Reactions to the Theory of Evolution[1]

by

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THE word evolution literally means the unfolding or unrolling of potential. However, since the appearance of Charles Darwin's Theory of the Origin of Species in the nineteenth century, it has come to refer to the hypothetical process by which all forms of life are assumed to have arisen from inorganic matter. Simple organic beings are said to have arisen from inorganic molecules, after which, by a process of genetical mutation and natural selection, the whole of the plant and animal kingdoms have been derived. The two eventual implications of this theory are atheism and a general belief that change may be equated with improvement.

When Darwin's theory became public there was an immediate religious reaction against it which continues to some extent today. However, more and more Christians have come to accept the theory, usually by insisting that evolution must have been guided by God. The works of Teilhard de Chardin have played a considerable role in encouraging this belief. The measure of their success can be seen by the influence of evolutionary thought on the Second Vatican Council, both in some of the Council's documents and in the liturgical changes which followed.

Why should the Theory of Evolution be so convincing? Is it a matter of concrete evidence or interpretation? To answer these questions we might begin by taking two examples to show how the same facts are interpreted from evolutionary and traditional points of view.

1. The skeletons of different vertebrates have a striking similarity. If one takes for example the limbs or skulls of a number of different vertebrate classes it is possible to find clear homologies between bones and to relate the differences in shape and proportion to the overall function of the organ. To the traditional mind this is evidence for a unity which transcends the differences between vertebrates and has its origin firstly in the Divine Unity and secondly in the unity of the Divine Idea which determines vertebrate existence. To the evolutionist, however, the same facts are evidence of common ancestry; that all vertebrates have a single pre-vertebrate origin and therefore need no Creator.[2]

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[1] We remind readers of Michael Negus' earlier article "Man, Creation and the Fossil Record", which appeared in this journal for Winter 1969.—Editor.

[2] It is perhaps worth mentioning that in recent years the same comparative method has been applied by evolutionists to the structure of some biological molecules such as enzymes. Exactly the same criticism applies to their conclusions. Old habits die hard.

2. The geological record indicates that there were vast periods of time before the appearance of man. How may this be explained from a traditional point of view? According to the Sufi Muhyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi: “Adam is the unique spirit *(an-nafs al-wâhidah)* from which was created the human species.” the latter being the outward, individual manifestation of the former.[3] Adam or Universal Man (in Sufism: *al-insân al-kâmil)* is the single principle of every cycle of existence, whether this is the Age of Reptiles or the Age of Man. The manifestation of individual man is the necessary and ultimate consequence of Universal Man and this is why man occupies a central position amongst all the creatures.[4] The evolutionist, ironically because of his Christian heritage, finds a world without men more or less equivalent to a world without God. He sees no reason why God should create such a world and so eventually concludes that God did not.

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The Theory of Evolution ties together information from the fossil record and from observable genetical mutation and natural selection. The latter information is far from new to mankind. Agriculturists have known for millennia that variation and selection can sometimes give rise to ‘high-yield’ varieties of animals and plants. Darwin’s innovation was to find examples of this in nature, to extrapolate his discovery to indefinite limits and to reject the fundamentalist interpretation of Creation prevalent at the time.

In fact Darwin replaced one error with another. Given a choice however, one must insist that the first error is preferable to the second; this error, as such, only concerns Existence, not the Cause.

Fossil records may be adequately explained in terms of metaphysical, cosmological and alchemical principles. The sequence of vertebrate fossils in the Paleozoic and Mesozoic periods, for example, from the lowest, oldest rocks upwards, is arranged like images in a medieval alchemical diagram. The ascent through the strata is clearly one from obscurity to spiritual liberation; from amphibia and early reptiles related to the crocodile, through an extraordinary variety of reptilian forms, until eventually bird fossils appear. This vast creative cycle prefigures on a grand, cosmic scale the science of Alchemy. The following quotations from Titus Burckhardt concerning Alchemy are strikingly like a commentary on the Paleozoic and Mesozoic fossils: “The dragon alone can represent all phases of the work, depending on whether it is provided with feet, fins or wings, or is without any limbs whatsoever.” “The alchemical symbol of the dragon thus closely resembles that of the Far Eastern World Dragon, which first

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[3] Cf. Ibn ‘Arabi: *The Wisdom of the Prophets*. Chapter entitled “The Word of Adam”. Trans. T. Burckhardt. Beshara Publications, 1975.

[4] cf. René Guénon: *Symbolism of the Cross;* Ch. 2. Luzac, 1958.

lives as a fish in water, and then, as a winged creature, soars into the heavens."[5] The sequence of fossilized beings, found in rocks, corresponds to the expression in time of a 'pattern'[6] which exists in simultaneity outside time and which has manifested itself both macrocosmically and microcosmically.

A comparative study of fossil and living creatures indicates some sort of compromise between the creative forces causing multiplicity and the restrictions demanded by the need for equilibrium in the cosmos. Commonly groups of organisms show greatest diversity shortly after the time of their appearance. During the course of time there is usually a restriction in diversity brought about by selective extinction. Those types survive which have a niche in the integrated cosmos.

The Divine 'need' to manifest every possibility means that the clear cut differences we see between modern groups of organisms are often less distinct in the fossil types. When evolutionists refer to "intermediate" organisms they do so with hindsight and, without knowing it, compare what is eventually possible in the cosmos with what was necessary at the times of creation.[7]

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The most incongruous characteristic of the Theory of Evolution is the lack of concrete evidence for it. The lack of evidence is certainly not due to the uninterest of evolutionists, some of whom, starting in the 1930's, have attempted in vain to produce a new species experimentally by induced mutation. The Theory survives because the imagination of modern man readily transforms one animal form into another. This is so because the modern psyche is dominated by

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[5] T. Burckhardt: *Alchemy,* p. 138. Stuart and Watkins, 1967.

[6] The reptilian cycle, corresponding roughly to the period from the Silurian the Cretaceous, is dominated by the vertical dimension, an ascent from *tamas* (fish-amphibia) to *sattva* (birds). The mammalian cycle (Cainozoic) which follows afterwards is characterized by the horizontal dimension, in which man, the final creation, occupies the central point; the tendency is centripetal rather than ascending. The cruciform pattern which unites the two cycles demands both creative and destructive phases as one superimposes upon the other.

[7] Palaeontologists are frequently reported in the press as having discovered yet more ancient fossil fragments of creatures "belonging to the human line of descent." In fact these fossil "hominids." of which there is some variety, do occupy a cosmic position between apes and men but in a hierarchic rather than a phyletic sense. It is known that these creatures had some skills in tool making, etc., but there is an absolute difference between hominid cerebral ability and the transcendent consciousness which is the primary characteristic of man.

time, matter and change and is relatively blind to space, Substance and Eternity. To oppose ones thoughts to the Theory of Evolution is to think in a way which is contrary to the common tendency of the modern psyche.

Some biologists search for detailed evidence to support the Theory of Evolution by studying living populations and by genetical experiments. They, like Darwin before them, find clear evidence of genetical variation and natural selection. The function of natural selection is principally to maintain the 'norm.' That is to say the types of organisms that are optimal for the niches offered within an integrated community. Evidence for variation and selection causing change has also been found. The examples illustrate how organisms may respond positively to changes in environment. There are also examples of "geographical isolation" where a single breeding population of organisms may become divided into two or more isolated sub-populations. Given time the sub-population may undergo changes which may include a reduction in their abilities to interbreed. These facts amongst others (e.g. polyploidy, hybridization *etc.*) are extrapolated to indefinite limits and are taken as evidence of speciation and therefore evolution.

The traditionalist has no argument with the evolutionist so far as these facts are concerned. The evolutionist uses them as evidence for the Theory of Evolution; the traditionalist interprets them as illustrating the flexibility of a species, the means by which organisms are capable of optimal integration with one another and with their environment. To some extent the evolutionist would agree. However, in one respect the two points of view are completely opposed: the traditionalist regards change as implying some kind of loss, even though adaptive, whereas the evolutionist regards change as implying, in principle at least, some kind of progress.[8]

The firm conviction of materialists that living organisms arose sequentially from inorganic molecules, leads them to believe that it is possible both to postulate how it could have happened and to eventually devise a technique which would achieve it. The problem for a materialist is to construct an orderly system from disordered molecules without the use of a pre-existing parent system. He is unable to accept any alternative; his interpretation of an organism is in terms of how it has arisen, not how it maintains itself.

To the objection that the greater cannot proceed from the lesser, the evolutionist might reply that the terms greater and lesser are meaningless from his point of view. However, the objection can be phrased in a different way, using the mathematical notion of information.[9] One can say that a living organism 'has a vastly greater quantity of information than non-living matter. It is

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[8] A similar point of view characterizes heretical religious movements.

[9] Information may be defined quantitatively by taking into account the amount of disorder which results when a change takes place. This can be measured as the amount of energy which is not available for useful work and which is manifest as an increase in disorder after the change has occurred. If no change in disorder occurs then total information is conserved. The quantity of energy not available for conversion into work is known in physics as entropy.

also clear that all living organisms either conserve information or lose it. If the energy supply to living cells is interrupted, sooner or later (dependent upon temperature) the living system begins to break down. This is a spontaneous physical process brought about by the natural, thermodynamic tendency towards an increase in disorder, a loss of information and eventually death. This tendency is formulated in the Second Law of Thermodynamics.

Living cells and organisms maintain themselves by cyclical renewal of their components. The information which a cell possesses derives from the complex relationships between the cytoplasm and the genetical code of the chromosomal material of the nucleus. The information of a whole organism is more difficult to define. However, one can say that the fertilized egg from which the organism develops must contain all the organism's information. This must be in excess of the metabolic requirements of the adult since it includes the information for all the embryonic and adult changes until the point of death. The different states which constitute genetical variation within a species may be regarded as resembling the entities of a complex chemical equilibrium, with the possibility of change from one form to another given sufficient "constraint" (i.e. selective pressure) as the Leahatelier Principle states. Change beyond the limits of equilibrium must lead to a loss of information and a gain in disorder in conformity with the Second Law of Thermodynamics. In biological terms: mutation beyond 'permitted' limits results in death. This is an observable, concrete fact, well known to geneticists.

Within the sphere of agriculture and horticulture, artificially selected organisms have less information than their wild ancestors, since selection for certain characteristics inevitably means loss of others. Indeed, this loss is currently causing much concern to breeders. It is sometimes possible to re-introduce some information into an organism by careful breeding programs (e.g. for disease resistance) by the use of original or other varieties, but one should carefully distinguish this hybridization of existing information from the creation of new.

The energy consumed by living organisms is not used to increase order, but at the best to maintain it by cellular replication. The truly spontaneous production of information is impossible. Organisms originally created by God maintain themselves materially by making use of the continual 'downhill' flow of energy from the sun. An evolutionist might reply that creation cannot be demonstrated, and with this we have to agree. However, for a believer, phenomena such as the Ascension of Christ and the Assumption of the Virgin confirm the creative process in reverse. Furthermore, it would be possible to construct a complete Theory of Creation which took into account all levels of Existence including the evidence used by the evolutionists, which applies only to the gross (most outward) state of Existence.

As a response to the atheism implicit in the Theory of Evolution several anti-evolutionary groups have arisen. Generally they are protestant, evangelical groups, often including trained scientists of a fundamentalist character, who insist upon the literal interpretation of the Bible. They believe, for example, in the creation of the world in six twenty-four hour periods at a certain date only a few thousand years before Christ. The error of the fundamentalists is that they are unable to see beyond the superficial meaning of the Bible. They are unable to see any reason for the vast antiquity of rocks or the incomprehensible dimensions of space. "The heavens

proclaim the glory of God, the firmament shows forth the work of his hands." The glory of God exists because it is true, not because an individual man sees it. The strange chemical worlds of Venus and Jupiter, the colors of a Martian sunset, the desolation of the Moon's surface and the animals of the deep oceans all have a significance for God, whether man experiences them or not. God's mercy to man is that he has placed him in an environment which is immediately comprehensible and efficacious for salvation, since it conforms to his nature. One can argue that the scientific knowledge which characterizes modern man has in a sense been stolen from God. This is why modern man, having 'fractured' the world's envelope in which he was providentially enclosed, finds himself confronted with an immensity of knowledge which supersaturates his mind. Though open to exploitation this knowledge also threatens to destroy him.

There is a need to avoid two errors: the first is the error of rejecting adequately established scientific fact, e.g. the age of the earth or the space-time dimensions of the universe. This is the trap into which the biblical fundamentalists fall. The second error is that of accepting pseudo-doctrines like evolutionary progress with all its implications and thereby subverting Tradition. This is the trap into which the followers of Teilhard de Chardin fall.

The balance lies firstly in acknowledging the supremacy of traditional doctrine, but also in accepting within self-determined limits those facts which can be demonstrated adequately by scientific enquiry even though they may have little to offer for the spiritual destiny of man.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

The truly intelligent man pursues one sole objective: to obey and to conform to the God of all. With this single aim in view, he disciplines his soul, and whatever he may encounter in the course of his life, he gives thanks to God for the compass and depth of His providential ordering of all things. For it is absurd to be grateful to doctors who give us better and unpleasant medicines to cure our bodies, and yet to be ungrateful to God for what appears to us to be harsh, not grasping that all we encounter is for our benefit and in accordance with His providence. For knowledge of God and faith in Him is the salvation and perfection of the soul.

From On the Character of Men and on the Virtuous Life,
attributed to St. Antony the Great.