

DARWINISM AND PHILOSOPHY

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Suzanne Cunningham. *Philosophy and the Darwinian Legacy*. Rochester: U. of Rochester P., 1996. Pp. 293. US\$49.50.

For over a century there has been a running battle between the proponents of evolution and the proponents of religious fundamentalism concerning the validity of Darwin's theories. The stakes have been so high that from

time to time—most recently in litigation over the scientific status of creationism, a theory that holds that evolution is the work of a divine agency—Darwin's theories have been brought before the courts. In *Philosophy and the Darwinian Legacy*, Suzanne Cunningham reminds us of a less public but no less momentous controversy about Darwinism. This controversy was over the significance of Darwinism for the reconstruction of philosophy. This controversy over the soul of philosophy in the twentieth century did not involve religious fundamentalists (there is not even an entry about Creationism in the index of this work) but did involve secular philosophers such as Bertrand Russell. They considered Darwinism and while they did not reject his theories outright they treated them as marginal for philosophy. Darwin had fared better in the courts.

Cunningham's book sets out to restore Darwin for philosophy. She offers a fascinating historical account of the treatments Darwin's theories in contemporary philosophy as well as a number of important proposals for how a proper reading for Darwin could stimulate theories of perception and knowledge other than those favoured by contemporary philosophy. Cunningham as historian traces the arguments and (in her view) misreadings which led the two dominant schools of philosophy of the twentieth century—analytic philosophy, established by G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell, and phenomenology, established by Edmund Husserl—to consign Darwin's account of evolution to a philosophical limbo. Cunningham as philosopher argues that in these misreadings both schools have brought forward "misguided", abstract theories of perception and mental activity that have no regard for human needs.

Creationists might be delighted with the irony that Bertrand Russell, the most persistent and outspoken critic of religion, emerges in Cunningham's account as the thinker who delivers the severest criticisms of Evolution and Darwin's theories.¹ In a succinct and, so far as I know, the most concentrated exposition of Russell's views on this important subject in print, she shows how Russell's critique touches every element of his thought. As an analytic philosopher, following Moore, he rejects the view made popular by Herbert Spencer, that biological evolution implies moral progress. As a philosopher of science, he argues that the science of logic which offers timeless norms for thought, is more appropriate than biology and evolution as a paradigm for philosophical reflection on science. As a humanist Russell is especially bitter over the sinister influence of the concept of "struggle for

¹ See also her paper, "Herbert Spencer, Bertrand Russell, and the Shape of Early Analytic Philosophy", *Russell*, n.s. 14 (1994): 7–29.

existence" over the politics of the twentieth century.

The centrepiece of the book is a careful and stimulating rereading of Darwin's original ideas. An important part of Cunningham's strategy is to protect Darwin from Darwinians such as Herbert Spencer and from the spiritualization of evolution in thinkers such as Bergson. She plunges into the lion's den by calling for a return to Darwin's naturalism and a careful reappraisal of Darwin's fundamental concepts, especially the "struggle for existence". She knows that "struggle for existence" has been used to give scientific credentials to robber-baron capitalism, imperialism and racism. She argues, however, that this concept has been misinterpreted and misused. Her careful exegesis of "struggle for existence" in Darwin's context shows that he meant more than a struggle that was "red in tooth and claw". On the contrary it "comprises all the mental and cooperative efforts ... that contribute to an organism's success in coping with its environment" (p. 11). Thus for Darwin, Pericles' famous funeral oration in which the Athenian leader designates the physical, mental and spiritual attributes of the Athenian democracy as the basis of its strength could be an illustration of fitness in the "struggle for existence".

In summary Cunningham provides a valuable reading of the implications of Darwin's views and of the various readings of Darwinism in the recent history of philosophy. Followers of Dewey and Habermas, both philosophers whose theories are centred around a concept of human interest, will be delighted. Students of Russell will be forced to reconsider Russell's conception of philosophy, not because he always dismissed evolution and struggle for survival, but because in his so-called non-philosophical writings he took them quite seriously. In his famous essay on "The Ethics of War"² he explicitly supported a "red in tooth and claw" argument in stating that some wars that advanced civilization, among them the American war against the native peoples in the nineteenth century, were legitimate. Later, in his campaigns against war, especially nuclear war, he argued as a champion of human survival, and if he did not think that philosophy could argue for humanity's well-being he was convinced that some philosophers could help avert human self-destruction.

² Written in 1915 and reprinted in *Papers* 13.