

LITERATURE REVIEWS

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CAN EVOLUTIONISTS RESCUE THIS ONE?

BIOLOGISTS, HELP! Larry Azar. 1978. *Bioscience* 28:712-715.

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During the past century evolution has held a dominant position in Western thought. However, in the minds of many, the question is far from settled (*Origins* 1:94-95; 2:42-43). In the scientific literature a small but persistent dissenting voice from the pens of a variety of scholars keeps appearing (*Origins* 4:4-10). The article "Biologists, Help!" by Larry Azar is one of the latest examples. Azar, who teaches in the Department of Philosophy at Iona College in New York, poses some perceptive questions about the "doctrine of evolution." He is not a biologist and would like some answers from them. He states, after watching the progress of evolutionary ideas for years, "I am still floundering, not because I am unwilling to listen, but rather because all I hear are opposing views on some of the basic issues." He then proceeds to describe eight fundamental areas of evolutionary thinking that are confused. Examples follow.

ONTOGENY AND PHYLOGENY. During the last century the German biologist Ernst Haeckel proposed that biogenetic principle which states that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny. Stated otherwise: as an organism goes through its embryological development, it reviews its evolutionary history. Because the principle has been rejected for some time, Azar wonders why biologists still continue publishing it.

CHANCE OR PURPOSE. There is contradiction regarding the nature of evolutionary change. The geneticist Waddington states that present-day evolutionary processes "are essentially random," while the paleontologist Simpson states that "evolution has orientation...; it obviously is not random." Azar then probes the more significant question of the role of biology in being able to answer the problem of purpose. While observing the persistent rejection by biologists of any non-naturalistic ideas he states: "For a biologist to note that he is not a philosopher is indeed legitimate. However, can ignoring a philosophical question be

interpreted as answering it?” Later continuing in the same vein he queries, “Is the biologist unwittingly implying that his vision of nature is so complete as to render unnecessary any consideration of nonbiological doctrines?”

THE REVERSIBILITY OF EVOLUTION. The Belgian paleontologist Dollo stated that evolution is not reversible. This has been called Dollo’s “law.” Simpson states that “evolution should be reversible — and it is.” Azar wonders how a view could be so quickly transformed into a law only to be dethroned later. He asks, “What criteria are at work in the acceptance of biological laws?”

WHAT IS EVOLUTION BASED ON? The author quotes paleontologists who point out that evolution is based on the developmental sequence of fossils found in succeeding sedimentary deposits, then quotes a past president of the Geological Society of America who states that “fossils have furnished...an amazingly effective key to the relative positioning of strata in widely separated regions and from continent to continent.” Azar asks, “Are the authorities maintaining, on the one hand, that evolution is documented by geology and, on the other hand, that geology is documented by evolution?” He also considers the question of the ubiquitous missing links, quoting from D. Kitts in the journal *Evolution*: “Evolution requires intermediate forms between species, and paleontology does not provide them.” He then equates the evolutionists with “the man of religious faith who says, ‘I believe, even though there is no evidence.’”

SPONTANEOUS GENERATION. The question of how life could arise spontaneously is cast in the context of the uniformitarian concept, namely, that the present is the key to the past. Life does not arise spontaneously now; therefore evolutionists have to postulate different conditions than the present for the spontaneous origin of life. Are they consistent when they deny the uniformitarian concept to postulate conditions that may have favored the spontaneous origin of life in the past (see *Origins* 2:59-63; 3:66-84), while they use the uniformitarian concept to show that the earth is very old? Geologic processes are going on very slowly now, and on this basis it would take a lot of time for some apparent changes to occur. Can evolutionists on one hand deny the uniformitarian principle when convenient, then again apply it when it seems to support the idea of long ages which is essential for evolution?

Other controversial questions mentioned by Azar include: are acquired characteristics transmitted? has evolution terminated with man? and do species really exist?

It is usually very helpful to have an outsider such as Azar take a fresh look at a discipline. One benefit is that problems that have been

placed on the shelf can again be brought into focus. To have this done by one with philosophical training may be especially useful, since more fundamental questions will be asked. In this paper Azar has done evolution a real service.

Probably most evolutionists will reject many of Azar's queries on the basis of lack of familiarity with details or by pointing out that disagreement and change are normal in the course of science. If they do, they have missed the meaning of his essay, which is: why is there such inconsistency regarding the fundamental tenets of evolution? This inconsistency is all the more surprising in view of the widespread acceptance of the theory.

Some of the points made by Azar do not represent the present status of thinking. For instance, many stratigraphers will be uncomfortable with the assumed exclusive reliance on fossils for correlation. Many other factors are employed in correlation of strata from various locales. Some other areas of disagreement not mentioned by Azar may be worthy of note: for instance, the raging controversy regarding which factors are important in determining evolutionary relationships in taxonomic research and the problems of devising a scenario for evolving by random mutations complex structures such as the eye or reflex pathways that are inept and would not provide survival value until fully functional. Also, a review of the scientific literature about evolution gives the impression that a double standard is in vogue. Evolutionists seem to abandon accepted scientific standards of demonstrability and repeatability when the issue of the general theory of evolution is involved. Usually data that are not repeatable 19 out of 20 or 99 out of 100 times are rejected in biological research; yet, evolutionists resort to extremely improbable events, such as one chance out of numbers consisting of hundreds or thousands of digits, in trying to explain their theory.

In this reviewer's opinion Azar has very adequately documented his thesis that a search of evolutionary literature leaves one with the impression that there is considerable disagreement regarding the basic principles of evolution. No theory of origins is free of problems. What is surprising is that a theory such as evolution should survive through so many revisions of its basic tenets, and that a theory with such wide acceptance is found upon close examination to be based on significant inconsistencies. The article is strongly recommended for anyone interested in the question of origins.