

**EVOLUTION; A LECTURE READ
BEFORE THE NINETEENTH
CENTURY CLUB, IN THE CITY
OF NEW YORK, MAY 25, 1886**

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Evolution; A Lecture Read Before the Nineteenth Century Club, in the City of New York, May 25, 1886 by Noah Porter

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NOAH PORTER

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EVOLUTION.

A LECTURE

READ BEFORE THE

NINETEENTH CENTURY CLUB,

IN THE CITY OF

NEW YORK, MAY 25, 1886,

—BY—

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EX-PRESIDENT OF YALE COLLEGE.

—:O:—

HERBERT L. BRIDGMAN,

55 Park Place, New York.

1886.

EVOLUTION.

The first thought which occurs to the writer takes the form of a question—whether Evolution itself has not become so trite and time-worn as to be wearisome to all classes of thinkers and readers, and whether for this reason it were not better for all parties to leave it for a time and turn to some other topic;—whether both theologians and scientists have not become tired, the one of criticising and assailing and the other of explaining and defending it.

This suggests another question in the opposite direction; and that is whether such a lull in the conflict be not the best time to determine how the contest stands; whether, as the smoke lifts and the cannonading pauses over the field, we may not be in a better condition to estimate what each of the parties has gained or lost, and (which is of greater moment) what is to be the final issue.

In both these thoughts, I have assumed that the subject with which we have to do is not evolution as such, in any of its protean forms, but evolution as it is related to Christian theism. Evolution as a theory, fact or law, must stand or fall by its appropriate evidence, whatever that evidence may be, and whatever is its subject matter;—whether it concerns the production of a new variety of pigeons or grape vines, of cabbages or race horses, or whether it is supposed to explain the arrangements of the planetary system, and to say the last word concerning the origin of the universe. Were the doctrine limited to subject matters of this sort, even the highest and most comprehensive, and did it involve no consequences and hold no relations to Christian theism, or even to natural ethics, we might leave it to the schools of science. Or, if we should contend that it could not be limited to

science as such, but, in some of its forms at least, must involve, if it did not constitute, a philosophy or metaphysics, we might still be contented to leave it to the scientists and philosophers, to settle between themselves first, to which domain each question belongs, and subsequently, how each question should be determined according to the received methods and laws of science or philosophy, one or both.

But evolution, as it is commonly understood, is more than a scientific or philosophical theory. It concerns itself, in fact, with Christian theism and Christian ethics and all those conceptions of polity and jurisprudence on which Christian nations stand and from which Christian civilization has been nurtured. When we say this, we do not mean the theism, the ethics, the polity, the law, and the civilization which Christianity has created or modified or colored, but the theism and ethics and sentiment with which Christianity begins, which Christianity assumes and embodies as axiomatic truth, and to which it appeals as the inspirer of human affection and hope. If what is now popularly known as evolution shall become the prevailing philosophy, then these faiths, these feelings, and the conduct and character which they inspire, and, to some extent, the principles and institutions which they have sustained, must be abandoned forever by man and for man.

The position so often taken, that the doctrine of evolution is one with which theologians need not concern themselves, but should leave to the scientists and philosophers to decide, is a position which cannot be maintained, so long as evolution teaches or implies an atheistic philosophy, a materialistic psychology, or a sociological ethics.

We are well aware that the term evolution is used in several senses, and in limited applications; and in some of these senses and uses it is sound in philosophy, true in science, and not only harmless but wholesome in theology.

Evolution or development, in their noblest and fullest signification, as we shall show in place, may spiritualize

nature, ennoble man, and honor God. The evolution which we criticise is a composite of scientific theories, some true, others doubtful, and others false, which are held together and wrought into a fanciful philosophy by the very slenderest threads of analogy and elevated into a negative theology by a daring flight of professedly modest or agnostic reserve. It is the logic of this system with which we have to do—the logic of its separate constituents, and of the bonds which unite these constituents into the semblance of a coherent theory. These several elements we propose to consider, both separately and in combination. In presenting these elements we shall seek to follow the order of time and of thought after which they have successively come into form or being, or, to use the more technical language, have been evolved or developed. We shall show how one has suggested or produced another. This method will enable us to understand how the theory as a whole came into being, which of these successive growths is weak and which is strong, and whether the whole or any considerable portion of the accepted result is a coherent and trustworthy product of human thought.

1. As the first of these elements, we name Darwinism, or the doctrine of the variableness of species under the operation of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. The theory is perfectly legitimate as an hypothesis, and is supported by the unquestioned and unquestionable presence and operative force of the two tendencies or laws to which Darwin attached supreme importance. That there is in every living germ a capacity and tendency to vary from the parent, may be conceded as true, without any theory as to how much environment may have to do with the matter. The facts Darwin collected with such patient industry and described with such consummate skill, by no means carry the conclusion that these forces are sole or supreme, in determining the origin of species. One may go a long way with Mr. Darwin and yet fail to accept the special conclusion, which seems to

have been a mere piece of guess-work with him, that the origin of plant and animal life began with the three or four species, to which he accords the special dignity of coming from the hand of the Creator. The tendency to vary, as such, it should be observed, is, when strictly contested, an utterly unscientific factor, being neither conceived nor expressed in any definite relations of quantity or quality, and being therefore susceptible of any application or estimate which fancy may suggest. The same is true of the influence or modifying force of circumstances. It certainly cannot be unscientific on the one hand to recognize these agencies of environment as real, and, in a sense, measurable agencies, and also to concede to this variable and indefinite tendency to vary all the potency for which it may be worth, and yet on the other hand to refuse to acknowledge that these two are the only factors or even the leading factors in the production of species. It is no matter of wonder, therefore, that some very eminent scientists who accept the doctrine of the variability or transformation of what were formerly called species, within certain limits and those pretty widely extended, do not accept the operation of environment and the survival of the fittest as the sole or prominent agencies which originate or modify species.

That Darwin's doctrine is perfectly consistent with theism, is put beyond all question by the well-known fact that Darwin himself asserted his belief in an intelligent Creator. It is equally evident that he directly and indirectly recognized the indications of purpose and adaptation in the phenomena which he so brilliantly describes, and which indeed his special theory so eloquently suggests and confirms.

But every theory must stand or fall by the verifying experiment, or such a number and variety of indications as may be fairly taken as the equivalent of experiment or fact. The Darwinian theory, however strongly it may recognize certain forces and definitely estimate the laws of their action, must still be judged of by the scientific test. The evidence

of the actual organization within the historical period of what is universally accepted as a single new species (i. e., the evidence of experiment or fact), under the Darwinian law or any other law, is generally allowed to be very scanty and indecisive. The proof is indeed abundant that surprising changes have been wrought by artificial breeding, conspicuously in the instances of pigeons, race-horses, and swine, and various vegetables and flowers. It is equally beyond dispute that under certain natural conditions of special isolation, in which a special concentration and intensification of certain factors have found a confined and segregated arena, brilliant exemplifications have been exhibited, of the tendencies or forces which are the hope of the Darwinian theory. But all that is proved by these experiments is that, under these specialized circumstances, the anticipated results are produced up to a certain limit. We admit that this would suggest that possibly these forces might be so adjusted as to overcome any conceivable limits in any of these directions, viz.: as from a pigeon to breed ostriches and eagles, or the albatross and the penguin. But man cannot try these experiments with success beyond certain limits. The indications must take the place of experiment, and in order to do so must be manifold and decisive. Mere analogy and guess-work cannot supplement either. Experiments carry us in a certain direction for a certain distance. Analogy founded on probabilities points us onward, and gives us wings to follow; but analogy, so far as it is founded on fact and other indications, sternly bids us halt. It avails us but little to learn from Darwin that there may be an ample force in reserve, which tends to indefinite variation, and which might be called out by a special environment. To all this the stern logic of science replies, *There may be, but is there?* What is the evidence? There may be an indefinite tendency to vary, indeed, and there may be also a prevailing tendency to return to an original type. Is there not abundant evidence of the one as truly as of the other? The one as

an hypothesis is as legitimate as the other. The question with which we are concerned is the question of fact as supported by evidence. The only evidence possible is that of analogy founded on indications. The practical common-sense of mankind and the sagacious tact of most naturalists has usually decided in one direction, and that is, that under the present conditions or laws of being, within the historic period, the limits of well-defined species have never been and are not likely to be changed.

Our limits will not allow us to discuss the nature of species and the foundation of classification in the sciences of nature. The questions which may be asked concerning this topic were discussed by the Schoolmen, and also by Locke, in a more concrete method, before the days of Darwin. We are limited to the logic of Darwinism, and the evolutionists may not wander farther. The thoughtful student of Locke's Essay (Book III., Chap. 6) will find that Darwin did not utter the first word upon this question, even if he thinks he should have the last.

2. From the historic we turn to the prehistoric period, i. e., from the observations and experiments of man and nature, as observed and recorded by himself, to the experiments of nature as recorded upon the rocky strata, and as these were laid down in geologic times. And what do we find? We find a series of periods of undetermined length brought side by side, within a single field of view, presenting vivid pictures and distinct inscriptions, which give decisive and overwhelming evidence that, from one period to another, there has been a gradual advance from the simpler to the more complicated forms of life, both vegetable and animal. But concerning the processes or agencies by which the simpler have risen to the more complex, the record gives no answer. From the nature of the animals and vegetables, and their relations to one another, the evidence which is furnished is no stronger and no weaker, that new species have been evolved from the old solely by the Darwinian processes