

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

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THE BLIND SCIENTIST: Unmasking the Misguided Methodology of Neo-Darwinism by Alexander J. Bonitto and John S. Knox. Wipf & Stock, 2024. 110 pages. Paperback; \$21.00. ISBN: 9781666783179.

This book is based on a thesis submitted for an MA in Christian Apologetics at Liberty University. At the time of writing, the primary author (Bonitto) had a BS in health sciences, along with an MBA in sports management; the second author (Knox, Bonitto's thesis supervisor), a PhD in theology and religion, an MA in sociology, and a MATS in Christian history and thought. Although neither has a graduate degree in biology, the goal of their book was to

examine the concepts, contexts and constructions surrounding postmodern scientism – not just to disprove the presuppositions and conclusions of neo-Darwinism – but to demonstrate that science has become far too political, unempirically presumptuous, and precarious in its presentations of “the facts.” Rather, this book seeks to carefully weigh the principles and practices of neo-Darwinian theory to determine which tenants [*sic*] could and should be considered truly *scientific* while practicing Jesus's teachings of *grace and truth*. (pp. xv–xvi; emphasis in the original)

The authors first identify five a priori assumptions which undergird neo-Darwinism (pp. 10, 44):

1. Life has evolved via a long series of small incremental steps, from simple toward more complex (gradualism).
2. All life originated from a single organism, and lineage can be traced via an interconnected tree-of-life (common ancestry).
3. “Micro-evolutionary” changes account for “macro-evolutionary” change (within-species changes account for speciation per se).
4. With enough time, random genetic mutations can accumulate and account for the complexity of organisms today (“time and chance”).
5. “All scientific explanations must explain any and all phenomena via material causes” (methodological naturalism).

Bonitto and Knox then set out to invalidate all five of these a priori assumptions but use debunked, misunderstood, and/or misrepresented arguments. Early in their treatise they present Behe's irreducible complexity and misguided calculations of the incredible improbabilities of lining up single random point mutations as the only pathway towards increased information content. Undiscussed are more recent and sophisticated advances in genetics which explain the paradoxes that they dwell

on (particularly single point mutations being insufficient to account for new complexity, and discordant trees-of-life), such as gene duplication, exaptation, horizontal gene transfer, recombination, mobile genetic elements, and large-scale genomic rearrangements, although they do make one passing reference to “jumping genes” which they identify as “junk DNA” (p. 17).

The Cambrian explosion and broken lineages, including sudden appearances of new species and “missing links,” (pp. 47–53, 77) are seen to invalidate gradualism and common ancestry, even though the authors say nothing at all about how fossilization works or its limitations. That is, fossilization is an exceptionally rare and sporadic event (only a miniscule fraction of the organisms that have ever lived become fossilized) and so large morphological changes can occur without leaving any fossil evidence (the gaps and leaps in the fossil record). Bonitto and Knox characterize punctuated equilibrium as merely an ad hoc or circular argument to obfuscate missing data and to “cover up the contracting evidence” (p. 77), even stating that “at best, it is a well-educated guess” (p. 47): Such dismissive comments about an idea that is as well established and widely accepted by experts as punctuated equilibrium are unfortunate. In one specific case (p. 49), they focus on Stephen Meyer's description of a genetic study which examined 2,000 genes in six animals from diverse phyla which *they* felt could not possibly be explained by the tree-of-life hypothesis. However, the original authors of that scientific paper¹ went on to show that the puzzling data were a result of horizontal gene transfer between species (a now well-documented phenomenon which entangles or enjoins the branches of diverse trees-of-life).

Bonitto and Knox go on to reason that “the evidence of the fossil record could not, on its own, refute the synchronic Darwinian model” (p. 8) – evidently suggesting that fossilization and genetic changes were going on at the same time and acting on the same substrate (the organisms) so they *should* produce the exact same Tree-of-life – and then claim that the many discrepancies between the two clearly refute neo-Darwinism. They don't seem to understand that those two forms of Trees are measuring completely different parameters: (1) that two different species (placental versus marsupial mice, for example) can have seemingly identical morphology (reflected in the fossils) but arise from completely different lineages (reflected in the genetic sequences), (2) that a single species can have profoundly different morphologies (breeds of dogs, for example), and (3) that trees-of-life generated from morphological changes are severely lacking in precision and accuracy compared to trees-of-life generated from genetic changes (e.g., with the latter affording one a chance to use genetic testing in order to claim an inheritance dating back a few generations, whereas the former would not).

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I find other lines of reasoning that they level against neo-Darwinism to be quite misleading. On the one hand, they employ statements made by dozens of scholars – including Francis Collins, who is listed amongst “Christian scholars who disagree with Neo-Darwinism” (pp. 17–18, 90–91) – which essentially amount to “We don’t yet completely understand this-or-that particular element of biology” as evidence against neo-Darwinism. And on the other hand, they frequently include argumentation pertaining to the origin of life, even though neo-Darwinism does not attempt to explain the origin of life.

Credit goes to Bonitto and Knox when it comes to the fifth a priori assumption: methodological naturalism. As they parse that fifth phrase (which I have quoted verbatim above), they are correct. Unfortunately, they have set up a tautology (akin to stating an “assumption” that hydraulic mechanisms can involve fluids only). A *scientific* explanation is, by definition, restricted to material causes. Scientists can directly examine only the material realm; they struggle to operationalize and test non-material matters (not just theological ones, but even matters such as consciousness, mind, love, or whatever preceded the Big Bang). But that does not prevent neo-Darwinists from *believing* privately that non-material causes *might* also be at play without explicitly weaving the latter into their explanations (thus avoiding God-of-the-gaps arguments). And they will call those *belief statements*, not scientific explanations. This does not invalidate neo-Darwinism.

Bonitto and Knox liken neo-Darwinism to the clumsy Ptolemaic cosmological model – which history ultimately revealed to be an unwieldy, indefensible, contrived, ideologically inspired hand-waving invention – and liken more recent attempts at refining the neo-Darwinian synthesis as equivalent to the introduction of epicycles into the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos in a failed attempt to account for contradictory observations. They ask why neo-Darwinists hang on so tightly to a theory that is so evidently flawed and unsupported: they suggest that scientists don’t want God to exist, do not want to “let a Divine foot in the door” (pp. 13–14, 19, 31, 78, 92), want to enjoy an immoral lifestyle and want financial stability. They draw lines connecting neo-Darwinism to atheism, Karl Marx’s Communism, Hitler’s Nazism, nihilism, the horrendous Columbine shootings, and eugenics and social cleansing programs, argumentation that I find to be unhelpful. Although they acknowledge that Darwinism may not be a *sufficient* condition for those aberrations, they then take two steps backward by finishing with “it is undoubtedly a necessary condition. Evidently, bad science can cause bad consequences” (p. 96).

I regret that I cannot recommend this book. I disagree with the authors’ conclusions that neo-Darwinism is a product of erroneous presuppositions which may foster

“bad thinking,” “bad science,” and “bad society” (p. xvii). Bonitto notes in the preface that he is “not a professional scientist” and “did not set out to add any new scientific research on evolution or scientific methodology” (p. xv); adding another co-author with doctoral-level training in biology might have been useful and is recommended for their future work on this topic. It is important to have more collaboration between theologians and scientists, each with their unique but complementary perspective on truth (as per Augustine’s “Book of God” and “Book of Nature”). Overall, this book is insufficient to address the monumental task of discrediting neo-Darwinism, which is based upon extensive accumulation of data and is backed by the vast majority of the scientific community, including experts in all the relevant areas. I found irony in the penultimate paragraph of the preface to this work in which Bonitto states,

My goal for this modest book is to illuminate the importance of preconceived ideas when drawing intellectual inferences. One’s presuppositions can heavily cloud how a thing is interpreted but true science has always been about filtering out personal biases ... Bad thinking leads to bad science, which inevitably ends in a bad society. (p. xvii)

I would reflect those statements back at the authors.

Note

¹Michael Syvanen and Jonathan Ducore, “Whole Genome Comparisons Reveal a Possible Chimeric Origin for a Major Metazoan Assemblage,” *Journal of Biological Systems* 18. no. 2 (2010): 261–75; doi.org/10.1142/S0218339010003408.

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WHAT HATH DARWIN TO DO WITH SCRIPTURE? Comparing the Conceptual Worlds of the Bible and Evolution by Dru Johnson. IVP Academic, 2023. vii + 224 pages. Paperback; \$24.99. ISBN: 9781514003619.

Despite the book’s title – *What Hath Darwin to Do with Scripture?* – this is not a typical origins book. For example, its author, Dru Johnson, does not lay out a specific biblical view of the creation narrative and then seek to show how mainstream scientific findings line up (or not) with this narrative. Rather, he starts off with the premise that both the scriptural and evolution narratives are founded on a single principle: becoming fit to live in a world where resources are in short supply. Survival, in each story, depends upon this “fittedness.” Furthermore, since God is the Author of both narratives, then “fittedness” for life in each story should be consistent with God’s character. But is it? That’s the question that runs all the way through this book. On the one side, the book follows the biblical picture of what God states is necessary for Israel to thrive in the midst of scarcity. On the other side, it summarizes the author’s understanding of