

The Great Superstition: Humanism on Trial

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In this day of political and ideological “correctness” it is no light matter to question the prevailing orthodoxies. The ensconced humanist mind in the universities and other institutions of so-called learning possesses not the least tolerance for anyone who dares to doubt or refute, the dogmas upon which their power, their prestige, indeed, their whole world has been erected. The greatest of these—the one upon which all other dogmas are based—is the “theory” of evolution.

“Theory” is used politely to describe the concept. “Theory” suggests that the whole idea is one that science studies as a *possible* explanation of the way the world, and all life in it, originated and developed. “Theory” need not mean that the matter is settled with any certainty or that something like “scientific knowledge” is available to demonstrate unequivocally the truth of the matter. The term “theory” merely allows for a framework of thought that permits the scientist the *freedom* to study the “facts” and “data” of the world of his experience so as to acquire a “systematic” understanding of the way things are and how they got that way. But this way of putting the matter was, as it turns out, an attempt to hoodwink the gullible. Today no-one (at least no-one who wants to keep his job) ever admits that evolution is simply a theory. It is accepted as utter Truth with all the passion and conviction of religious zealotry. Even moderately to question the evolutionary creed is enough to invite swift reprisal from the establishment's true believers.

Despite this, Phillip Johnson has not hesitated to offer a clear and eminently reasonable refutation of the theory of biological evolution. *Darwin on Trial* argues that the current dogma of evolution merely assumes what it ought to prove. He argues that evolutionary theory it is impervious to negative criticism because its purveyors refuse to admit that any of the “facts” upon which the theory is based could possibly fit any other explanation. Because the modern mind accepts the “fact of evolution” as true by definition, it cannot permit any discrepancies in the facts to disprove evolution. But—and this is the principle

issue in the book—the alleged “facts” upon which the case is made are altogether at odds with the theory. So great is this contrariety that, as Johnson concludes, the need exists radically to re-think the theory or to come up with a new one. However, as Johnson also argues, the defenders of the theory do not wish to admit defeat. (And with good reason! The humanistic faith is dependent upon the view that man is a product of evolutionary chance and is not a creation of God and therefore obligated to God! Johnson, however, is reluctant to mention this explicitly.) Consequently, he deems it necessary to provide a clear and concise definition of the theory and why it is not credible as honest “science”. In this respect, the book is a superb accomplishment.

Johnson knows that anyone who presumes to question the theory of evolution will be denounced as either ignorant of true science or some sort of religious lunatic. Indeed, from the beginning evolutionary theory has been at war with the Christian religion over the claim to possess a true “scientific” knowledge of the origin of the world and all life in it. Christianity has held to the origin and formation of all life-forms as the product of a special creative act of God and that all living creatures were designed by God and exist just as He designed them (allowing for mutations within species). All life on earth, then, must ultimately be traced back to the actions of a Deity that are unobservable by man and not repeatable by “scientific” testing. In other words, the *mechanism* of creation cannot be known. One must *believe* the explanation on the authority of God's word-revelation. However, God's word also says many other things as a matter of authority about man in particular, such as his obligation to submit to God's moral requirements as a result of his being God's creature. To be free from these obligations it becomes necessary to find an alternative explanation to the origin and development of life—man's life especially—than the Christian explanation.

Such an explanation must possess an authority of its own—it is “science” that becomes that authority (which is simply to say that man's reason is his own authority). Thus, the evolutionist will assert that creation has no “scientific” validity precisely because it is not possible to study scientifically the mechanism by which it has been alleged to take place. As Johnson then notes, science is defined by evolutionary theory “in such a way that advocates of supernatural creation may neither argue for their own position nor dispute the claims of the scientific establishment.” (p.8) Any argument against the theory of evolution will always be viewed as coming from those who maintain the absurdity of a supernatural creation and therefore is worthy of nothing but scorn. And yet, as Johnson has also correctly observed, “the very persons who insist upon keeping religion and science separate are eager to use their science as a basis for pronouncements about religion. The literature of Darwinism is full of antitheistic conclusions, such as that the universe was not designed and has no purpose, and that we humans are the product of blind natural processes that care nothing about us...statements...presented [not] as personal opinions but as the *logical* (emphasis mine) implications of evolutionary science.” (pp.8&9) The dogma of evolution guards the theory against all adverse criticism.

It is just this problem with the “logical implications” of evolutionary thinking that

convincing Johnson that much more than mere “science” is being expressed in its claims —“implications” that do not require one to be a practicing scientist in order to understand them. In fact, Johnson clarifies his own status for having a right to speak on the subject as a nonscientist. It is because he is a trained academic lawyer who specializes “in analyzing the logic of arguments and identifying assumptions that lie behind those arguments.” (p.13) Thus, we may comprehend the title of the book: Johnson means to place the theory of evolution in the docket and examine the arguments used to support the theory. From his study it became apparent that “what people believe about evolution and Darwinism depends very heavily on the kind of logic they employ and the kind of assumptions they make.” (p.13) Johnson's book masterfully demonstrates that the kind of reasoning employed by evolutionists silences every criticism that the “logic” of evolution is without the slightest scientific validity, for it refuses to consider that the so-called facts upon which it is based can lead to any other conclusion than what evolutionary theory says it must.

From Darwin to the Present

From the time that Charles Darwin published *The Origin of Species* the basic assumptions of evolutionary theory have not changed. Darwinism rejected the origin of all life-forms as the result of a special creative act of God. It claimed, as was mentioned, that creation was unacceptable because no one could say anything about the *mechanism* of creation. But, as Johnson means to show, neither has evolutionary theory provided an explanation of the mechanism of the origin of life. Darwin merely posited the notion of a “gradual adaptive change” based upon “chance”. The causal explanation, then, was due to a “purposeless material mechanism” which was simply assumed. In other words, Darwin merely believed that life began and developed according to this means and therefore proceeded to deduce the cause of life from the fact of life.

Thus to prosecute accurately the dogma of evolution, Johnson begins by recounting the basic tenets of Darwin's creed. They fall under three heads of doctrine: (1) the claim that living species are not immutable, that *new* species have appeared at different times in the earth's history and others have disappeared. (2) the claim that evolutionary processes can account for all *diversity* of life-forms because all have *descended* from a *common ancestor*. (3) finally, that the entire process of descent and adaptation was guided solely by *natural selection*, i.e., by *chance*. It is primarily the last two points that Johnson is concerned to examine in detail, beginning with the third claim.

Natural selection is a Darwinian concept used to explain how changes took place that enabled one species (over time) to mutate into another species. However, the concept says more! Not change for change's sake is at issue, but change which increases the complexity and ability of the species to adapt and survive in its environment. It is change from lower to higher life-forms. “Natural selection” means that this change takes place without any outside cause or interference, and without any intelligent design. But as Johnson has observed, the concept of “natural selection” is a mere tautology, for it

assumes what it ought to prove. Its claim is that “the fittest survive”, and because some species have survived then they must be the fittest. The fact of survival somehow proves the theory. Natural selection merely deduces the “advantage” of change from the “fact” of change that has been observed *within* a given species. How does the fact of change prove that an advantage has been gained? Since natural selection requires an explanation of change from a less-advantaged to a more-advantaged life-form, it requires that some means be found to decide what constitutes an advantage. The fact that some particular life-form exists is no explanation!

Darwin wanted to provide an explanation for the origin and formation of all living species as a result of causes operating in the world alone. In other words, no recourse to the supernatural must be allowed or conceded. But Darwin clearly saw that many different species of life-forms—in some cases radically different—were to be found everywhere. How to account for this incredible diversity lay at the heart of his theory. He claimed that natural processes *gradually* brought about changes that eventually resulted in the differences of whole species. As new species took over the older ones died out. In this process Darwin would not allow for something called “saltations”—sudden leaps from one species to the next. Sudden appearances (today called systematic macro-mutations) of even “new complex organs” would be too much akin to a miracle—hence, supernatural! All changes must be uniformitarian and natural, i.e., in accord with presently observed processes. Each change must involve tiny, cumulative steps or micro-mutations. However, each small change, however infinitesimal, must register a “scientifically explained” advantage. Not only the species, but the complex organs of a particular species must conform to this rule. Thus it is a great advantage to have an eye with which to see. But the eye did not emerge all at once, it evolved by tiny inches from a non-eye to a partial eye to a complete eye. Each change would be an added advantage. But here is where the theory becomes hopelessly speculative. If an eye was preceded by less than an eye what would be the advantage of each infinitesimal stage? How does 5% of an eye increase in advantage at the stage of 50%? Who knows—evolutionists just assert that it must be so. The same could be asked of thousands of different organs. What about sonar in bats or bird's wings? Keep in mind that all change is purely a matter of random mutation. By merely asserting an advantage and then falling back on random causality, how scientific is that? Johnson grasps well the pretentiousness of Darwinism on this score: "The prevailing assumption in evolutionary science seems to be that speculative possibilities, without experimental confirmation, are all that is really necessary...Nature must have provided whatever evolution had to have, because otherwise evolution wouldn't have happened...The theory itself provides whatever supporting evidence is essential."(p.43) Merely to claim that things change is not to explain why the changes have come about as they have. And to assume that all change is an advantage, i.e., is responsible for an improvement in the life-form or in its organs, and yet is the product of random selection is the sheer expression of a faith!

Looking for Mister Good Evidence!

Darwinism can be described as a theory in search of proof, a creed seeking confirmation. Since the theory is true by definition, then the evidence must be available. In chapters four through eight Johnson examines the evidence that evolutionary theory relies upon to preach its 'scientific' truth.

By far, the most important field of investigation upon which the theory of evolution has relied to substantiate its claims has been the fossil record. The discovery of fossil remains is claimed as sufficient proof of the theory because it has shown that numerous extinct species necessarily implies that earlier life-forms must have been the progenitors of those alive today. But the great problem with the fossil record is that it does not conform to the Darwinian assumption of “gradual adaptive changes” of infinitesimal stages. Rather, the fossils show a remarkable rigidity of type in the biological world. All those “insensibly fine gradations” (Darwin's expression) between structural forms are simply absent. Let no one imagine that insufficient information is available from the fossil record to be snide at this point. On the contrary, in the past 150 years the uncovering of fossils has produced an *embarras de richesse*. Scientists have been deluged by the fossil remains. All of which leads Johnson to say: “One might therefore suppose that geologists would be continually uncovering fossil evidence of transitional forms. This, however, was clearly not the case. What geologists did discover was species, and groups of species, which appeared suddenly rather than at the end of a chain of evolutionary links.” (p. 46) The fossil record during this time has remained pretty much the same. (p. 50)

Furthermore, the fossil record not only contradicts the assumption of gradual appearance of whole species, but of their gradual disappearance as well. That is, the fossils point to whole species that have become extinct—and *suddenly* extinct! Evolution requires the gradual dying out of the old forms and their replacement by better adapted new forms. But the discovery of fossils has not corroborated this claim. Either way, Darwin's “no saltations” rule has come in for serious re-examining.

Since the introduction of Aristotle into the logic curriculum of mediæval universities a principle driving force to shape scientific development has been a mania for classification. Everything must fit into the correct category. In the area of biological science all life-forms were arranged logically in accordance with taxonomic divisions—families, orders, classes, phyla. The basis of classification derived from patterns of relationships which were said to exhibit similarities or homologies. For Darwin the possibility of the classification of life-forms is more “evidence” for evolution. In his mind the “fact of relationship” is conclusive proof of the “fact of evolution”. If similarities exist, he reasons, then these offer confirmation for descent from a common ancestor. All mammals, for example, must have derived from a common ancestor since biologically they have so many things in common.

But, again, the problem with this reasoning is that it merely takes for granted what it fails

to demonstrate. If evolution is the only acceptable “scientific” explanation for the origin and formation of life, why does the theory always seem to lack scientific credibility at the most crucial junctures? For example, what might one imagine as a 'common ancestor' of the whale, bat, lion, and man, since no empirical remains of any such ancestor has been discovered? But more importantly, what scientific explanation is ever provided to say how this common ancestor came to produce offspring as widely different as, say, the whale and the bat. It is not enough merely to assert similarities without also seeking to account for the differences. So far no evolutionist has been any more successful than the creationist in explaining the mechanism by which descent from a common ancestor has resulted in the differences between bats and whales. And simply to resort, as they are always so quick to do, to “random genetic changes” is nothing more than to invent an explanation out of midair. As Johnson points out, it is the “philosophical materialism” that predetermines the evolutionist's mind to think that patterns of natural relationships necessarily prove that evolution is true. (p. 65)

A related field of study, having to do primarily with living species, but connected to the fossil remains as well, concerns the vertebrate sequence. This is an area of importance to evolutionary theory because it is thought conclusively to prove the idea of descent from a common ancestor. There is said to be convergence or similarity in the skeletal structures of all known higher life-forms. One can trace this similarity back through types, from mammals to reptiles to amphibians to fish. Then, claims the evolutionist, just reverse the sequence under gradual evolutionary processes of transition. Thus, fish evolved into amphibians, and amphibians into reptiles, and finally, into mammals. But again one is required to ignore significant problems. For example, if older life-forms give way to higher life-forms, then why do lower order life-forms still exist alongside the higher ones? What is more, the fossil record shows plainly that the same distinctions exist there. There are no infinite gradations between the types. But, secondly, merely to examine one feature of living species that provides proof of similarities but ignores radical differences in other respects is disingenuous. For example, between the above species there are major differences in their respective reproductive systems. If they present evidence for descent from one to the other, how does one explain these crucial differences? As Johnson notes, “The Darwinist approach has consistently been to find some supporting fossil evidence, claim it as proof for 'evolution', and then ignore all the difficulties.” (p. 84)

All along Darwinism claims that it approaches the question of the origin of life on the basis of strict scientific procedure. That is, it claims that it follows the rules of empirical evidence and legitimate logical deduction from them. But the logical deductions of evolution are always made in advance of whatever truly empirical evidence is available. Consequently, evolutionary theory always accepts as true what it sets out to prove. They have never empirically observed any evolutionary process at work. They merely assert that evolution occurred because they are predisposed to believe it. The underlying assumption is that of “scientific naturalism”. Any other explanation is inadmissible because it does not conform to a purely 'naturalistic' explanation. And since no other theory is conducive to the logic of naturalism, then evolution must be true, otherwise science would be at the mercy of religion, and clearly this will not do.

It is not at all surprising then when, though they claim simply to follow the rules of strict scientific procedure, the evolutionary position of the scientific establishment leads them increasingly to deny the existence of God and to be openly and vociferously hostile to especially Christianity. As Johnson states, “Naturalism is not something about which Darwinists can afford to be tentative, because their science is based upon it...The absence from the cosmos of any Creator is therefore the essential starting point for Darwinism.” (p. 115) It is this predisposition to accept evolution as true in opposition to the traditional notion of a supernatural creation that is the real underlying motive of Darwinism. Driven as they are with utter hatred of the idea of a special creative act of God they will maintain the theory of evolution despite the fact that it flies in the face of the evidence. Thus to cast doubt on the theory never leads to a reconsideration of it as legitimate; it simply calls forth an avalanche of abuse from its true believers. “To Darwinists, fully naturalistic evolution is a fact to be learned, not an opinion to be questioned. A student may silently disbelieve, but neither students nor teachers may discuss the grounds for disbelief in class, where others might be infected.” (p. 141)

Creation versus the Bible

The arguments advanced by Johnson against the claims of evolution have been made on numerous occasions by many honest scientists. Many of these “scientists” have even been “Creation-scientists”. It is important to call attention to this since Johnson, while he wishes to challenge the dogma of evolution, does not wish to be identified with this latter group. From the outset he makes it clear that he does not call into question the idea of evolution *per se*; it is only the concept as it is understood by those who subscribe to *philosophical materialism* and *scientific naturalism* that he finds unconvincing. When speaking of the difference between “creation” and “evolution”, Johnson wants it understood that he believes “‘Evolution’ contradicts ‘creation’ only when it is explicitly or tacitly defined as *fully naturalistic evolution* - meaning evolution that is not directed by any purposeful intelligence.” (p. 4) The only real difference between creation and evolution is in the nature of development—creation means *sudden*, whereas evolution emphasizes *gradual*, progressive development. But as Johnson sees it, since the evidence for gradual evolution is missing, perhaps it is time to consider that sudden transformation by an outside intelligence, as against a purely naturalistic explanation, is the only way to solve the problem of the facts after all.

What lies behind Johnson's reevaluation is his keen desire to respect humanistic man's adherence to the autonomy of science, and thus to keep the Bible out of scientific discussion, even as it concerns questions of ultimate origins and the formation of life. At the same time, he wishes it to be understood that he accepts the idea of a Creator-God and even calls himself a Christian so far as his own presuppositions are concerned. But apart from his willingness to start with God and belief in His supernatural creative work, he does not believe it necessary to derive one's point of view on the matter from Scripture in any particular sense. Thus, he thinks he saves himself from being called a religious kook when he denounces “creation-science” and all so-called fundamentalists who have simply

and naively based their thinking “upon an extremely literal interpretation¹ of the Bible.” (p. 4) Apparently we may take our idea of creation from the Scripture in a strictly formal sense, but we may not allow it (i.e., God!) to tell us how things were created and what procedure was followed. Science knows these things better than Scripture (God), and what it says constitutes genuine knowledge. If science says that evolution is rationally possible, we may not reject this out of hand. Hence, what is possible is decided by the mind of man on his own. He need not think that the possible is predetermined by God and clarified by revelation—in other words by means that accede the mind of man to discover on his own—so that man must submit his thoughts to God’s thoughts on the matter. Where did Johnson even come up with the notion of “creation” if he did not get it from Scripture? And if it came from Scripture (revelation) how is it possible to think of it in any way but as Scripture tells us? It is possible, because Johnson, like many humanist-Christians, does not believe that Scripture is absolutely authoritative in what it says and wholly truthful in its very statements. Science also has authority and its proclamations are just as truthful as what any god might say.

Johnson has done great service by disclosing in plain English the specious claim of evolution to be legitimate science. Science relies upon sound evidence to postulate acceptable theories. “Scientific methodology exists wherever theories are subjected to rigorous empirical testing, and it is absent wherever the practice is to protect a theory rather than to test it.” (p. 148) Evolution fits the latter category; it is an ideology that forces the “facts” to conform to its assumptions. New assumptions are needed. But where are these to come from? So long as we maintain the autonomy of the mind of man, and do not insist that he submit in complete obedience to the mind of God as He has revealed to us and recorded in Scripture things which the mind of man could not have discovered on his own, we shall find that man only will accept an explanation for why he, as well as all things, exists that does not require him to admit that it is because God created him. Evolution cannot be mixed with creation in any sense whatever. Evolution in its entirety is an explanation that does not require creation to fill in the gaps, because evolution has never been science: it has always and ever been a religion of human autonomy. It is not enough to add creation where it lacks sufficient scientific credibility. Only the Biblical—and the Biblical explanation in its entirety—will do. God will not share His authority with man.

¹ We would dearly love to know what is the difference between “an *extremely* literal interpretation” and just a “literal interpretation” of Scripture. Would Johnson accept a mere “literal interpretation?” If so, what is his idea of “literal?” Accepting the words for what they say? If not, then how should one understand what one reads in Scripture? More often than not this addition of an adverb is merely to give emotional emphasis to what one believes or does not believe. It tells us more about the person who utters the comment than it does about what the statement itself means.