



Book Review

Robert J. Richards and Michael Ruse, *Debating Darwin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016, xvi + 299 pp., illus., \$30.00.

For a brief period in the 1980s, counter-culture hero and acid-tripper Timothy Leary took to the road with Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy and debated before college audiences issues of politics, American society, and human nature. Over a much longer period, in the rather more austere setting of history of science meetings, philosopher of biology Michael Ruse and historian of biology Robert J. Richards have informed and entertained a different set of auditors with their intellectual skirmishes on how best to interpret Charles Darwin, evolutionary biology, the foundations of human morality, and more. One could easily get enough of Leary and Liddy in a single performance, but the typical history of science meeting has not been the ideal place to get a full sense of what Ruse and Richards have been arguing about. The standard scenario of a brief scholarly paper followed by a few minutes of repartee simply does not suffice. The pleasure of the present volume is that it gives the reader a chance to consider at length and at leisure two eminent interpreters of Darwin providing contrasting views of how to make historical sense of Darwin.

Ruse and Richards insist from the start of their book that what they have to offer here is more than “simply two good friends having a game of intellectual handball.” Their differences, they allow, bear “on our understanding not only of nature writ large, but also on human nature and on the moral character of our species” (p. x). The book begins with each author providing an elegant, extended essay devoted to Darwin and Darwin’s intellectual development. Each author then offers a detailed critique of the other. The book then concludes with an engaging epilogue treating very briefly (1.) the history of evolutionary biology since the *Origin of Species*; (2.) the problem of human consciousness; and (3.) “Religion and God.”

The authors start with decidedly different assessments of Darwin’s intellectual development. For Ruse, Darwin represented a “quintessentially English” (or British) tradition. Darwin’s view of the operations of nature, according to Ruse, reflected a British worldview

exemplified in the writings of the likes of Adam Smith, Thomas Robert Malthus, and Archdeacon William Paley. Richards, on the other hand, sees Darwin as a much more cosmopolitan thinker, a man whose multiple intellectual sources included German Romanticism. That wellspring of thought, argues Richards, provided Darwin with a more teleological, more progressive, and more moral outlook on nature and evolution than he could have imbibed from the general atmosphere of an industrializing world power and the writings of his own countrymen.

From Ruse's perspective, Darwin took the Malthusian theme of struggle for existence and found there the key to understanding the great hurdle that the English tradition of natural theology had posed for any English naturalist, namely, how to explain adaptation, i.e., all the wondrous mechanical structures and instincts that made the different species so admirably suited to the conditions of their existence. This was the point that Paley had so forcefully argued in offering these characters as testimony to the existence of a wise and benevolent Creator, but natural selection gave Darwin a way to account for adaptation by appealing to general natural laws, not to God's immediate handiwork. However, as both Ruse and Richards insist, for the early Darwin, at least, nature's laws were, as Darwin put it in a letter to Asa Gray, "expressly designed by an omniscient Creator" (p. 47).

Richards grants the importance of the British natural theological tradition for Darwin's thinking. He allows that even if Darwin later came to characterize himself as an "agnostic," Darwin "constructed his theory initially under the assumption that mind was at work in the universe," an assumption that carried with it ideas about the progressive character of evolution, the end goal of evolution, and "the moral structure of nature," and these, says Richards, were ideas that Darwin "never abandoned" (p. 85). Richards insists, nonetheless, that among the various sources of Darwin's thinking there was another strand of thought that, together with natural theology, was "especially prominent and determinative" (p. 84). This was a complementary set of ideas from the German Romantics – most notably Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Alexander von Humboldt, and Carl Gustav Carus. From their writings, directly or indirectly, Darwin received not only an aesthetic appreciation of nature but also the idea of archetypal structures and a general sense of higher powers coursing through and bringing unity to nature.

Conjoined with their different views of where Darwin drew his inspiration, Ruse and Richards provide different assessments of Darwin's use of metaphors, where Darwin stood on the question of the importance of individual versus group selection, whether or not Darwin

regarded evolution as essentially progressive (and the extent to which Darwin viewed man as evolution's goal), and the place of morality in the evolutionary process.

The authors allow that there is much about Darwin on which scholars today in fact agree. However, the book does not signal additional areas where Darwin scholars perhaps do not agree. Curiously, while the book says a good deal about Darwin's thoughts on human evolution, the authors make no effort to engage with the argument elaborated by Adrian Desmond and James Moore in their book, *Darwin's Sacred Cause: How a Hatred of Slavery Shaped Darwin's Views on Human Evolution*.

Chicago University Press is well known for publishing handsome books, and this book is no exception. The only flaw this reviewer noticed was a tiny glitch that Spell Check could not find, a reference by Richards to "solider" rather than "soldier" bees (p. 166), which summons up an interesting image regarding the advantages some bees might have over others. As for the book's title, *Debating Darwin*, this might lead an unsuspecting creationist to purchase the book, hoping to find ammunition there against evolution and natural selection. If so, he or she would be sorely disappointed. Richards and Ruse are debating each other, not looking for flaws in Darwin's thinking (though not apotheosizing him either).

The authors' debate is learned, witty, engaging, and even passionate. Students and Darwin scholars alike will be able to read this volume with interest and enjoyment and be inspired to go back to Darwin's own writings, especially to Darwin's early notebooks, the *Origin of Species*, and the *Descent of Man* in the continued effort to comprehend Darwin in his historical context.

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