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Julian Huxley's Confession

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The history of any science often reveals aspects of that science that have escaped attention in the intervening years. As someone so wisely put it -"The one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history." I present, in this brief essay, one particularly revealing demonstration of that phenomenon, one that is especially significant to the current status of the Darwinian hypothesis.

Julian Huxley was the grandson of the distinguished Thomas Henry Huxley, known as "Darwin's bulldog" for his spirited defense of Darwin's theory of evolution. Like his illustrious grandfather Julian Huxley became a major spokesperson for Darwinism when in 1942 he published his "Evolution: The Modern Synthesis."

Two years earlier, Richard B. Goldschmidt had published "The Material Basis of Evolution" in which he had in effect dismissed the corpuscular gene as the evolutionary unit and instead proposed that it was the chromosome and its internal structure, which had served to direct evolutionary change. It is difficult to imagine two books more opposed in perspective.

Huxley referred to Goldschmidt some 28 times, yet remained a convinced selectionist Darwinian nevertheless. It is important to remember that Darwin wholeheartedly subscribed to Lyell's Uniformitarian Doctrine; namely, that the forces we now see shaping the world are the same forces that have operated in the past. While that is what most geologists still accept there is no *a priori* justification for extending that concept to the living world. That is what makes what I am about to present all the more significant.

Huxley's book ends with the chapter "Evolutionary Progress." On page 571, seven pages before the end he presents the following synopsis. For emphasis I have italicized key words and phrases but otherwise it is verbatim.

"Evolution is thus seen as a series of *blind alleys*. Some are extremely short - those leading to new genera and species that either *remain stable or become extinct*. Others are longer - the lines of adaptive radiation within a group such as a class or subclass, which run for tens of millions of years before coming up against their *terminal blank wall*. Others are still longer the lines that have in the past led to the development of the major phyla and their highest representatives; their course is to be reckoned not in tens but in hundreds of millions years. But all in the long run *have terminated blindly*. That of the echinoderms, for instance, reached its climax before the end of the Mesozoic. For the arthropods, represented by their highest group, the insects, *the full stop* seems to have come in the early Cenozoic: even the ants and bees *have made no advance* since the Oligocene. For the birds, the Miocene *marked the end*; for the mammals, the Pliocene."

I was amazed to read this summary and was curious to find out what prompted Huxley to include it at the end of his book, as it would seem to negate much of what preceded it. Where did he get the notion that evolution was finished? This I feel I was able to do from a paper by the anti-Darwinian paleontologist Robert Broom. Huxley and Broom had corresponded on the subject as revealed by Broom:

“And a few zoologists are beginning to recognize that evolution is slowing down, if not quite stopped. In a letter I had from Professor Julian Huxley only a few months ago he says, ‘I have often thought about your idea of the fading out of evolutionary potency, and though I cannot pretend to agree with some of the philosophical corollaries which you draw from it, I more and more believe that it is of great importance as a fact.’” (Broom, 1933).

I was disappointed to discover that the only reference Huxley made to Broom was in a footnote on page 568:

“A small minority of biologists, such as Broom (1933), still feel impelled to invoke ‘spiritual agencies’ to account for progressive evolution, but their number is decreasing as the implications of modern selection theories are grasped.”

The reference to “spiritual agencies” by Broom was his suggestion that there had been a Plan, a word he capitalized.

Without referring to either Huxley or Broom, Pierre Grasse reached the same conclusions:

“Facts are facts; no new broad organizational plan has appeared for several hundred million years, and for an equally long period of time numerous species, animal as well as plant, have ceased evolving... At best, present evolutionary phenomena are simply slight changes of genotypes within populations, or substitution of an allele with a new one.” (Grasse, *The Evolution of Living Organisms*, 1977 page 84.)

and:

“The period of great fecundity is over; present evolution appears as a weakened process, declining or near its end. Aren’t we witnessing the remains of an immense phenomenon close to extinction? Aren’t the small variations which are being recorded everywhere the tail end, the last oscillations of the evolutionary movement? Aren’t our plants, our animals, lacking some mechanisms which were present in the early flora and fauna?” (Ibid, page 71).

I unhesitatingly answer yes to each of Grasse’s three questions and I hope others can as well.

The reason I have presented this brief essay is to demonstrate that, even from within the Darwinian establishment, grave doubts have surfaced concerning its basic tenets from one of their most prominent spokespersons. I am not surprised Huxley is rarely referenced these days.

References

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