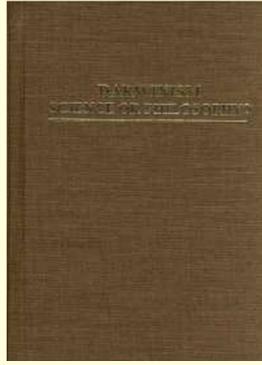


Darwinism: Science or Philosophy?

review by Gert Korthof
6 Apr 1997 (update 30 June 1999)



"Darwinism and neo-Darwinism as generally held in our society, carry with them an a priori commitment to metaphysical naturalism, which is essential to make a convincing case on their behalf."

This is not another creationistic book with all the standard arguments against evolution. Not again a summing up of all the facts contradicting evolution or all the facts that Darwinism cannot explain. This book addresses the nature of natural science itself: does every scientific theory exclude supernatural interventions ? If so: does it exclude supernatural intervention as an outcome of scientific research or is it a necessary condition for doing scientific research at all? The focus of the book is not establishing the truth or falsity of neo-Darwinism. Everybody has already his own answer to that question.

The focus of the book and the conference is more fundamental. In fact the theme of the conference could be translated as: is natural science atheistic in its theory building and explanations because that is the most successful way of doing science or are scientific theories atheistic because scientists made the rules of the game such that the outcome *must* be atheistic theories ?

The symposium participants explore the boundaries and foundations of science in such a varied manner and with such a diversity of points of views one seldom encounters in technical books on the philosophy and history of science.

This book is worth reading for both 'creationists' as 'evolutionists', because people listen to each other and there is agreement on some issues possible. (To be sure it is Darwinism that is critically analysed, not creationism !!!).

An important point of agreement could be that **methodological naturalism** - the principle that science can only study the things that are accessible to its instruments- is not in question. Science can study what science can study. When limitations of science are taken to be limitations upon reality, we have **metaphysical naturalism**. (Phillip E Johnson, *page 15*).

The analysis of Peter van Inwagen is insightful:

"I myself think that the statement 'God is the creator of the cosmos' is true. And I think it is a far more important truth than anything discovered by Newton, Darwin or Einstein. But I do not mistake it for a scientific theory." (p 109).

I do agree that it is not a scientific statement. But then: what does the statement "God is the creator of the cosmos" mean ? What does it mean that it is true ? And how do you establish its truth ? For Scientific Creationists to call something 'scientific' seems to be a way to say it is important. For van Inwagen something can be important and true, without being science. This would be a good basis for agreement between 'evolutionists' and 'creationists'. A second basis for agreement would be the insight that a scientist cannot present the statement 'God does not exist' as a **scientific result**. He can only use it methodologically. That means a scientist can and should never use God as a scientific explanation.

Knowledge of the basic issues of philosophy of science, that is the nature of science and scientific theories, would be helpful for readers, but probably not necessary. In any case this book is a rich source of insights and contains an unusual rich diversity of points of view. I never found it boring.

What did Michael Ruse admit ?

I include a summary and evaluation of Michael Ruse's presentation, because "Ruse Admits Evolution Is a Philosophy" has become a "known fact" among creationists. It is the title of a page written by Tom Woodward (1) and I received two emails, reporting that Ruse admits that Evolution is a philosophy (probably based on Tom Woodward's report).

In this review I restrict myself to the published proceedings of the 1992 Dallas symposium: the subject of my current review (2). What did Michael Ruse really say, according to the proceedings? And what does it mean? Ruse presentation was titled: "Darwinism: Philosophical Preference, Scientific Inference, and Good Research Strategy".

Ruse's presentation comes in 3 steps (decisions):

- 1. SCIENCE:** commitment to unbroken law (no miracles)
- 2. EVOLUTION:** the truth of evolution is beyond reasonable doubt, but is not a logical necessity.
- 3. DARWINISM:** Darwinism as the best scientific strategy

1. Science

Ruse believes that the most profitable way to understand the world is the scientific one. That is a commitment to the idea of the world being law-bound –that is subject to unbroken regularity– and to the belief that there are no powers that interfere with the normal workings of material objects (p. 21).

"I take it that my position excludes certain sorts of miracles- for instance, Jesus turning the water into wine" (p22). "Is my position reasonable, provable, irrational, or just a philosophical preference? It is certainly not provable in the sense that the theorem of Pythagoras is provable. It is not provable in the sense that one can prove that the earth goes around the sun. On the other hand, I deny that it is merely an irrational prejudice, or even "just" a philosophical preference."(p. 22) (His statements can be read online). It is clear that Ruse is talking here about general (philosophical) assumptions of science, not any specific to Darwinism.

2. Evolution

Having accepted the scientific method, how reasonable is it, to accept evolution, given the evidence ? Ruse accepts evolution on the basis of the fossils, the homologies of bones and of geographical distribution. Ruse: "I think that the fact of evolution is beyond reasonable doubt" however "the truth of evolution is not a logical necessity" (p. 25).

3. Darwinism

If one accepts science, and if one accepts evolution, then one needs to decide upon the causes of evolution. Ruse chooses Darwinism as the best scientific strategy. Natural selection explains the world. Natural selection is the cause of evolution, but not the exclusive cause. "My point is simply that, as one following science, if a designer implies someone who got involved miraculously in the process, that idea is simply inappropriate in this context"(p. 26).

Now, let us return to Woodward's statement "Evolution is a Philosophy". It is clear now to everybody who carefully read Ruse, that the statement "Evolution is a Philosophy" is not what Ruse said. Above that, it is a too crude level for an analysis of Darwinistic logic. It is as crude as the symposium title "Darwinism: Science or Philosophy?" Apparently it is good enough for religious propaganda, as people like Woodward and Johnson show us.

"Darwinism: Science or Philosophy?", Jon Buell, Virginia Hearn (Editors) Foundation for Thought and Ethics, Richardson, Texas, 1994 (229 pages)

Proceedings of a symposium entitled: "Darwinism: scientific inference or philosophical preference ?"
Held on the Southern methodist University campus in Dallas, Texas, March 26-28, 1992.

Keynote speakers were **Philip E. Johnson**, author of "Darwin on Trial" and Professor of Law at University of California, and **Michael Ruse** author of "Darwinism defended" and Professor of Zoology and Philosophy of Science, University of Guelph.

SYMPOSIUM PARTICIPANTS:

Michael J. Behe
William A. Dembski
Frederick Grinnell
Peter Van Inwagen
Philip E. Johnson
Leslie K. Johnson
Stephen C. Meyer
K. John Morrow
Michael E. Ruse
Arthur M. Shapiro
David L. Wilcox

There is a complete [online version](#) of the book.

Notes

This book was a gift from Sid King (18 FEB 1997).

1. ["Ruse Gives Away the Store -Admits Evolution Is a Philosophy"](#) by Tom Woodward (professor of religious studies).
2. For a transcript of the talk of Michael Ruse at the 1993 Annual Meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, see: [Transcript: Speech by Professor Michael Ruse](#) published by Access Research Network and copyright ©1998 Michael Ruse.
3. See also: [But is it Science? review](#) (includes recent books by Ruse).