Book

A reappraisal of Ernst Haeckel

The American Creationists, those folk who believe that the earth was created in 6 days, 6000 years ago, have fought long and hard to get their beliefs included in the science curricula of state-funded schools in the USA. Thus far, they have met with little success. A recent tactic is to claim that Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution through natural selection is morally pernicious and should not be fodder for young minds. “Darwin to Hitler” is the new mantra, and it is being pushed non-stop in the mega-churches of the nation. Making their case, the Creationists at once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood once focus on Darwin’s great German supporter, evolutionary morphologist Ernst Haeckel, and argue that he stood...
antireligion in quite the way he did, although he was certainly not alone in doing this. Huxley may have wanted Haeckel to moderate his language, but scientists like Huxley were then working flat out to establish a place for serious professional science and they knew that their opponents too often were people of the cloth who wanted nothing of the secular, post-Enlightenment forces that science represented. There was a battle to be fought and Haeckel had the guts to fight it. Relatedly, however, Haeckel was at times reckless to beyond the point of foolishness. Moreover, the critics of his diagrams did have a good point: his illustrations of the similarities of early embryos were an artifact of the use of the same diagram to represent dog, chicken, and turtle. Although Haeckel removed these in later editions of his works, the damage was done.

Third, the charges of being a proto-Nazi are wrong to the point of being ludicrous. Haeckel, like almost everyone else in the 19th century (including Darwin), stands indicted of racism. The western obsession with organic adaptations. For Darwin, ultimately, what needed explaining was the exquisite design of the hand and the eye, the focus of the natural theologians like Archdeacon Paley. For Haeckel, ultimately, what needed explaining were the isomorphisms—what came to be known as homologies—between organisms of different species or even greater groups. I see overlap with Darwin. I do not see the identity that Richards finds.

Fourth, was Haeckel as much in the Darwinian tradition as Richards claims? That he was a Darwinian is beyond doubt. That Darwin appreciated Haeckel’s work is also beyond doubt. The Descent of Man is openly generous in praise of Haeckel’s writings. Nevertheless, I sense that Haeckel is more truly a child of German Romanticism—of Goethe in particular—than of the empiricist forces driving Darwin. I find the defining heuristic of Haeckel’s work in the Romantics’ obsession with underlying patterns or archetypes, Baupläne, rather than in the British obsession with organic adaptations. For Darwin, ultimately, what needed explaining was the history of scientific studies, and concludes that we do not remember our first 2 years. Indeed, most of us recall nothing before our fourth birthdays. The reason for this early childhood amnesia is presumably either that the nervous system of the brain is still developing, or that language is yet to develop. If correct, this deals a blow to those who believe in recovering repressed memories from infancy. It comes as no disappointment to Sabbagh, and he offers a detailed demolition of the claims of the “recovered memory” movement. For Sabbagh “all memory, whatever age it is laid down or recalled, is unreliable.”

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In brief

Book Making memories
Albert Einstein described his earliest memory from before the age of 4 years. His father showed him a magnetic compass, and the “determined” behaviour of its needle intrigued him. “I can still remember—or at least I believe I can remember—that this experience made a deep and lasting impression upon me. Something deeply hidden had to be behind things.”

His appealing recollection fits the thesis of Remembering Our Childhood, Karl Sabbagh’s lively investigation of the science of early memory and its medical, social, and legal implications. Memories, he maintains, do not resemble images on a videotape, as widely believed, or seal impressions in mental wax, as Socrates believed; instead they are constructed, indeed created, during recall out of cues that elicit the memory and fragments of experience originally stored in the brain. No doubt little Einstein really was fascinated by his first compass, but the adult scientist may have constructed the “deep impression” out of later experiences, helped perhaps by family retelling. As Charles Darwin remarked of his earliest memory before that age of 4 years, “from hearing the thing so often repeated, one obtains so vivid an image, that it cannot be separated from memory”. Sabbagh introduces the reader to a collection of early memories gathered from friends and acquaintances, which he then examines in the light of scientific studies, and concludes that we do not remember our first 2 years. Indeed, most of us recall nothing before our fourth birthdays. The reason for this early childhood amnesia is presumably either that the nervous system of the brain is still developing, or that language is yet to develop. If correct, this deals a blow to those who believe in recovering repressed memories from infancy. It comes as no disappointment to Sabbagh, and he offers a detailed demolition of the claims of the “recovered memory” movement. For Sabbagh “all memory, whatever age it is laid down or recalled, is unreliable.”

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