the fullness of his humanity. It would mean abandoning a philosophy that undermines the very existence of reason and destroys any adequate basis for determining truth. The tragedy of modern thought is only recognized when one understands that to abandon an evolutionary, materialistic world view is precisely what man refuses to do.

Calling attention to the consequent deaths of truth, reason and epistemology does not exhaust the significance of Darwin's "horrid doubt." For if man is nothing more than the product of a natural universe consisting only of matter and energy, a universe in which all things are produced by chance, then human dignity, any meaningful concept of ethics, and free will die as well. If man is a biological accident who owes his origin to nothing more than the rolling of some cosmological dice, what is meant by human dignity in the first place? Can human dignity and notions of right and wrong, good and evil, in such a universe be anything more than modes of thought and action that somehow have allowed human societies to function in a reasonably stable fashion? In short, are they no more than "survival value" factors?

Finally, what does one do with the question of free will? Few concepts have been more troublesome to philosophers. Does man possess it? If so, how did he come by it? And if man does have it, how much do such factors as heredity, environment, and the existence or non-existence of the spiritual realm enhance or limit that freedom of choice? As the implications of the evolutionary theory have come to the forefront, a certain attitude toward freedom has become advocated more and more. This is the attitude of behavioral psychology. As B. F. Skinner puts it:

The role of natural selection in evolution was formulated only a little more than a hundred years ago, and the selective role of the environment in shaping and maintaining the behavior of the individual is only beginning to be recognized and studied. As the interaction between organism and environment has come to be understood...effects once assigned to states of mind, feelings, and traits are beginning to be traced to accessible conditions, and a technology of behavior may therefore become available.⁶

In short, man does not independently act upon his environment, but his outward environment, his culture, which was determined by the natural environment, and his own heredity, which was dictated to him by natural selection, program him on how to feel, what to think, and how to react to the world and the people around him. Behavioral psychology, which rests firmly upon an evolutionary, naturalistic world view robs man of his freedom of action and thought just as much as the most vehement Calvinist denies the existence of freedom to the unregenerate sinner. Thus, if mechanistic, atheistic evolution be true, can the seemingly "free" actions of individual human beings be significantly different than mere randomness, as in the random actions of individual atomic particles? To hold to the evolutionary theory and at the same time, in spite of the inescapable conclusions of that theory, hold to a belief in human purpose, dignity, free will, and the meaningfulness of ethics is to involve oneself in an unresolvable

dilemma. One could try to escape the dilemma and say that life and man are not solely a product of natural selection. But to do this undermines the central concept and motive force of evolutionary theory. In addition, it allows the entrance of the divine in creation.

At present, modern evolutionary theory is neither prepared to abandon the centrality of natural selection nor to allow any room for God in the creative process. How then does it attempt to reconcile mechanistic, naturalistic evolution with such concepts as the ability of man to comprehend truth? Since most theories are not yet reconciled to the extreme conclusions of behaviorism, the other alternative is to declare that in some mysterious, perhaps forever unknowable way, at some time in the unknowably remote eons past – non-life accidentally produced life, chance produced purpose, matter produced “mind.” Though no evidence can ever be mustered to support such gigantic assumptions, this is the way that almost every philosopher of naturalistic evolutionism deals with this critical issue. This explanation brings our discussion of the nature of the evolutionary theory to full circle. Such an explanation illustrates that evolution is fundamentally not a scientific theory, but a true metaphysical and, if you will, religious world view. In no way are its central assumptions open to either empirical verification or falsification.

Though seldom squarely faced, the ominous implications of a mechanistic evolutionary world view for mankind are not being completely lost on modern secular man. As noted psychologist-philosopher Erich Fromm admits:

Man is born as a freak of nature, being within nature and yet transcending it. He has to find principles of action and decision making which replace the principles of instinct. He has to have a frame of orientation which permits him to organize a consistent picture of the world as a condition for consistent actions. He has to fight not only against the dangers of dying, starving, and being hurt, but also against another danger which is specifically human: that of becoming insane.⁷

Thus upon the basis of naturalistic assumptions, man can consider himself to be nothing but an accident, alone in a forever silent universe, without an inherent direction; and if no sense of direction be found, he stands in imminent danger of being plunged into the abyss of insanity.

It is at this very point that we come face to face with the spirit of the age — evolutionary humanism. In spite of the logical and inescapably gloomy conclusions of his naturalistic assumptions, modern secular man mystically holds on to them instead of accepting faith in God. Not only this, he even seeks to find hope in them. Focusing on the concept of progress inherent to evolutionary theory, man hopes somehow, at some

time in the not-too-near future, to be able to consciously take control of the evolutionary process, find the proper direction from within himself, and rebuild Eden. In the words of Sir Julian Huxley:

*The broad outlines of the new evolutionary picture of ultimates are beginning to be clearly visible. Man's destiny is to be the sole agent for the future evolution of this planet. He is the highest dominant type to be produced by over two and a half billion years of the slow biological improvement effected by the blind opportunistic workings of natural selection; if he does not destroy himself, he has at least an equal stretch of evolutionary time before him to exercise his agency.*⁸

What evidence does Huxley then give to support his optimistic pronouncements for mankind's future based on his belief in evolutionary progress? None whatsoever.⁹ The very core of evolutionary humanism is hope for the future based upon faith in a theory of man and the universe that is itself based upon faith. This is why Francis Schaeffer refers to modern humanist thought as "upper-storey mysticism."¹⁰ In the realm of the "lower storey" — the logical and empirically verifiable or falsifiable — the basic assumptions of evolution cannot be proven true or false. Furthermore, the logical conclusions to those assumptions lead to the non-existence of human purpose, dignity, free will and the meaninglessness of ethics. Also, the humanistic hope for a better future is likewise without logical or empirical support. The history of the 20th century alone, which has witnessed the slaughter of more men, women and children in its first 75 years than in the previous 5000 years of recorded history combined, does not augur well for a very optimistic future, if man alone must build that future.

Thus, in order to accept evolution in the first place, and then to find hope for the future on the basis of that theory, modern man must make a foundationless leap into an "upper-storey mysticism." It is a mysticism in that the basic assumptions of evolution must be taken wholly by faith. It is a mysticism in that hope for man's future must be based upon a faith that ignores history both past and present, and focuses upon the obviously unverifiable future.

Finally we are forced to ask the question, if an evolutionary, naturalistic world view is so apparently inadequate, then why accept such a belief at all? Is it possibly because the most logical alternative is to embrace the Christian faith? Such an answer is strongly implied by eminent 20th century novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley, in his book *Ends and Means*:

The philosopher who finds no meaning in the world is not concerned exclusively with a problem in pure metaphysics; he is also concerned to

prove that there is no valid reason why he personally should not do as he wants to do....

For myself, as, no doubt, for most of my contemporaries, the philosophy of meaninglessness was essentially an instrument of liberation. The liberation we desired was simultaneously liberation...from a certain system of morality. We objected to the morality because it interfered with our sexual freedom; we objected to the political and economic system because it was unjust. The supporters of these systems claimed that in some way they embodied the meaning (a Christian meaning, they insisted) of the world. There was one admirably simple method of confuting these people and at the same time justifying ourselves in our political and erotic revolt: we could deny that the world had any meaning whatsoever.¹¹

And what did men like Aldous Huxley use to support such a philosophy of meaninglessness? Evolution through natural selection, which as his brother Julian has stated makes it unnecessary “to deduce the existence of divine purpose for the facts of biological adaptation.”

In summary, evolution is not primarily a scientific theory. It is a comprehensive world view that not only seeks to explain the origins of life and man, but also to supply a philosophy of hope built upon an implicit belief that man is answerable to no one but himself. For if evolution be true, then man is the highest being in his universe. And even though he has not yet been able to establish Eden, and in spite of the fact that recorded history gives him little encouragement, the very idea that evolution is inherently progressive fosters hope that he will eventually progress to an even greater state of knowledge, social concern, and control over those aspects of his environment which forestall Eden’s construction. That is, provided man doesn’t blow himself off the map before evolution can continue.

In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche portrays a madman walking through the marketplace. The madman cries: “I seek God!...Whither is God? I shall tell you....God is dead....And we have killed him. How shall we, the murderers of all murderers, comfort ourselves?”¹² I suggest that modern man has sought his own liberation from God, has sought God’s death, through the two-pronged philosophy of evolutionary naturalism and evolutionary humanism. But instead of finding himself in the death of God, man has come face to face with his own death — the death of reason, truth, epistemology, freedom, morality, and his own dignity.

ENDNOTES

1. Huxley J. 1946. Rationalist annual. London: C. A. Watts & Co., p 87.
2. Monod J. 1971. Chance and necessity. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, p 112, 145-146.

3. Quoted in: Gish DT. 1974. Evolution: the fossils say no. San Diego, CA: Creation-Life Publishers, p 10-11.
4. Frontispiece to: Lack D. 1961. Evolutionary theory and Christian belief: the unresolved conflict. London: Methuen.
5. Ibid., p 104.
6. Skinner BF. 1971. Beyond freedom and dignity. NY: Alfred A. Knopf, p 25.
7. Fromm E. 1963. The revolution of hope: toward a humanized technology. NY: Harper & Row, p 60-61.
8. Huxley J, editor. 1961. The humanist frame. NY: Harper & Brothers, p 17.
9. I believe that a good reading of *The Humanist Frame* will substantiate my assertion.
10. See three excellent works by Dr. Francis Schaeffer for an in-depth examination of the new mysticism: *The God who is there* (1968. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press); *Escape from reason* (1968. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press); and *Back to freedom and dignity* (1972. Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press).
11. Huxley A. 1937. Ends and means. London: Chatto & Windus, p 272, 273.
12. Kaufmann W, editor. 1954. The portable Nietzsche. NY: Viking Press, p 95.