

Evolution and Recent History: Darwin, Evolution and His Critics—Part Two

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I. How Convinced Was Charles Darwin about His Theory of Evolution? (con't)

In light of what Darwin asked people to believe, it is hardly surprising that he often expressed doubts about the feasibility of his theory. In his sixth chapter, “Difficulties on Theory,” he remarked, “Long before having arrived at this part of my work, a crowd of difficulties will have occurred to the reader. Some of them are so grave that to this day I can never reflect on them without being staggered;...”⁹ Darwin considered such things as instinct alone “sufficient to overthrow my whole theory.”¹⁰ He also referred to the common view of many naturalists who “believed that very many [plant and animal] structures have been created for beauty in the eyes of man, or for mere variety. This doctrine, if true, would be absolutely fatal to my theory. Yet I fully admit [as evolution requires] that many structures are of no direct use to their possessors.”¹¹ Commenting on “the difficulties and objections which may be urged against my theory,” a few pages later he observes that “many of them are very grave....”¹²

In Chapter 7 on “Instinct,” he encountered other problems, e.g., “So wonderful an instinct as that of the hive-bee making its cells will probably have occurred to many readers, as a difficulty sufficient to overthrow my whole theory.”¹³ In commenting on how bees build honeycombs he said, “He must be a dull man who can examine the exquisite structure of a comb, so beautifully adapted to its end, without enthusiastic admiration.... Grant whatever instincts you please, and it seems at first quite inconceivable how they can make all the necessary angles and planes, or even perceive when they are correctly made.”¹⁴ In referring to the marvelous community of slave ants he commented, “What can be more extraordinary than these well ascertained facts? If we had not known of any other slave-making ant, it would have been hopeless to have speculated how so wonderful an instinct could have been perfected.”¹⁵ This was a problem for Darwin because he admitted, “No complex instinct can possibly be produced through natural selection, except by the slow and gradual communication of numerous, slight, yet profitable variations”¹⁶—and the facts of slave-ant communities were difficult, to say the least, to explain on the basis of natural selection.

In considering the behavior of other insects he observed, “It will indeed be thought that I have an overweening confidence in the principle of natural selection, when I do not admit that such wonderful and well established facts at once annihilate my theory.”¹⁷ In fact, Darwin has a very difficult time believing that natural selection can accomplish all that he hopes it can: “But I am bound to confess, that, with all my faith in this principle, I should ever have anticipated that natural selection could have been efficient in so high a degree....”¹⁸

In Chapter 9, “On the Imperfection of the Geological Record,” Darwin encountered additional problems. If evolution were true, one would expect that the vast majority of fossils would be of intermediary forms. Due to the incredibly slow nature of the evolutionary process such forms would exist over the vast majority of geological time. But Darwin, like modern scientists, could not find the intermediate forms necessary to support his theory. He admitted, “Why then is not every geological formation and every stratum full of such

intermediate links? Geology assuredly does not reveal any such finely graduated organic chain; and this, perhaps, is the most obvious and gravest objection which can be urged against my theory.”¹⁹ Further, “to the question why we do not find records of these vast primordial periods, I can give no satisfactory answer.... The case at present must remain inexplicable; and may be truly urged as a valid argument against the views here entertained.”²⁰

Darwin concluded this chapter by confessing, “The several difficulties here discussed, namely our not finding in the successive formations infinitely numerous transitional links between the many species which now exist or have existed; the sudden manner in which whole groups of species appear in our European formations; the almost entire absence, as at present known, of fossiliferous formations beneath the Silurian strata, are all undoubtedly of the gravest nature.... Those who think the natural geologic record in any degree perfect, and who do not attach much weight to the facts and arguments given in other kinds given in this volume, will undoubtedly at once reject my theory.”²¹

Darwin faced so many other problems—problems so severe one wonders at his determination to pursue his theory. Among such problems are:“...organs of extreme perfection and complication.”²² For example, the human eye. Darwin confessed, “To suppose that the eye, with all its inimitable contrivances for adjusting the focus to different distances, for admitting different amounts of light, and for the correction of spherical and chromatic aberration, could have been formed by natural selection, seems, I freely confess, absurd in the highest possible degree.”²³ In Volume 2 of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* by Frances Darwin (1887, p. 67), Darwin confessed in 1860 that, “The eye to this day gives me a cold shudder...”²⁴

Indeed, a leading modern evolutionist, Pierre-P. Grasse, a leading French Zoologist, observes,

We fully understand Darwin’s fears and wonder what they would have been had he been confronted with the anatomical and cytological complexity that is revealed by modern biology; he would have been even more worried had he known that [natural] selection cannot create anything on its own. We know absolutely nothing about the evolution of the eye of the vertebrate, and embryology is of little help. The problem is to know whether random mutations could have given rise to an organ requiring, because of its complexity, a considerable number of data for its elaboration. The number of mutations must have been enormous.... The complexity of the retina, of the sheathes, etc., need not detain us either; all this is extremely well known, but we must say that no recent publication inspired by Darwinism even mentions it.

In 1860 Darwin considered only the eye, but today he would have to take into consideration all the cerebral connections of the organ. The retina is indirectly connected to the striated zone of the occipital lobe of the cerebral hemispheres: Specialized neurons correspond to each one of its parts—perhaps even to each one of its photo receptor cells. The connection between the fibers of the optic nerve and the neurons of the occipital lobe in the geniculite body is absolutely perfect.... As a rule everything works perfectly.

In fact, the picture we have just sketched is even more complex; we did not consider the molecular structure which shows as many peculiarities of adaptation as the macrostructure... and we have neglected entirely the chemistry of a complex organ capable of multiple adjustments.

We took the eye as an example, but the ear would have been just as instructive. Is

not the human brain, the organ capable of abstraction, an even better example?²⁵

Another evolutionist wonders, “How then are we to account for the evolution of such a complicated organ as the eye.... Since it must be either perfect, or perfectly useless, how could it have evolved by small, successive, Darwinian steps?”²⁶

It is hardly surprising that the human eye bothered Darwin. Even today evolutionists can’t account for it—and they never shall. But the eye was hardly the only thing to concern him. In fact, one encounters the same kinds of problems for every organ of every species. Darwin later admitted, “I remember well when the thought of the eye made me cold all over, but I have got over this stage of the complaint, and now small trifling particulars of structure often make me very uncomfortable. The sight of a feather in a Peacock’s tail, whenever I gaze at it, makes me sick.”²⁷

But the stunning beauty and design of peacock feathers are not the real problem; even ordinary feathers are. No evolutionary scientist has ever been able to offer a plausible explanation or reconstruction for the evolutionary origin of simple feathers, including their unique shaft barbs and barbules which give them their insulatory and aerodynamic characteristics.

Darwin’s “demons” were everywhere in the natural world. Throughout his book we find statements such as the following: “I have sometimes felt much difficulty in understanding the origin of simple parts....”²⁸; “The belief that an organ so perfect as the eye could have been formed by natural selection, is more than enough to stagger anyone;...”²⁹; and, “It is, no doubt, extremely difficult even to conjecture by what gradations many structures have been perfected...”³⁰; and, turning to the geographical distribution of animals, “the difficulties encountered on the theory of descent with modification are grave enough.”³¹

In Chapter 14, his concluding chapter, Darwin writes, “that many and grave objections may be advanced against the theory of descent with modification through natural selection, I do not deny.... Nothing at first can appear more difficult to believe than that the more complex organisms and instincts should have been perfected, not by means superior to, though analogous with, human reason, but by the accumulation of enumerable slight variations,...”³² And a few pages later, “Such is the sum of the several chief objections and difficulties which may justly be urged against my theory; ... I have felt these difficulties far too heavily during many years to doubt their weight.”³³

All of the above is why Darwin was impelled to admit in his introduction, “For I am well aware that scarcely a single point is discussed in this volume on which facts cannot be adduced, often apparently leading to conclusions directly opposite to those at which I have arrived.”³⁴ He further stated, “A fair result can be obtained only by fully stating and balancing the facts and arguments on both sides of each question; and this cannot possibly be here done.”³⁵

Darwin expressed many such doubts. Then he turned around and attempted to resolve them. Then he went back to his original doubts. Such oscillation is hardly surprising for someone attempting to explain the unexplainable—and ultimately the impossible: how the marvelous complexity of all life originated from dead matter. Next, we will consider how Darwin attempted to resolve some of his doubts.

(to be continued)

9. Charles Darwin (ed. J. W. Burrow), *The Origin of Species* (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1974.), p. 205.
10. Ibid., p. 123.
11. Ibid., p. 227.
12. Ibid., p. 230.
13. Ibid., p. 234.
14. Ibid., p. 248.
15. Ibid., p. 244.
16. Ibid., p. 236.
17. Ibid., p. 259.
18. Ibid., p. 262.
19. Ibid. p. 292.
20. Ibid., pp. 313-14.
21. Ibid., pp. 315-16.
22. Ibid., p. 217.
23. Ibid., p. 217.
24. W. R. Bird, *The Origin of Species Revisited* (New York, Philosophical Library, 1987, 1988, 1989.), Vol., 2, p. 73.
25. Pierre-P. Grasse, *Evolution of Living Organisms: Evidence for a New Theory of Transformation* (New York, Academic Press/Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1977.), pp. 104-05.
26. In Bird, Vol. 1, pp. 73-74.
27. Ibid., p. 75, citing F. Darwin, ed., *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*, Vol. 2, 1887, p. 296.
28. Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, p. 224.
29. Ibid., p. 231.
30. Ibid., p. 435.
31. Ibid., p. 437.
32. Ibid., p. 435.
33. Ibid., p. 440.
34. Ibid., p. 66.
35. Ibid.