

The Man and the Animal

by Olin Alfred Curtis

The speaker argues that evolution is a series of individual items planned for culmination, and that the Christian view of evolution emphasizes the need for God in nature.

Scripture: Genesis 1:27, Psalm 19:1, Psalm 139:14, Romans 1:20, Colossians 1:16

Topics: "Creation Theology", "Divine Providence"

Description

Olin Alfred Curtis delves into the concept of evolution, emphasizing the distinction between the progress of the plan and the progress of the individual in nature. He discusses the idea that every individual has an inherent capacity or primal scheme of being, and that true progress is the realization of this inherent capacity. Curtis highlights the need for God as the transcendent and immanent force behind nature, emphasizing that nature requires the Absolute Will for every movement and aspect. He concludes by likening evolution to a series of individual items planned for culmination, all working together to manifest the purpose of the Creator.

Transcript

Lower than God who knows all and can all,
Higher than beasts which know and can so far
As each beast's limit, perfect to an end,
Nor conscious that they know, nor craving more;
While man knows partly but conceives beside,
Creeps ever on from fancies to the fact,
And in this striving, this converting air
Into a solid he may grasp and use,
Finds progress, man's distinctive mark alone,
Not God's, and not the beasts': God is, they are,

Man partly is and wholly hopes to be.

-- Robert Browning, A Death in the Desert -

When I speak of transition I do not in the least mean to say that one species turned into a second to develop thereafter into a third. What I mean is that the characters of the second are intermediate between those of the two others. It is as if I were to say that such and such a cathedral, Canterbury, for example, is a transition between York Minster and Westminster Abbey. No one would imagine, on hearing the word transition, that a transmutation of these buildings actually took place from one into another.

-- Thomas Henry Huxley, Life and Letters, ii, 428.

In the scientific sense evolution is neither a controlling law nor a producing cause, but simply a description of a phenomenal order, a statement of what, granting the theory, an observer might have seen, if he had been able to inspect the cosmic movement from its simplest stages until now. It is a statement of method and is silent about causation ... The causality of the series lies beyond it; and the relations of the members are logical and teleological, not dynamic. In that case much evolution argument vanishes of itself. Survivals, reversions, atavisms, and that sort of thing become only figures of speech, which are never to be literally taken. In a phenomenal system these things can literally exist as little as they can in a piece of music, for in such a system only laws and ideas abide.

-- Borden P. Bowne, Theism, Deems Lectures for 1902, pp. 104, 108.

Necessarily here we touch the dominant theory of evolution. There are, as Professor Bowne has pointed out, two different ways of regarding the process of evolution in nature, namely, as a causal process and as a phenomenal process. For illustration take the series A B C. Our questions are: Did A by dynamic efficiency produce B, and then B in the same causal manner produce C? Or did A simply first appear in a progressive plan which next required B, and then culminated in C? Readily we perceive that these questions pertain to two distinct provinces, the first question to that of metaphysics, the second to that of natural science. Evolution as a theory of natural science, aiming to furnish an account of phenomenal relations in nature, I can receive and receive with enthusiastic gratitude toward such naturalists as Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace; but evolution as metaphysics, aiming to furnish a philosophy of causation, I must reject as utterly superficial and unconvincing.

Perhaps we can handle the subject with more clearness and interest by making reference to that popular exposition by Charles Morris, called Man and His Ancestor. In a brilliant chapter, "How the Chasm was Bridged," Mr. Morris teaches that the ape may have "emerged into man" by means of his first use of tools. To "some wise-headed old man-ape" there came, perhaps, the idea of binding a stone to the end of a club. Thus was made not only the earliest form of the battle-ax, but, as "our progressive ancestor" soon perceived, a veritable tool with which objects could be shaped. In this fortuitous manner, it is imagined, began the long and splendid line of human invention and manufacture!

This is exceedingly interesting; but even more interesting than this event is the "wise-headed old man-ape" himself. at is meant by saying that he "emerged into man"? Is it that he passed from mechanical volition into self-conscious volition? If so, then Mr. Morris has missed the true point of emphasis. The method of this passage into the experience of self-consciousness is not the remarkable thing. It is no more remarkable that a creature, if capable of self-consciousness at all, should become self-conscious by binding a stone to the end of a club than that Jean Paul should become self-conscious by sawing wood.

The true point of emphasis is the possibility of the fact and not the way in which the possibility is at last actualized. And is it not plain enough that the possibility of self-consciousness, wherever found, implies an initial, an inherent, capacity for self-consciousness? Could you begin with any haphazard thing and bring it on to self-consciousness by mere procedure and environment? Dropping details, my contention will amount to just this: If ever an "ape" became a self-conscious man it was because he was, in initial capacity, in fundamental plan of being, not an ape, but an undeveloped man. If Mr. Morris, or any naturalist, prefers to name this undeveloped man a "man-ape," wise-headed or otherwise, that is nothing but a convenience in classification, and in no degree does it impair or change the fact, the stupendous fact, that now for the first time in the onward sweep of life we have an individual creature with inherent capacity for manhood. This capacity, this basal plan, "this possibility timidly looking toward a zenith" -- this, I insist, is the one significant thing precisely as it is the one significant thing in any child born in any human home today.

Having in mind now this undeveloped man, the question comes up, Was he an evolution from a lower animal? More sharply, Was the first creature with capacity for self-consciousness evolved out of a creature having no such capacity? As already indicated, the term evolution is ambiguous and so the question can be taken in either of two ways. It might mean, Did the lower animal, by inherent dynamic, cause the undeveloped man? Or it might mean, Did the lower animal merely grant the occasion, the phenomenal point of demand? Was the lower animal simply man's immediate antecedent in a progressive teleological plan? If the causal meaning be intended, we are estopped, and must instantly answer, No! And we are estopped not by any presupposition of a special creation, but by the one fact that the lower animal, however similar to man in structure, appearance, and habit, evinces no adequacy for such causation. The very feature of our natural constitution which seeks a cause at all also requires an adequate cause; and that an ape, or any lower animal, was an adequate cause for the primeval man is, as far as I can see, not only altogether without proof, but totally inconceivable.

Nor are we aided by any formula such as the "biogenetic process" provided by Professor Ernst Haeckel. These evolutionistic formulae are for the most part sheer generalities, arbitrary and empty. They are more vacuous, if that be possible, than those amazing scholastic definitions which gave motive to the acid line in Faust, "Mit Worten ein System bereiten." Even when a scientific formula is of value, it is but a description of a natural method as observed, and can have no dynamic efficiency whatever. Indeed, it is beyond understanding how any serious thinker can ever believe that laws, processes, collocations, and concatenations in nature ever do anything!

To many, though, the crucial question is this: Did that undeveloped man have a simian parentage? This is a clear-cut question; but the answer given will depend not so much upon the array of argument as upon one's personal valuation of the kind of evidence afforded. As the significance of this personal estimate of the worth of evidence is seldom appreciated, and as it must be appreciated before the present theological situation can be fully understood, I will single out and dwell upon an item used in proof by both Mr. Morris and Mr. Darwin. This item I have selected not because it is more finical than many other items given, but because it is strikingly and interestingly characteristic and quickly serves to show the point which I have in mind. The hairs on a man's upper arm grow in direction opposite to that of those on his lower arm; and they all, above and below, point toward the elbow. This peculiarity is not found, it is said, in the lower mammals; but it is found in some of the gibbons and in the larger anthropoid apes. Mr. Darwin's ingenious explanation is this: These apes, when in the rain, originally made a water-shield by covering the head with the hands, "the hairs turning so that the rain could run downward in both directions toward the bent

elbow." A man, of course, now makes no such water-shield, but all the hairs on his arm still point toward the elbow; and in this insistent peculiarity we have a "survival" in proof of simian parentage.

To some men this kind of evidence is forcible, and for full conviction they need only a quantity, larger or smaller; but to other men such an argument, however enlarged, is but a pronounced material fallacy. Nature is too vast, too complex, too secretive, and man's origin is too remote in time, for us sanely to draw so positive a conclusion from any number of similarities, whether superficial or structural. Biology now seems to an onlooker to be unusually hesitant; theories confidently held only a few years ago have been given up; and no man can tell what theory will fill the horizon ten years hence; but this much is certain -- no theory based entirely upon the kind of evidence now used by evolutionists will ever satisfy all truth-seekers.

But this question itself of man's parentage, while important in certain lines of discussion, is not so crucial as is usually, and on both sides, taken for granted. Establish, say, a *tarsiid* parentage for the primeval man, and what would it amount to as bearing upon any profound defense of the Christian faith? Nothing one way or the other. The connection between parents and offspring would be superficial -- phenomenal -- and the demand for an adequate cause would be precisely as urgent as it was before. Neither would this phenomenal connection require us to modify the fundamental Christian conception of man's nature, condition, and destiny.

My own general position as to the theory of evolution can be summarily gathered up in this way: In nature there are two kinds of progress, one kind of the plan, and the other of the individual. The progress of the plan is by means of a series of concrete individuals, the first making the start, then each one gathering up the meaning of the past and fixing a new point of departure toward the final goal. The progress of the individual is by growth, or development, until its inherent capacity, or its primal scheme of being, is realized. No individual can become another. No individual can efficiently cause another. But whenever an individual is a certain thing, or has by development reached a certain condition, then another sort of an individual may be required to carry out the whole plan in its further reach. As phenomena, transient or abiding, two individuals may be closely connected under the plan; and this connection, as in the case of a human mother and child, may be of large and possibly everlasting significance; but fundamentally, in causation, every individual is as isolated, and as utterly provided for by the plan, as though there were no other individual in existence. The law of heredity itself is nothing but the plan's method by which an individual is made a deposit for the meaning of the past. And the total plan is a bare method, too. It never takes care of itself. It never does any dynamic task. It has no secret, potent, resident forces which produce things and push things; No natural law or power makes either the corn grow or the winds whistle. On the one hand, the system of nature is not a deistic machine, wound up once for all to perform its own set task. And, on the other hand, it is not a pantheistic organism, forever self-sufficient for its own necessary process. It needs God, the immanent and yet transcendent God. In every point and in every movement nature needs the Absolute Will. Outside of one very limited realm, which requires no emphasis here, there is no causation other than that of this Divine Will. Forces, laws, processes, evolutions they all but express the personal power and manners of the Lord God Almighty. The poetry of the psalmist was in direct trace of the ultimate truth when he said, "The God of glory thundereth."

Most tersely said, evolution is but a series of individual items planned for culmination; each item, after the start, getting from adjacent items an occasion for being, and also all phenomenal relations; and the entire series making one coherent, ever-moving scheme to manifest in time the purpose of the Creator.

Once I saw the sketches used by William Morris Hunt in painting the Flight of Night. With these sketches before me, I could grasp the underlying plan of the picture, and see how and why one figure was related to another. A certain figure grew under treatment until it was filled out in form, color, and expression, and then its completion made another related figure necessary to the further development of the whole plan. Looking at a consequent figure from an artistic standpoint, one could properly say, "That figure was evolved out of those before it." But the remark would mean only that the consequent figure was occasioned -- that is, it received from the preceding figures a fitness of position and a peculiar accentuation in form, color, and expression. And even more might be said. Not only does the consequent figure have characteristics which surely it would not have as an unrelated item, but also some of these characteristics are borrowed (inherited) because the underlying plan requires a thematic emphasis by repetition. But whatever was done, it was done with items under a plan by the artist. The Flight of Night did not paint itself. No item of the picture did anything. William Morris Hunt did the whole thing. He alone was the efficient cause.

A man is an animal. But this is because in certain features he is like an animal. In other words, it is mere classification. And man is like an animal not because he was evolved out of an animal, or dynamically caused by an animal, but because the underlying plan of the living God, at this point in its progress, calls for a being that gathers up the meaning of all animal life before rising into the dignity of personality.

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