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Around the Campfire with Uncle Dave Foreman



Darwinism—Science and Philosophy

One hundred and fifty years ago, Charles Darwin overthrew philosophy up to that time. Darwin is not only the greatest biologist ever, but the greatest philosopher, even if most folks don't begin to understand how much Darwin overthrew old thinking and shaped new thinking. Ernst Mayr, who was unmistakably one of the top biologists of the twentieth century (he died at the age of 100 in 2005) wrote of the 24th of November 1859, (when Darwin's *On the Origins of Species* was published and which should be a big holiday for thinking folks): "This event represents perhaps the greatest intellectual revolution experienced by mankind." Among other things, "It almost single-handedly effected the secularization of science."^[1] Which means that science at last sought *only* natural grounds for the universe and life. This is a big deal. A big, big deal. Darwin was the first great thinker to look at the world (and Man) through the true-to-life lens of biology. Philosophers and scientists before Darwin brought the supernatural into their studies of the natural. Darwin left out the supernatural and, by the way he did so, he made it workable for others to do the same. Insofar as my wit may be pigeonholed, I am a Darwinist. Though some biologists have asked that "Darwinist" no longer stand for "evolutionist," I strongly believe that "Darwinism" is still the truest name for the Weltanschauung coming from his theories.

Darwin's theory of evolution is five theories, wrote Mayr: (1) The nonconstancy of species; (2) descent of all species from common ancestors; (3) gradualness of evolution; (4) multiplication of species; and (5) natural selection. These thoughts were world-shaking when Darwin first put them out. And they are world-shaking yet today in much of the United States and other muddle-headed strongholds, such as Islamodom. Although Darwin's theories work well together without any grit between them, they are standalone theories. Indeed, for most of the hundred years after 1859, few evolutionists bought all five of these theories.^[2] It wasn't until Mayr and others hammered out the *evolutionary synthesis* that all five of Darwin's theories became widely acknowledged. Mayr wrote that the evolutionary synthesis is "The

achievement of consensus among previously feuding schools of evolutionists, such as experimental geneticists, naturalists, and paleontologists, taking place particularly in the period 1937-1947...."[3]

Among the high-flown beliefs propping up the Weltanschauung of the West that Darwin overthrew were *essentialism*: all beings are unshifting breeds; *finalism*: "the belief that the living world has the propensity to move toward 'ever greater perfection'"; and *teleology*: any shifts are goal-targeted or, in other words, things do not happen by luck, fluke, or serendipity.[4] This last may be the hardest for even learned, thoughtful folks to choke down. But as the late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould so brightly and sharply warned:

[T]he worst and most harmful of all our conventional mistakes about the history of our planet [is] the arrogant notion that evolution has a predictable direction leading toward human life.[5]

This is such a *needed* acknowledgement that I must linger on it for a few more lines. Man is not the unerring outcome or endpoint of hundreds of millions of years of "life's descent with modification," but is, rather, a happy or unhappy (hinging on what kind of Earthling you are) happenstance. We were not "meant to be." Nor is anything Man has done in its flicker of time been meant to be. We happened to become, just as did the Curve-billed Thrasher getting a drink right now from the birdbath outside my window.

We only happened to be.

This may be the hardest and most frightening teaching from evolutionary biology and paleontology. It might well be some of why most *H. sapiens* do not believe biology has much to do with us. That we were not meant to be, but only happened to be is likely the most revolutionary idea in Man's tale. But this slap at our cheeks is not the worst wound to our overweening, selfish gall. The hurt goes deeper. Not only were we not meant to be and are only the happenstance of a string of flukes that could have gone other ways—but no abstractly intelligent kind of life with the inner might or craft to make a technological civilization overlording Earth was meant to be. In other words, no being with our abstract reasoning and skill in taking over Earth was meant to be or was inevitable thanks to built-in design features in the unfolding of biology, as even some evolutionary biologists want to believe.

Coming to grips with these truths is hard for most folks. I would bet that even many of those who in their wits acknowledge evolution layer their thinking with essentialism, finalism, and teleology. Whether moldy-old godly, New Age woo-woo, or freethinking, we seem to be deeply upset by the thought that things might happen for no worked-out goal, that our lives—oh my!—may be without meaning (other than to hand down our selfish genes—oops, I blew that one!). The greatest of all bogeymen hiding under our beds is "Happenstance." Fear of this hobgoblin may be why so many retch at the thought that evolution, even biology, has anything to do with human nature 150 years after Darwin. And it is likely why our forebears 50,000 years ago or so dreamed up sundry ghosts and the whole spooky otherworld. I'll bet that the first such shades were those of our forebears: hence "ancestor worship."

Geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky, one of the fathers of the evolutionary synthesis with field-naturalist Mayr and paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson, said wisely, "Nothing in biology makes sense, except in the light of evolution." [6] This is bedrock truth. I would also say that since Man is biological, nothing about Man makes sense, except in the light of evolution (this does not mean we are 100-percent genetically programmed).

However, notwithstanding the swift, shallow nod given to evolution today, it is thoroughly scorned by most thought-cults. That the political right—religious, libertarian, corporate, imperialistic, authoritarian, neoconservative, and so on—shuns Darwinism should bewilder no one. My work here, though, is with the rest of American political and intellectual culture in the middle and to the left.

The Bush Junior Administration was so startlingly irrational and antiscientific that it bucked up the belief that the right is against science while the left is for science.[7] While it is screamingly true that the right twists or shuns science, we need to pop the bubble about the left. Leftist and liberal ideologies—which are mind-traps like all ideologies—can be deeply antiscientific, too. In this, they are in line with most "intellectual" thought—left, right, and middle-of-the-road.

Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson writes:

Yet, astonishingly, the high culture of Western civilization exists largely apart from the natural sciences....[Intellectuals'] reflections are devoid of the idioms of chemistry and biology, as though humankind were still in some sense a numinous spectator of physical reality. In the pages of *The New York Review of Books*, *Commentary*, *The New Republic*, *Daedalus*, *National Review*, *Saturday Review*, and other literary journals articles dominate that read as if most basic science had halted during the nineteenth century.^[8]

He also warns, "Public intellectuals, and trailing close behind them the media professionals, have been trained almost without exception in the social sciences and humanities. They consider human nature to be their province and have difficulty conceiving the relevance of the natural sciences to social behavior and policy."^[9] Indeed, we can call them "biophobic—fearful of biology and determined to avoid it."^[10] The news business's blithe lacking of biological knowledge and understanding is much of why we struggle to get the conservation word out. Wilson's insight here should be grafted into the minds of conservationists so we can better understand those who tell folks how and what to think. By understanding their underlying slant against and misunderstanding of biology, we can better reckon how we should help them understand the living world. In outreach strategies for conservation campaigns, Wilson's insight must become a root understanding.

Dave Foreman

Blowing smoke rings quite late on an Eldritch, moonless night

Adapted from my forthcoming book *True Wilderness*.



^[1] Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution Is* (Basic Books, New York, 2001), 9; Chapter 5 "Darwin's Influence on Modern Thought" in Ernst Mayr, *What Makes Biology Unique: Considerations on the Autonomy of a Scientific Discipline* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2004), 83-95, is a sound grounding in why Darwin is a great philosopher.

^[2] Mayr, *What Evolution Is*, 86.

^[3] Mayr, *What Evolution Is*, 286.

^[4] Mayr, *What Evolution Is*, 74-76, 120-121.

^[5] Stephen Jay Gould, "Reconstructing (and Deconstructing) the Past," in Stephen Jay Gould, editor, *The Book of Life* (W. W. Norton, NY, 2001), 10.

^[6] Mayr, *What Evolution Is*, 39.

^[7] Chris Mooney, *The Republican War on Science* (Basic Books, New York, 2005).

^[8] Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1978), 203.

^[9] Edward O. Wilson, *Consilience: The Unity Of Knowledge* (Vintage Books, New York, 1998), 137.

^[10] Wilson, *Consilience*, 203.



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