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On Evolution, Warped Sociology, and Espousing Virtues

To the Editor:

I was surprised and then dismayed by the decision of the National Association of Scholars (NAS) to devote the 2024 spring issue of *Academic Questions* to evolution and an evolution theory that dresses up a recent version called the "selfish gene" theory (the genes changed because they saw the advantages) with a theory that organisms and their biochemical sub-units are cogent and ambitious, striving to change their genetic makeup in an effort to evolve themselves to something better. The idea of intelligent life in biochemical and lower forms of life exceeds my tolerance for the exotic and magical—science is supposed to be based on reliable evidence, not fashioning a theory that invents powers and forces that are founded on anthropomorphizing the cause of genetic history of events asserted to explain the taxonomic domain of living things.

I reviewed the six articles submitted by advocates of the new generation of evolutionary theorists for content and found that there was plenty of jargon from their specialty to consider and all the papers were well referenced for research that supported their assertions. However, the symposium writers failed to convince because in all the papers I never saw a cogent and lucid discussion of the mystical and magical powers of organisms and biochemical molecules that allowed for a progressive evolution of species diversity and extraordinary complexity. Want to make a grand proposal? Better have a good argument and some reliable evidence.

I will take the six writers in order.

Intro by Dr. J. Scott Turner

As the organizer of the symposium, Dr. Turner sets out the goal of moving from a position he asserts as a given—evolution is settled science—to promote the symposium's heterodox theories. He lays the groundwork for the symposium by his statement that "evolutionary science is a rich froth of competing ideas and vigorous discussions."

Dr. Turner asserts that the answer to the inadequate evolutionary theories of the past is characterized by:

- Skepticism about the Modern Synthesis (MS) theory of change and selection that attempts to deal with modern genetic knowledge. Such theories fail to deal with the historical evidence that shows those troublesome gaps.
- The belief that more recent knowledge of genetics opens up new ideas that selection should be exchanged for "living things actually exert a great deal of control over their own evolution: they have evolutionary agency." I am assured this is not a revival of the Dawkins selfish gene, but if it walks and talks like a selfish gene, it's a selfish gene theory with a new dress and story to tell.
- Turner continues—"Do organisms, in some still poorly understood way, want to evolve? Is evolution somehow intelligent?" Yeow, protein soups and organelles and cells and membranes that are self-aware and strive to contribute to evolution—what a concept. I would agree that poorly understood describes the level of knowledge of this magical thinking.

So here we go on a magic trip, a cherry picked set of writers who all think there is an intelligent force driving evolution, not random genetic variations with selection. NAS decided to put this symposium in their house journal but ignores those who reject Darwinism and have plenty of evidence in genetics, physiology, biochemistry, and probability theory to argue that the physics and chemical forces are still unknown that explain the appearance of diverse functional complexity. Might have been easier to marvel at the diversity and functional complexity and admit we don't know how it happens or where it's going. Instead, we get six writers who believe in a buffed-up version of Dawkins' selfish gene theory as the answer—chemicals have heretofore unknown powers and abilities—they think, they act, they care, they strive to be more than they are. Amazing.

I assert that the symposium fails because it doesn't provide what Dr. Turner recommends: "shouldn't evolution rather be taught as a long discourse, marked with humility rather than dogma, as philosophy rather than doctrine."

J. Scott Turner, in "Homeostasis and Purposeful Evolution":

- To restore evolutionary thought to being a science of life again, what is needed is a credible theory of life's purposeful nature, which includes phenomena such as intentionality, creativity, and intelligence.
- The missing philosophical nugget may be found in Aristotle's conception of the bioς, which is essentially an organism's internalized knowledge of what it intends to be.
- To be an adaptive interface, the cell membrane must also be a cognitive interface ... an intelligent interface, mobilizing changes in, say, the cell's internal catalytic milieu,

again so as to make adjustments that will sustain the life within. And all elements of the adaptive interface stream from the cell's own self-knowledge of what it intends to be.

The final flourish is, "The credible case can now be made that evolution is an intelligent, purposeful, and intentional process, which negates the fundamental premise of the Darwinian idea." This new evolutionist asserts that Darwin's theory of selection was negative—an accident, bad—because it was based on mutation and selection for survival, the new theory is about progress and being better on purpose. Be still my heart.

Nathalie Gontier, "Evolving Views on the Science of Evolution":

- Here, we trace the evolution of evolutionary thought through seven different research schools that have arisen since the introduction of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* ...
- Organisms also demonstrate anatomical, behavioral, and cognitive plasticity and flexibility in changing environments through their physiology or through learning.
- Reticulate evolution, the most advanced of the seven schools of evolutionary thought, in Ms. Gontier's opinion "is showing that adaptation heredity and fitness, constraints and affordances, speciation and extinction not merely Darwinian principle. They are also brought forth by reticulate mechanisms and processes of evolution. (I am breathless and confused. What's the pitch?)
- These scholars, as well as adherents of all different evolution schools are finding homes in the Third Way of Evolution movement ...

I am transfixed. I have to say Ms. Gontier knows her lexicon—and shows it. But along the way she failed to show me how she has discovered the evolutionary theory that really works.

Amelia Lewis, "Do Organisms Have Goals and Purpose?":

1. Neo-Darwinism fails to acknowledge organismal agency and teleology or the ability of the organism to interact dynamically with and to influence its physical and social environment in a goal directed manner.
2. The Extended Evolutionary Synthesis (EES) is a non-creationist alternative to traditional neo-Darwinian thinking, and in this paper, from within the context of the EES, she discusses how individuals not only respond to and manipulate their environment, but teleologically direct the course of their own evolution. (It is hard for me to go on with this BS, but I must.)

Lewis concludes:

- If we are to acknowledge sentience in at least some animal species ... then we need to acknowledge what that means for our understanding of living systems as a whole.

- These phenomena (complex animal activities like nest building, birdsong, and play can only be explained by complex teleology, a dynamic interplay of physical and cognitive processes which are under agential control, resulting from complex physiological functions and self-reinforcing (autocatalytic) cellular metabolic pathways.
- "What will (or did, in its evolutionary history) enable this living system to keep running at multiple levels of organization?"

Indeed that is the question, how? But the essay by Ms. Lewis didn't offer an answer, just a lesson in the use of scientific hocus pocus.

James Shapiro, "Evolution Is Neither Random Accidents nor Divine Intervention: Biological Action Changes Genomes":

As Shapiro works out of the University of Chicago, I had reason to expect he would give a better scientific paper to justify his inclusion in this mostly non-scientific symposium and he did not disappoint. He actually used genetics and biochemistry to articulate a mechanism of evolution that would explain the herky jerky nature of the historical fossil record and punctuated equilibrium. Along the way Dr. Shapiro gave an excellent paper on some essential cellular dynamics and biochemical phenomena. I did not detect in his paper any of the anthropomorphizing that has been discussed—in fact he gave a biochemical/biological theory for what might bump up the speed of evolution, one of the big reasons for the neo-evolutionary symposium. I felt better seeing some biochem and cellular biology discussed.

- The key to Dr. Shapiro's approach is "it is time to shift our basic concept of evolutionary variation from the traditional model of slow change from non-biological sources to a full biological model of rapid genome reorganization stimulated by challenges to reproduction."
- Dr. Shapiro concedes some space to the creationist versus Darwinist dichotomy and says both miss the important point of his paper: "living organisms possess many different means of altering their genomes ... interspecific hybridization (an exotic biochemical exchange of genetic material) is recognized as a rapid source of speciation."

Dr. Shapiro devotes the middle of his paper to an in-depth discussion of genomics to include more knowledge of what were once considered non-active segments of the DNA strand and large "inactive" areas of genes and chromosomes. He says they are not so silent, but are just not well understood and there is plenty of evidence to argue there are available mechanisms that could change an organism so much that it becomes a new species. He proposes eight reasons to discard previous theories on genetic changes ... Rather than the slow process of descent with variation by selection "the biological paradigm posits that organisms possess

inherent capacities for rapid concerted genomic innovations to evolve when species survival is endangered." Then he throws in a qualifier to save his theory: "One trigger for these innovations can be interspecific hybridization which will increase in frequency as mating pools shrink because of adverse conditions."

Dr. Shapiro has a special affection for interspecies hybridization because it allows for big jumps in genome content that would be the quick way, not the incremental way, for new species to arise. The good professor has an obvious problem—do disappearing organisms under threat become the gene stock for a new species? How else besides threat of extinction could organisms be inclined to do this magical interspecies hybridization—why should they at all—just because it can happen doesn't mean it will. What is the experimental evidence for what will increase interspecies hybridization?

Richard Vane-Wright, "Heterodox Thinking on Evolution and Radical Enlightenment":

- The Radical Enlightenment (of evolution) counters homogenization of interpretation through the conservation of diverse and incompatible ontologies ...
- After a lengthy discussion on the basics of Darwinian theory as modified by new knowledge in genetics, called the Modern Synthesis, Vane-Wright concludes there is likely to be a paradigm shift ...
- Vane-Wright appears to advocate James Shapiro's theory that allows for abandoning a DNA/gene-based theory and expanding the theory to include other sources of mutation and speciation.
- Mr. Vane-Wright even ventures into dark country when he suggests that Lamarck was right, genetics can change during the life of the subject so that inheritance is a different set of genes/DNA/chromosomes in the gametes, not a replica of half of the donor. My oh my.

Well that was quite an adventure. My conclusion is that if the NAS wanted to do it right they would have had a real debate on evolution and not an insider's debate among people who are lifetime advocates of descent with modification and selection that doesn't come anywhere near answering a fundamental question—how did we get to a spectacular diversity and functional complexity of life on earth. No evolutionary theory answers those questions. The "primordial soup" story is a joke, explosive appearance of living species are not explained. But most of all the evolution toward sentience, self-consciousness, and speech are not explained.

I am with the insightful genius Tom Wolfe. We don't know, may never know and some things are beyond our ability to know at this time. Consciousness is one and the miracles of the universe and our local miracle of life are the others.

John Dale Dunn, MD, JD
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J. Scott Turner responds to John Dunn:

Dr John Dunn is "surprised and dismayed" that *Academic Questions* devoted part of its Spring 2024 issue to a collection of essays on heterodox thinking on evolution. For the benefit of *AQ*'s many readers, he has compiled an extensive author-by-author critique of the six articles in the collection. I hope his critique is read widely. Perhaps then someone can help me decipher just what his critique is.

He begins by objecting to the collection's "dress[ing] up a recent version called the selfish gene theory (the genes changed because they saw the advantages) with a theory that organisms and their biochemical sub-units were cogent and ambitious."

I have to say, I've never been accused of trying to dress up selfish gene theory (if anything, I'm accused of wanting to strip it bare), but for the record, I think he misconstrues Richard Dawkins' point about the selfish gene idea: genes don't "see" anything, advantageous or otherwise, they just replicate. Beyond that, I'm not entirely sure what Dr. Dunn's disagreement is.

He asserts that putting "this symposium in [*Academic Questions*] ... ignores those who reject Darwinism [based on] plenty of evidence in genetics, physiology, biochemistry, and probability theory." Okay. Did he miss the "Against Darwinism" heading in my own paper? How did he translate the general tone of skepticism about the Modern Synthesis expressed by all the contributors into "six writers who believe in a buffed-up version of Dawkins' selfish gene theory"?

Dr. Dunn is using a lexicon that's alien to me. He is scornful of claims that "biochemical sub-units" were claimed to be "cogent and ambitious." This is news to me, as there were no such claims made in any of the papers in the collection. Perhaps he is confusing life with the chemistry of life? Rather, throughout his critique, he drops phrases intended to frighten the horses: "magical new answers," "absurd ideas," "scientific hocus-pocus," and (my favorite) invoking a "dark country" where "Lamarck was right." "My, oh my" he sighs, as he sorrowfully goes about what he sees as an intellectual duty. ("It is hard for me to go on with this BS, but I must."). Thank you for your service!

To the extent I could distill a cogent critique from all this, I think it was a general displeasure at the treatment of living agency as a significant, and often overlooked, factor in our understanding of evolution, both of the phenomenon itself, and of the mechanisms that bring it about. So let me address that.

Agency has always been at the center of our thinking about life, and its evolution. Prior to Darwin, it was the purpose-driven God. In the Darwinian idea, the principal evolutionary agent is selection. As the logic of the Darwinian idea has played out over the past century-and-a-half, it has led to the endpoint of reducing the organism to being a mere vehicle for genes—a sterile and

disappointing conclusion to Charles Darwin's own quest to understand living nature's "endless forms most beautiful."

Having been left holding that deflated balloon, many evolutionists have been looking anew at the problem of agency. This involves sorting through some fairly thorny scientific and philosophical issues. How does heredity actually work, and is it consistent with the Darwinian idea? What is the link between behavior, reproductive success, and evolution? What are the philosophical underpinnings for how we think about evolution? Is there more than one way to think about evolution? The Third Way of Evolution group, from which the authors of the *AQ* collection were drawn, represents a good cross-section of how these thorny issues are being approached. The authors in the *AQ* collection were not "cherry-picked." They are exemplary of what I described in my introduction as the "rich froth of competing ideas and vigorous discussion" that should be widely known.

I can only speak for myself here, but the thorny issue I have had to confront is the philosophical underpinnings for how we think about life itself. I'm a physiologist, and much of my career has been devoted to understanding the mechanisms of life. These are wondrous to behold and fascinating to explore: what a colleague has described as the "delicious meat" of mechanism. The more I partook of the feast, however, the greater became my discomfort with the proposition that life is ultimately just a very complicated clockwork. Rather, I have been forced to the conclusion that there *is* something distinct about life itself (which makes me a vitalist, I suppose), and what makes it distinct is its peculiar form of *living* agency, that is marked by intentionality, purposefulness, and intelligence (which puts me farther out at the fringe, I suppose). Even worse, I have had to conclude that this distinctive living agency can be found at any scale that life exists, ranging from the most humble (cells) to the most grandiose (the biosphere). That is what led me on my own multi-decade journey from staunch Darwinist to the conclusion that the Darwinian idea is probably mistaken.

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To the Editor:

A lot of readers will agree with Alexander Riley's scathing critique of sociology ("The Warped Vision of Contemporary Sociology," *AQ, S*ummer 2024). Specifically, they will concur with him that, due to an ideologically-based reluctance to consider the full range of explanations for behavior, many sociologists are abandoning theoretically-grounded, dispassionate research on society. Yet, my reaction to Riley's appraisal is mixed.

On the one hand, I agree with much of what he writes and also believe he could have gone further in his critique. For example, he might have noted that the website videos he examines—which are intended to recruit high-school and college students into sociology—may have a two-fold effect: they may attract into sociology those students who embrace progressive or leftist ideological views on, among other issues, socioeconomic inequality; and conversely, they may repel from sociology those students who embrace a no-holds-barred pursuit of scientific inquiry into these issues. Such an effect would obviously accelerate the developments that he bemoans.

On the other hand, Riley might have acknowledged that there are sociologists who share his view that the discipline should be, more or less, committed to a natural-science model of investigation. In fact, he might have mentioned that some prominent sociologists (e.g., Dalton Conley of Princeton and Guang Guo of UNC Chapel Hill) include biological variables in their research. To be sure, the number of sociologists who advocate for the scientific model is relatively small and getting smaller. But sociologist Jonathan Turner (University of California—Riverside) observes that, outside North America and Europe, scientific sociology is on the rise, and he indicates that disciplinary trends may ultimately result in a split between scientific and non-scientific sociology (see his book review in *Contemporary Sociology*, vol. 52, Nov. 2023). Thus, while sociology faces an uncertain future, it may not be as warped as Riley suggests.

Robert L. Boyd
Professor of Sociology
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Alexander Riley responds to Robert L. Boyd:

Professor Boyd is surely right that there are still some sociologists endeavoring to save the discipline from the trend of radical politicization. I know two of the three he mentions personally, Turner and Guo, and greatly respect their work. It is telling, though, that the third he mentions in his list of those challenging the status quo, Conley, dedicated his book on social genomics largely to attacking existing efforts to use genetic data in sociology and to reiterating the same old same old woke political correctness on racial disparities (it's racism, all the way down, and even if we cannot find any significant empirical measures of the purported cause).

I appreciate Professor Boyd's hopeful attitude and wish I could share it. The unfortunate fact however is that any objective accounting of the number of sociologists approximating the perspective of rigorous thinkers such as Turner and Guo in American sociology yields a tiny number. They cannot hope to stand against the tidal wave of activists who now dominate virtually every department of sociology in the country. The difference becomes starkly apparent

in looking, for example, at membership levels in topical sections in the ASA. As of last year, the lone such section dedicated to the use of biological data and evolutionary theory in sociological research had but seventy-two members, and only ten of these were students, out of a total ASA membership of 9,893 in 2023. Meanwhile, there are three sections dedicated to some combination of race and gender, and each of the three has around 1,000 members, and hundreds of student members.

If a scientific revolution is in the offing in sociology, there is precious little evidence of it.

Alexander Riley
Prof. of Sociology
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To the Editor:

Much of the Summer 2024 issue of *Academic Questions* was a rehash of what we already know about the effects of leftism and wokeism in society and in the academic world, but three articles stood out as especially valuable:

It was refreshing to find Gorman Beauchamp retrieving Shakespeare's actual Caliban from the morass of imaginary Calibans of the Romantic and anti-colonialist ideologues. Bravo.

It was informative to read Mark Bauerlein's review of both Hanania's *Origins of Woke* and Rufo's *America's Cultural Revolution*, in which he says "Yes!" to both. "It is important to know the exact language of executive orders and legislation, along with what it wrought. It is also important to uncover the concepts that produced that language." As Breitbart is said to have said, "politics is downstream from culture."

Professor Bauerlein was one of the earliest in my experience to warn us of the left's corruption of our culture and our schools at all levels, and he remains one of the best.

Finally, it was cheering to read Peter Wood's "The Illusion of Institutional Neutrality," not because the news is any good—the institutions are a mess, whether they are aiming for neutrality or are totally given over to benighted "woke-ism," or worse, to the Hamas barbarism. It was cheering because his reasoning is good and his conclusion is and has always been the true one: There is no system that can substitute for espousing "substantive ideals of truth, liberty, and citizenship" or for saying "forthrightly what virtues we wish our universities to champion." Virtues, not ideologies. Mr. Wood is to be commended for not substituting one simplistic system of thinking for another but calling, like the great men from Solomon and Socrates to Solzhenitsyn and Jordan Peterson, for virtue.

As the late and great musician, songwriter, and armchair philosopher Charles Embree (aka Riff Charles) used to put it, "It's either right back up or left on down."

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