

Book Review
Darwin on Trial
By Phillip E. Johnson

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Much has changed in this world since 1991. To begin to attempt to detail the ways which the world has changed since that time would be almost an insurmountable task. The types of computers and gadgets that were state of the art in 1991 are the base operating systems for children's toys these days. Things have exponentially shifted in the last 22 years. The scientific world has accomplished a great deal in this same amount of time. There have been amazing advances in many fields of science. Even the scientific paradigm termed Darwinism or Neo-Darwinism has been subject to scrutiny and change. Beginning in and around 1991 major challengers began to emerge to this orthodox system of thinking. One of these challengers who opposed this orthodoxy was Phillip E. Johnson from the Harvard School of Law and Emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley. In the groundbreaking work *Darwin on Trial* Johnson attacks the foundations of Darwinist dogma by approaching from an investigative legal perspective. Johnson provides the nature of his background, "Before undertaking this task I should say something about my qualifications and purpose. I am not a scientist but an academic lawyer by profession, with a specialty in analyzing the logic of arguments and identifying the assumptions that lie behind those arguments."¹ The same logic and reasoning which undergirds the practice of law provided the system of inquiry which produced this great work. While authors such as Michael Behe and Stephen Meyer approached this topic from a scientist's point of view and Lee Strobel from an investigative journalist point of view, Johnson approaches from a legal angle which was and is invaluable in today's day and age. Chapter by chapter in this work Johnson tackles some of the major issues which cry out for cross examination. It is therefore the goal of this review to point out the numerous highlights of this work while also addressing some minor concerns.

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In the opening chapter of this work Johnson logically begins with his “wheelhouse” and that is detailing the history of Darwinist concepts from a legal perspective and how things have developed in and through the court systems here in the United States. In doing so Johnson follows the thread of these concepts from their conception until the current time and how they have appeared in legal battles. The most famous of these accounts was the Scopes Monkey trial. In this chapter Johnson points out the misuse of terms and the misapplication of definitions in and around many legal settings. He points back to these misunderstanding and misapplications later on in other chapters.

In chapter 2 Natural Selection is investigated. Natural selection or the survival of the fittest is the major force which Darwin extrapolated to undergird his molecules to man hypothesis. Many people are very familiar with Darwin’s observations on the Galapagos Islands where he did indeed witness natural selection taking place. These observations were the basis for his ideology. The scientific world since his time has taken natural selection, micro and macro evolution, survival of the fittest, mutations, etc., and placed them all under the umbrella of the term evolution. In this chapter Johnson sets out to properly define from a scientific and a philosophical view point exactly that which is termed natural selection. He rightly points out that natural selection has it’s limits. Concerning the changes that happen with dogs he states, “In other words, the reason that dogs don’t become as big as elephant, much less change into elephants, is not that we just haven’t been breeding them long enough. Dogs do not have the genetic capacity for that degree of change, and they stop getting bigger when the genetic limit is reached.”² This discussion of natural selection was solid. One point that this chapter could have made but did not centers on the idea of genetic information being lost as natural selection takes place. As “kinds” sort themselves out, genetic information is lost one generation to the next.

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The same is true of mutations. Genetic information is reduced with each successive event. For evolution to be true then genetic information must be gained, which has yet to this day to be observed in any shape or form.

In chapter 3 the idea of mutations is tackled. In this chapter the idea of the necessary steps that would need to take place to produce a functioning eye is given as a great example. In discussing the eye, Johnson offers this counter-explanation to the idea that 5% of an eye could offer 5% sight, “The fallacy in that argument is that “5 percent of an eye” is not the same thing as 5 percent of normal vision. For an animal to have any useful vision at all, many complex parts must be working together. Even a complete eye is useless unless it belongs to a creature with the mental and neural capacity to make use of the information...”³ In the following paragraphs Johnson seems to concede the earth is hundreds of millions years old by giving an example of a creature existing for this long while not adapting or mutating. A quote from later in the chapter made an excellent point, “The prevailing assumption in evolutionary science seems to be that speculative possibilities, without experimental confirmation, are all that is necessary... Nature must have provided whatever evolution had to have, because otherwise evolution wouldn’t have happened.”⁴ This example of begging the question is the exact type of thing which a trained logical thinker like Johnson would catch and rightly point out.

In chapter 4 Johnson tackles the fossil record. In this chapter he focuses mainly on the lack of transitional form and also and the pre-Cambrian explosion. In these two subjects he does an effective job of explaining the that fossil record should, in theory, be riddled with transitional forms and in fact it is not. Johnson elaborates; “Darwin conceded that the state of the fossil evidence was the “the most obvious and gravest objection which can be urged against my

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theory.”⁵ In line with this quote Darwin surmised that time was the only factor which was really at issue. Specifically, all that was needed was more time in order for the these transitional forms to emerge. Some 150 years later not one legitimate transitional form has been found and authenticated. Again throughout this chapter Johnson seems to concede the age of the earth to be in the hundreds of millions of years.

In chapter 5 the “Fact” of evolution is the subject of investigation. Here the scientific dogma of the nature of Darwin’s theory is examined. Johnson rightly exposes how this dynamic has taken place and is abused by the scientific community. The word theory is removed from it’s proper place without the bat of an eye these days. The misuse of the word “fact” in and around the subject of evolution is a serious problem. Johnson combats Stephen J Gould on this very subject, “Because Gould draws the line between fact and theory in the wrong place, the distinction is virtually meaningless. The theory to him is merely the theory of natural selection, and the “fact” is the fact that evolution may occur by chance mechanisms without influence from selection.”⁶

Johnson also offers this great quote concerning the misuse of terms, “The vocabulary of Darwinism inherently limits our comprehension of the difficulties by misleadingly covering them with the blanket term ‘evolution.’”

In the later chapters of the book Johnson touches on some very interesting topics. One of these is the idea of Prebiological Evolution. In this chapter, the idea of the “primordial soup” is examined. Darwin quoted in a letter gave rise to this idea which has since continued to soar, “... if we could conceive some warm little pond, with all sorts of ammonia and phosphoric salts, lights, heat, electricity, etc. present that a protein compound was chemically formed ready to

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undergo still more complex changes, at the present day such matter would be instantly devoured or absorbed, which would not have been the case before living creatures were formed.”⁷ This was simply an offhand discussion in a letter, but it had teeth; teeth that have grabbed on and not let go. Since that time the Miller-Urey experiment among others, have tried to replicate this “soup” with no serious success. In fact they only have succeeded in creating a poison rich environment where life is actually less possible. This fails to recognize two major issues even if these experiments were successful. First, intelligence and design are necessary to reach the desired end and secondly, from where did the ingredients for the soup come? The idea of something from nothing is not addressed or the fact the intelligence and design are necessary components of the experiments. Continuing his attack on prebiological evolution Johnson speaks to the possibility and probability of proteins, amino acids, chemicals, etc. organizing themselves into life. Johnson offers this famous quote from Fred Hoyle, “... that an organism emerged from a prebiotic soup is about as likely as that ‘a tornado sweeping through a junkyard might assemble a Boeing 747 from the materials therein.’ Chance assembly is just a naturalistic was of saying ‘miracle.’”⁸ And probably the best quote from this entire work centered on the famous scientist Francis Crick. Here Johnson sums up the scientific work of Crick, “When a scientist of Crick’s caliber feels he has to invoke undetectable spacemen, it is time to consider whether the field of prebiological evolution has come to an end. And yet, despite the absence of experimental success, many scientists remain confident that the problem will be solved in the foreseeable future.”⁹

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Another interesting topic which is broached in the later chapters is the idea of the rules of science. In this chapter Johnson spends a good deal of time explaining the ideology of Thomas Kuhn. The most intriguing idea from Kuhn is summed up by Johnson:

The most important of Kuhn's concepts is the paradigm, which is not a mere theory or hypothesis but a way of looking at the world that is influenced by cultural prejudice as well as by scientific observation and experience. According to Kuhn, 'An apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time.' Scientists, like the rest of us, view reality through the mist of ideas and assumptions that make up the paradigm.¹⁰

This description and analysis of Kuhn's ideas is spot-on. This describes much of the scientific world. The pursuit and discovery of ideas is sacrificed upon the altar of protecting already held ideas. This is not honest or scientific by definition. Johnson does an excellent job of explaining the very reality of this dynamic in our world today. To challenge a currently held dogmatic position like Darwinism is a dangerous proposition.

In conclusion, Phillip E. Johnson has put together a solid work which should be at the ready for any philosopher or apologist for the Christian faith. The true essence of this work which shines through is that the evidence speaks loudly against Darwin and his cohorts. Johnson has shown that the intellect is not at the center of this matter. He has shown this to be about the will of man; the will to not allow any possibility for a Theistic explanation, the will to suppress the knowledge of God; the will to ignore that which is evident. Now more than ever in Western civilization do the words of Paul ring ever true;

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous man shall live by faith." 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power

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and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. 21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. 22 Professing to be wise, they became fools...” Romans 1:16-22a
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