
A PHILOSOPHER LOOKING
AT EVOLUTION.
WHY THIS GIVES MEANING
TO MY LIFE

MICHAEL RUSE

I have been a professional philosopher now for over fifty years and this question at the head of my essay is one that I have pondered over many times and indeed still do. I am a philosopher of science with a particular interest in evolutionary biology and its history so what I have to say may be of some interest to the readers of *Ludus Vitalis*.

The most obvious answer is that I am an educator. I have taught many generations of students. You start to feel really old when someone in your class says to you, not that you taught my parents, but that you taught one of my grandparents! I would like to think that my teaching has been important, making a difference to young people, not so much giving them job skills—frankly, you don't go to a philosopher for those!—but in teaching them about important ideas and instilling a sense of self-worth, both thinking intellectually and acting morally.

Yet from the first, I never really felt that this was all I should be doing. For many of my colleagues, being good teachers is first, second, and third of their lives and practices. And one hundred and first, one hundred and second, and one hundred and third. I admire them immensely and in many respects I envy them. I don't mean that in a condescending way. A good and dedicated teacher is making value, is contributing to society in a way beyond anyone else. What greater task or privilege could there be than passing on what we have to the next generation, encouraging them to take and then to build? And not to ask for thanks, for I always say that that the greatest thanks are what they in turn do for their next generation.

I, however, was always driven to write, to do research. I am glad I have had my students, I am glad I have had my family, otherwise I would do nothing but write and research and be a very dull fellow indeed. Although I never took a biology class in my life, early in my career I discovered the theory of evolution and its father, Charles Robert Darwin, and from then until now I have thought about and written about Darwin and his great theory.

They say that if you know how much money you have, you are not rich enough. The same is true of publications. If you know how many articles carry your name, how many books you have written or edited, then you have not done enough! I do know that I have written philosophically about evolutionary biology and also historically about Darwin and evolution. I have tried also to take biology and apply it to philosophy arguing that so important an idea must have major implications for the ways in which we think and act.

Fortunately—at least I think it is fortunate—I have spent a lot of my time teaching undergraduates, often students from the sciences who know little or nothing about philosophy. This has meant that necessarily I have developed skills at communicating in a straightforward and non-complicated fashion. I like to think that this reflects into my writing, and have pushed me to write extensively in the non-professional area—blogs, newspapers, magazines, even *Playboy* once! From the responses I get, I know that I am giving others, including the general public, things to ponder and with which to disagree!

Most importantly of all for me has been my engagement in the science/religion debate. Over thirty years ago now the American biblical literalists, the so-called Creationists, started to push hard to have their ideas taught in American state-supported high schools, in the science classes. Because of my interest in evolution, especially my knowledge about Darwin—in 1979 I published an overview of the Darwinian Revolution—I was increasingly drawn into this debate, appearing several times on the same platform as some of the leading Creationists, including Henry H. Morris, co-author of *Genesis Flood*, and Duane T. Gish, author of *Evolution: The Fossils Say No!*

Then in 1981 I appeared as a witness for the American Civil Liberties Union, in the State of Arkansas, when it challenged the constitutionality of a new law insisting on the teaching of Creationism alongside evolution. It is not often a philosopher is asked to testify as to his expertise, but I was able to supply a formal characterization of science, showing that evolution fit the bill and that Creationism did not, and I am glad to say that my opinion prevailed. Or I should be a little more modest and say that our opinion prevailed, for I was one of a number of witnesses that included the theologian Langdon Gilkey, the geneticist Francisco J. Ayala, and the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould. (Based on my testimony, this was the set of criteria that were taken to be definitive of science and not religion, that is of evolutionary thinking and not Creationism: 1. It is guided by natural law; 2. It has to be explanatory by reference to natural law; 3. It is testable against the empirical world; 4. Its conclusions are tentative, i.e., are not necessarily the final word, and 5. It is falsifiable.)

In the thirty years since then I have been much engaged in the controversy over the relationship between science and religion and for what it is worth have managed to reap the scorn both of the Creationists, or more recently the supporters of their new project, Intelligent Design Theory (that claims that every now and then God intervenes to keep the process of creation on track) and of the so-called New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens, who argue that religion is not just wrong but morally pernicious. I have tried to argue for a middle position, for what is known in some circles with contempt (but which I embrace with pride) as “accommodationism.”

I continue to write on this topic and to lecture extensively. I would like to think that my work is intensely value-laden and that in my way I am contributing to society. Although born in England and having lived most of my professional life in Canada, I now work in the United States of America. It goes without saying that this is a deeply polarized society, with religion being a major cause. On the one side, you have those who embrace evolution, often reject religion, and promote liberal causes like abortion on demand, feminism, gay rights, and much more. On the other side, you have those who embrace religion, often of a Protestant evangelical variety, and who promote conservative causes, like outlawing abortion, wanting a more traditional role for women and family, denying homosexual equality, and much more. I cannot pretend my work bridges the gap and as an avowed evolutionist I am obviously much more on one side than the other. But I would like to think that my work can help build bridges, if not with those of my generation with the young, and such a thought is deeply satisfying.

To conclude, I will list some of my books pertinent to this short account. Those with an asterisk (*) have been translated into Spanish.

ON THE PHILOSOPHY OF EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY: **The Philosophy of Biology*. London: Hutchinson, 1973. **Sociobiology: Sense or Nonsense?* Dordrecht, Holland: Reidel, 1979. **Taking Darwin Seriously: A Naturalistic Approach to Philosophy*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986. *The Philosophy of Human Evolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

ON THE HISTORY OF EVOLUTIONARY BIOLOGY: **The Darwinian Revolution: Science Red in Tooth and Claw*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979. *Monad to Man: The Concept of Progress in Evolutionary Biology*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996. *Charles Darwin*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Darwin and Evolutionary Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

ON THE SCIENCE/RELIGION RELATIONSHIP: *But is it Science? The Philosophical Question in the Creation/Evolution Controversy*. Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1988. **Can a Darwinian be a Christian? The Relationship between Science and Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001. *The Evolution-Creation Struggle*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 2005. *Science and Spirituality: Making Room for Faith in the Age of Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.