



THE METAPHYSICS OF EVOLUTION

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY IN LIGHT OF FIRST PRINCIPLES

by Father Chad Ripperger, reviewed by D. Q. McInerney

The Creation and the Expulsion from the Paradise by Giovanni di Paolo

The theory of evolution has been controversial almost from the day on which it was first introduced. Criticisms of the theory, coming from a variety of quarters, have varied over the years, in number, intensity, and relevance, but there was never a time when it found universal acceptance; a case in point being the fact that continental European scientists and philosophers were always reluctant, if they gave it any attention at all, to render to the theory the kind of pious deference it receives in English speaking countries today. What is particularly interesting about the current situation is that the theory is now being washed with a new wave of criticism, criticism which is noteworthy for its variety and poignancy. It is arguable that the theory has not, up to this time, been subjected to such highly informed and carefully reasoned scrutiny.

There is an explanation for this state of affairs. There have been

unremitting efforts on the part of the more passionate proponents of the theory (backed up by a media which in more cases than not parrots “expert” opinions unthinkingly) to convince the world that evolution is a “fact,” and thus not open to discussion. Accordingly, those who have the temerity to question the theory put themselves in danger of being labeled as benighted Cro-Magnon types and ruled peremptorily out of court. A dismissive attitude of this sort, besides being uncomely in itself, does not sit well with people of learned backgrounds who are well versed in modern science, and who are quick to make the rejoinder that the real fact about evolution is that it is not a fact.

This is something which is manifestly evident to anyone who has taken the time to devote serious and thorough study to the theory. What is presented to us today—the original proposals of Darwin plus the various modifications which they have

undergone since the publication of *The Origin of Species*—are fraught with internal problems of the kind which no scientific theory would want to be burdened. Granted that the repeated claims that the theory is a fact is in many cases no more than a rhetorical ploy used to quell annoying opposition. Nonetheless making such a claim, besides being an abuse of language, is intellectually irresponsible.

Apart from what a good many science textbooks would want us to believe, evolutionary theory is not a single, coherent body of scientific thought that, in its essential tenets, has been definitively proved, nor is it the case that all those in the biological sciences have given it their full and unqualified assent. There is now, as there always has been to a more or less degree, considerable dissent within the professional evolutionary community itself with regard to one aspect or another of the theory. This should give pause to anyone who is inclined, not having investigated the matter himself, to assume the theory to be an impregnable monument to modern science.

Perhaps the most telling recent criticisms leveled at the theory from a scientific point of view come from those scientists who presumably had not seen fit to subscribe to the theory in the first place. One thinks in this respect of the impressive work being done by the biochemist Michael Behe, whose publications, significantly, have drawn respectful responses from some prominent advocates of evolutionary theory. And then there is the Intelligent Design movement, which, though glibly dismissed by some, has presented a well-structured edifice of arguments all of which deserve to be taken seriously on their own merits.

The fate of evolution, as a scientific theory, will finally be settled within the scientific community itself, which is altogether fitting and proper. (It is worth noting, parenthetically, that evolution, besides being a scientific theory,

is a philosophical worldview as well, and in the latter form it is considerably more pervasive, and potent, than is the scientific theory. Contending with evolution as a philosophy poses a whole new set of problems.) But every scientific theory, if it is to have any viability at all, must rely on certain foundational metaphysical principles, and therefore its soundness, *as a scientific theory*, can antecedently be determined by examining it from a metaphysical point of view. This is precisely what Father Chad Ripperger does in *The Metaphysics of Evolution*, and, given the present situation, that is what makes it so timely and important a book. In his Introduction, Father Ripperger immediately calls our attention to the fact that most forms of evolutionary theory, apart from what evolutionary scientists themselves might be prepared to acknowledge, bear necessary reference to any number of key metaphysical principles, and that is why the most profitable critique of the theory is to be made from the point of view of those principles, to determine whether or not they are being properly honored.

One of the reasons so many evolutionary scientists are simply unaware that their theory is inescapably bound up with metaphysics has to do with the fact that, given the educational climate in which they were raised, they are laden with an altogether too narrow conception of science. They erroneously equate science with the empirical sciences, and therefore—at least a good many of them—look upon truth as something that can only be ascertained through empirical processes. What cannot be established by science has no factual status. Now, the empirical sciences, such as physics and chemistry, are indeed sciences, but they are subordinate to the queen of the philosophical sciences, which is metaphysics. Specifically, they are subordinate to metaphysics in the sense that all of the basic concepts according to which they operate, and without which there

would be no physics or chemistry, such as, for example, the concept of causality, are metaphysical principles.

The Metaphysics of Evolution is divided into three chapters, the first of which provides us with a careful, detailed explication of the nature and function of first principles. Considered generally, we might regard first principles as those most fundamental of truths which serve to illumine and guide the human intellect in all its workings. These principles are “con-natural” to us, which means, as Father Ripperger explains, that they are part and parcel of our very nature as rational creatures; they are “innate or possessed from the very beginning and [they are] not acquired or added.” (9) In this first chapter Father Ripperger distinguishes between real principles, which we may think of as the starting points, or foundation, with respect to being itself, and logical principles, which are principles governing our knowledge of being, rather than of being itself. This distinction establishes the subject matter of the two chapters which follow.

Chapter Two is devoted to the treatment of twelve real first principles, and how they apply to evolutionary theory. Father Ripperger shows, with precise, deft argument, that the central thesis of evolutionary theory, i.e., that higher forms of life emerge from lower forms—not to speak of the more radical thesis that life emerges from non-life—stands in direct violation of all of these metaphysical principles. I will cite just a couple of examples from this chapter. With regard to the critical distinction between act and potency, Father Ripperger reminds us that act is necessarily prior to potency.

Something which is potentially X can only become actually X by reason of something which is already actually X. Evolutionary theory, by arguing that lower, less complex, organisms can give rise to higher, more complex, organisms, is effectively telling us that what is only potentially X can pull itself up by its own bootstraps, as it were, and become actually X. But, again, this violates the principle which lays it down that whatever is in act can be in that state only thanks to something already in act. “In this respect,” Father Ripperger remarks, “the theory of evolution places potency prior to act, not just in the order

of time, but in the ontological order.” (15-16)

Father Ripperger provides weighty evidence to show that evolutionary theory runs directly counter to the principle of the degrees of being, as well as, most importantly, the principle of non-contradiction. As

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for the principle of sufficient reason, it is his considered opinion that this “is the most violated among evolutionary theorists.” (26) The principal point that is being conveyed by the second chapter of the book, sustained by a variety of trenchant arguments, is that evolutionary theory is simply proposing the impossible: that there can be, in the physical universe, effects that exceed the perfection of their causes, that, in other words, it is possible after all to get blood from turnips.

Chapter Three of *The Metaphysics of Evolution* is devoted to showing how logical first principles—specifically, the principle of evidence and the principle of economy—are not duly honored by evolutionary theory. The radical inadequacy of the evidence for the theory offered by the fossil record

is something which was acknowledged by Darwin himself, and although he hoped that time and assiduous efforts on the part of researchers would eventually remedy that problem, the situation today is not much changed from what it was in the middle of the nineteenth century. Father Ripperger takes note of the fact that two internationally known and respected evolutionary scholars, Stephen Jay Gould and Niles Eldridge, having freely admitted that the fossil record simply does not support the orthodox Darwinian theory, then proceeded to make a substantial alteration to the theory, which drew the animus of another prominent evolutionist, Richard Dawkins of Oxford University. So, here we had the spectacle of members of the evolutionary elite disagreeing over issues which were by no means peripheral but in fact cut to the very heart of the theory.

The principle of economy tells us that, all other things being equal, if we are given the choice between two theories, one of which is considerably more complicated than the other, in more cases than not the simpler theory will prove to be the more reliable one. If one were to focus on the principle of natural selection, upon which the entire theory pivots, then evolutionary theory might be regarded, with respect to its central tenet, as a simple enough theory. But apart from the many difficulties that studied reflection on that very tenet can reveal, the theory as a whole, when one takes into account the several undemonstrated assumptions upon

which it rides, turns out to be rather complicated indeed. Evolutionary theory of course proposes itself as an empirical theory, that is, as one which should be open to practical testing, but the fact is that so many of its key assertions remain permanently out of reach of empirical verification.

Because evolutionary theory violates so many of the basic principles of metaphysics, the only conclusion that we can come to concerning the theory is that it is irrational.



Creation of the Animals by Jacopo Tintoretto

Darwin makes it clear in *The Origin of Species* that he is attempting to counter what is proposed in the Book of Genesis, that God directly created the various species of plants and animals. Of the two explanations of how the world of flora and fauna in which we now live came to be, the one proposed by Darwin and that given to us by the Bible, there is no doubt as to which is the simpler.

Father Ripperger made a particularly arresting argument apropos of his observation that those who are advocates of theistic evolution tend to put themselves in a position which is highly problematic. Advocates of theistic evolution are doubtless sincere Christians who, by giving their allegiance to evolutionary theory, perhaps want to show that there is no conflict between their faith and science. But the incongruity of their position consists in the fact that they are attempting to interject a supernatural element into a theory that is totally naturalistic, and thus, ironically, they are not aligning themselves with the theory as it was proposed. On the one hand they would seem to want to see evolutionary theory as a perfectly acceptable natural explanation of the origins of

the various forms of life. And yet at the same time they deem it necessary to allow for divine intervention along the evolutionary way. In this they might be chided for doing what Blaise Pascal accused Descartes of doing—bringing God into the picture for the sole purpose of bolstering a theory that was incapable of standing on its own. Inserting supernatural influence into what purports to be a purely natural process indicates, Father Ripperger writes, “that it is not strictly a natural process but requires the introduction of God into each step to be able to achieve the next higher species in the evolutionary process.”(58) So, in sum, what we have here is a situation where theists are not really adopting evolutionary theory as such, but rather something of their own devising, and which orthodox evolutionists would reject out of hand.

Father Ripperger concludes his book with the summary observation that, because evolutionary theory violates so many of the basic principles of metaphysics, the only conclusion that we can come to concerning the theory is that it is irrational. As the book itself amply demonstrates, this is a conclusion which its author did not arrive at haphazardly, and anyone who would want to take exception to it must be prepared to meet the array of forceful arguments that Father Ripperger offers as the premises for his conclusion. This is a small book, quantitatively considered, but from a qualitative point of view it looms large. *The Metaphysics of Evolution* deserves to figure prominently in the ongoing debate over the soundness of evolutionary theory. ✠

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