
THE ROMANTIC GRANDEUR OF THAT VIEW OF LIFE

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Robert J. Richards, *Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory*, The University of Chicago Press, 2013.

With his recent book, *Was Hitler a Darwinian? Disputed Questions in the History of Evolutionary Theory*, Robert Richards has written a neat book in the domain of the history of science. This circumstance nonetheless, does not refrain such stupendous piece of scholar research from having considerable value for other areas of concern regarding the work on the biological sciences. Philosophers of biology much in particular will benefit in no scant measure from considering the moral of the book which can in turn be expressed in the form of a tautology-like historical truism of misleading triviality: *it does not matter what we can make of his figure at times, Charles Darwin himself was not a Neodarwinian*. The reason I regard such lemma as misleadingly clear is because there is not doubt that this much may prove all too easy to forget in light of the heuristic vigor of the current version of evolutionary theory. It is by all accounts clear also that Richards has a point here. It is one that should not be neglected by any philosopher of science worth her salt: any confusion between what Darwin thought and the sort of conclusions that Neodarwinian theory entails as a scientific construction ought to be avoided carefully.

The book constitutes a collection of eight different essays plus a very fertile “Introduction” on the nature of history as an intellectual endeavor, which deserves to be read carefully. While each one of the chapters makes independent sense in isolation, it is also the case that the whole of the volume keeps some unity, as it seems to be articulated under the following proviso: it is methodologically not advisable for anyone—whether historian or philosopher—to try and create a Darwin of her own when discussing about *Sir Charles*. This much is again surely true, although it may well be that the only way to understand the past is from an inescapably *presentist standpoint* (for, as the author wisely observes in the introduction,

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such is the very particular nature of the in-existence of the past), yet this motto is hardly an excuse for a misrepresentation of the philosophical atmosphere in which the Darwinian theory was first raised as it is accounted for in (exhaustively) fine detail in Robert Richards' work.

The essay from which the book takes its title is noteworthy in this regard. Many advocates of the doctrine of the Intelligent Design would argue (as indeed some regularly do) that Darwinism is flawed because of its alleged influence over Hitler's ideas. Indeed, one almost can listen some people lamenting with a solemn tone the indirect responsibility of evolutionary theory in the making of the Holocaust, and setting the case as an example for the democratic societies of the day to stand away from evolution teaching. Robert Richards' analysis resounds aloud in this connection to show why this line of argument is fallacious. Even if such influence held historically, that unfortunate fact about Hitler's intellectual background would prove nothing with regard to the truth of the theory. Nevertheless, there is more to the discussion that just this epistemological point however important it may be; the case is cogently argued too that for any interesting meaning of the world "Darwinian" Hitler was far from being one. In this light, the chapter reconstructs lucidly Hitler's conception of the stability of races in the *Mein Kampf*, and shows how his viewpoint on the matter hardly connects with the Darwinian understanding of species transformation. Additionally, the essay also goes on to research on the sources of Hitler's usage of the world "struggle", obviously central to the Nazi political lexicon, and demonstrates that, far from being informed by Herbert Spencer works (let alone Darwin), it dates back to the footsteps of various nineteenth century proponents of racialism such as Arthur Gobineau and Houston Steward Chamberlain. Also, Richard's argument indicates strongly that Darwinian biology did not actually occupy during the National socialist years a central position in German academia, which one would undoubtedly tend to expect it to be granted if Charles Darwin had been Hitler's cultural hero.

Chapters 1, 3 and 4 are devoted to pursue the impact of the romantic milieu in which *The Origin of Species* was first conceived. Richards' conclusion is equally unequivocal in this regard. Not that Charles Darwin did not amend some of his views later on and, certainly, not that the current state of the evolutionary theory needs to coincide with all that Darwin thought at every state of his intellectual evolution. Whatever the case, Richards controversially argues, there was a room in the first versions of the theory for teleology and moral purpose to direct the course of evolution to the production of human beings and their moral sentiments. It is obvious that this is not exactly a popular point to make these days, considering the current state of the art in the arena of the studies on evolutionary theory. Most scholars would, no doubt, take this part of

Richards' argument with a distance without even having a look at the evidence he deploys. It is conceivable too that some would aptly agree with Dan Dennett's response to the historical evidence in question: *I don't care a damn what Darwin said, it is wrong!* Perhaps rightly so. After all, it is plain for all to see that that teleology is long gone when it comes to the logic of the Neodarwinian thinking. In any event, and unless we abide by the wrong class of presentism, we will always have to recognize that the historical record shouldn't be ignored in history of science. In such historical sense Robert Richards point also needs to be granted.

The critique of Elliott Sober's *Did Darwin Write The Origins Backwards?* which chapter 3 puts forward, stands out intriguingly in this connection. The reason this argument constitutes a compelling discussion is the following. Richards objects to Sober on methodological naturalism regarding Darwin's theory and he does so on his own account of Darwin attitude towards a deity controlling the evolutionary change of organisms. While it is relatively easy to see that he might be right if the debate is to be construed historically (for, if Richards' historiography is sound, Darwin did not practice the sort of naturalism as we understand it today), it is also true that considering the current state of affairs in biology, evolutionary theory implies no ontological commitment about the existence of a supernatural entity. Regardless of what Darwin may have thought about it, the logic of evolutionary biology is *naturalistic*. This argument suggests that the aforementioned comment of Dennet, contemptuous as it is, may be right.

Under the provocative title "Darwin's principle of divergence: *Why Fodor was almost right,*" chapter 3 contends that Darwin's theory as it was first built requires a principle of divergence to promote the change of the organic traits for the selection to work upon and, this being so, Darwin's evolutionary doctrine cries out for an intelligent agency to direct the process of evolution. Even if he would describe himself as an agnostic in the years to come, there is literary evidence in *The Origin* about Darwin contemplating a teleological purposive agent when construing his theory. This is why Robert Richards, refreshingly—and ironically enough if I am not mistaken—sustains that while Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini critique on the logic of the theory of evolution by natural selection is flawed beyond repair when applied to the present-day version of evolutionary theory, yet it could have a case if amended to target Charles Darwin's own construction instead. Note, however, that in that case it follows that Darwin would still be in a safe ground to resist Fodor's clumsy attack. Simply put, it is true, Richard grants Fodor, that the NS in Darwin's original theory needs to be capable of telling the adaptation from the free-riders... *and it does tell.*

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 contain an intelligent vindication of the heritage of three figures of the history of evolutionary thinking. Whereas the chapter 5 explores Herbert Spencer's theory in relation to that of Darwin, 6 and 7 do justice to the work of Ernst Haeckel (to whom Richards had already devoted a previous book), cleaning his name from the charge of scientific fraud in relation to his illustrations of embryological development. Finally, chapter 8 shows that the Darwinian concept of evolution also gained remarkable influence in the arena of linguistics and does so by means of a detailed account of the work of August Schleicher on language evolution.

In brief, the historian of evolutionary theory as well as the philosopher of biology will find this book both relevant and delightful. For those working in any discipline that has to do with the divide between history and philosophy of science, *Was Hitler a Darwinian?* is an ineludible reading.