

The Metaphysical Concept of Evolution

By Wynand de Beer

In view of the ambiguity of the term “evolution,” let us begin by distinguishing between evolution in the traditional, metaphysical understanding and the theory postulated by Charles Darwin and his followers. The term “evolution” is derived from the Latin *evolvere*, literally, to roll out or unfold, which in this context means the development of that which is enveloped.¹ “The cosmos becomes what it is through an ‘unwinding’ or explication of What is already inside, which is ‘turned out’ or *evolved* into what It is initially not but can then be seen in.”² We might say that evolution is the unfolding of inherent possibilities. In Aristotelian terms, we could say that evolution entails a movement from potentiality (Greek, *dynamis*) to actuality (Greek, *energeia*). Since this unfolding involves an acquisition of form for a specific end or purpose, a *telos*, where intelligible form, *eidos*, serves as the model or template for sensible form, *morphē*, an authentic theory of evolution must include both formal and final causality.

This, however, goes against the modern biological understanding of evolution as “the genetic transformation of populations through time, as a result of genetic variation and subsequent environmental

¹ Editor’s Note: This essay comprises the introductory chapter of the author’s book *From Logos to Bios. Evolutionary Theory in Light of Plato, Aristotle & Neoplatonism* (New York: Angelico Press, 2018), with slight modifications. Reprinted in *Sacred Web* with the publisher’s permission.

Gilson, Etienne, *From Aristotle to Darwin and Back Again. A Journey in Final Causality, Species, and Evolution*, trans. John Lyon (San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 2009), 59.

² Cutsinger, James S., “On Earth as it is in Heaven,” 2007, 11. http://www.cutsinger.net/pdf/earth_as_it_is_in_heaven.pdf

impact on the rates of reproductive success,”³ which recognizes only material and mechanical factors as causes of biodiversity. However, in the words of the medieval scholar Richard the Englishman, “Nothing can be produced from a thing that is not contained in it; by this fact, every species, every genus or every natural order develops within the proper limits to it and bears fruits according to its own kind and not according to an essentially different order.”⁴ That is to say, lifeforms unfold according to pre-determined inner possibilities, although external factors do play a secondary role, as, for instance, in the geographical distribution of a species.

It is popularly held that the idea of evolution results from a modern scientific outlook and effectively replaces previously held theological doctrines on Divine creation, but in reality its origin lies in metaphysics and is grounded in an understanding of reality as a great Chain of Being reaching from God down to inanimate matter. However, “the evolutionary chain of living organisms in post-Darwinian biology is none other than the secularized and temporalized version of the traditional metaphysical doctrine of gradation or the ‘great chain of being’ of the western tradition.”⁵

In his essay *Gradation and Evolution*, Traditionalist author Ananda Coomaraswamy draws a similar distinction between the traditional, metaphysical doctrine of gradation and the modern, mechanistic theory of evolution. According to the metaphysical view, nothing in the world happens by chance—rather, what happens is always the realization of a possibility, so that all living beings are held to be physical manifestations of inherent possibilities.⁶ In this connection, the Swiss metaphysician Frithjof Schuon compares the evolution of the cosmos, and by extension all life in it, to embryonic development: “In the same way the whole cosmos can only spring from an embryonic state which contains the

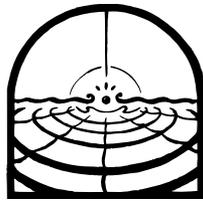
³ Blackburn, Simon, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 123.

⁴ Quoted in Burckhardt, Titus, “Cosmology and Modern Science,” in *The Sword of Gnosis. Metaphysics, Cosmology, Tradition, Symbolism*, ed. Jacob Needleman (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1974), 147.

⁵ Bakar, Osman, “The Nature and Extent of Criticism of Evolutionary Theory,” in *Science and the Myth of Progress*, ed. Mehrdad Zarandi (2003): 164. www.worldwisdom.com/public/library/default.aspx.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 166; Coomaraswamy, Ananda. *What is Civilization? And other essays* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1989), 70.

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