

Evolutionary Ideas of Samuel Butler

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to explore the evolutionary ideas of Samuel Butler (1835-1902), a versatile genius and a rare researcher of so many disciplines at a time- a satirist, a novelist, a critic, an essayist, a critic and a rebel of the late Victorian age. It aspires to ascertain the contribution of Samuel Butler as an evolutionary thinker in relation to the prominent evolutionists. Particular attention is devoted to elaborate Butler's 'unconscious memory' in stark contrast to the materialistic approach suggested by Darwin's theory of 'Natural Selection'. It endeavors to explain Butler's attempt to delineate the defects in *The Origin of Species* and to repair them with a purposive explanation of the evolutionary process. It exhibits Butler's attempt to demonstrate the way in which variation originated with his theory that memory was the main way in which heredity was transmitted.

1. What is Evolution?

Herbert Spencer offers us his famous formula of evolution, which made the intellect of Europe gasp for breath. He asks a very typical question:-

"What is the formula of growth and decay of all things? It must be a formula of evolution and dissolution".

He defines evolution:-

"Evolution is an integration of matter and a concomitant dissipation of motion; during which the matter passes from an indefinite, incoherent homogeneity to a definite coherent heterogeneity; and during which the retained motion undergoes a parallel transformation".

First Principles and *The Origin of Species* became the centre of great battle of books, in which Huxley served as generalissimo for the forces of Darwinism and agnosticism. For a time evolutionists were severely ostracized by respectable people; they were denounced as immoral monsters.

Spencer took no dogmatic stand; he accepted Darwin's theory gladly, but felt that there were facts which it could not explain, and which compelled a modified acceptance of Lamarckian views.

2. Darwin's and Lamarck's Theory of Evolution as Background for Samuel Butler's Response

Darwin's earth-shattering and epoch-making book *The Origin of Species*, published in 1859, revolutionized the traditional world nourished by Christianity. It was so far-reaching in its implication that it deeply influenced the thoughts and endeavors in every department of life during the latter half of the nineteenth century. It shook the foundation of religion and science and called into question the tacit assumption of religious belief, it was a major event in Victorian thought and the history of ideas. It dealt with a severe blow to traditional teleology. It ruined the ability of some of Victorians to become believers. They were assailed with doubts.

Darwinism ran counter to all the religious views of the time. It showed the hollowness of the Biblical theory of creation which contemplated one species distinct from others and reserved separate days or moments for the creation of each one of them and it asserted a genetic relation between all forms of life, including man. After Darwin human history could no longer be conceived as divine drama. Man was a part of nature, being originally connected with all other species from which he has been derived by a continuous process of evolution. By placing man wholly within the organic realm Darwinism undermined people's belief in 'creationism' and raised doubts as to the unique spiritual nature of man. Thus it shook the entire foundation on which Christianity was based. It clearly demonstrated that the whole natural and moral edifice of the Christian world was built upon the false history. It also affected the conception of nature of mind itself. Since this theory implies evolution through the transmission of qualities from one generation to another, mind, including consciousness, cannot be a separate entity. The human mind is evolved from a protoplasm through animals that have not man's intellectual, imaginative and spiritual powers, and thus all man's spiritual endeavors have root in their physical existence and are determined by the capacities and limitations of the body.

According to Darwin, man and animals (the 'species') evolved gradually over a long period of time and are still evolving. Environment plays a selective role in the evolutionary process, and some organism evolved more successfully than others.

Under the stress of the conflict between science and religion initiated by Darwinism, the intelligentsia of the modern western world became more and more anti-clerical, anti-religious and materialistic. Thus Darwinism ushered in an era of scepticism. T H Huxley, one of Darwin's great disciples called it 'agnosticism'. Priests and bishops took up arms to defend the authority of the church which had been undermined by the onslaught of Darwinism. In their opinion to accept the new truth would be to invite a moral collapse of the word.

Evolution, according to Darwin, depends on heritable variations in fitness. But he was not sure how these variations arose; and, although he postulated that these variations are inherited, he did not know how biological heredity operates. He tried to find out the causes which produce variations; but he was never quite certain that he had found a satisfactory clue. Again and again he asserted that the causes of variations are mostly unknown; sometimes he attributed them to chance and sometimes to the direct and definite effects of the conditions under which an organism lives.

Darwin's theory of Natural Selection, it will be evident, is not a complete and self sufficient process. Ignorance as to the cause of variations and as to how biological heredity operates is a major gap in it. Lamarck's theory of variations through the exercise of the will and effects of use and disuse fills this gap to a large extent.

There is a fundamental difference between Lamarck's theory and Darwin's. Darwin excludes all idea of will, purpose or design. It is purely deterministic and mechanistic Lamarck, on the other hand, believes that species evolve because they wanted to. Darwin attributes the main cause of variation to the physical environment, while Lamarck recognizes in living beings the power of varying according to the will and effort to adopt themselves to the condition under which they have to live. Lamarck's theory, therefore, is not deterministic and mechanistic like Darwin's.

Lamarck observed that great changes in environment necessarily result in changes in the needs of animals. These altered needs induce the animals to make some efforts which bring altered habits. These altered habits produce structural changes from use or disuse of particular organs. Lamarck wrote:-

"Every fairly considerable and permanent alteration in the environment of any race of animals works a real alteration in the needs of the race.

Every change in the needs of animals necessitates new activities on their part for the satisfaction of those needs, and hence new habits.

Every new needs necessitating new activities for its satisfaction requires the animal, either to make more frequent use of some of its parts which it previously used less, and thus greatly to enlarge them; or else to make use of entirely new parts, to which the needs have imperceptibly given birth by efforts of its inner feeling".

It should be noted that acquire modifications are of two different kinds. First, there are those modifications which are due to the direct action of the environment, without reference to any active efforts on the part of the organism. Secondly, there are those modifications which are caused by increased and sustained use or disuse of any organ, due to environmental cause, which requires the organism to exert certain parts more or less than average.

3. Samuel Butler and Evolution

Samuel Butler, while pursuing his independence as a sheep farmer in New Zealand, read Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) avidly, it took him by storm. He became one of Darwin's enthusiastic admirers initially, but he quickly became aware that Darwin's theories were incomplete, even grossly defective and started revising them with his own ideas. Butler revolted against Darwin by rejecting his "Theory of Natural Selection". He became critical of the idea of mechanical evolution as he became enamored of the theory of creative evolution to be pursued by G B Shaw later on.

Butler traced his doctrine to Buffon, Lamarck and Erasmus Darwin. In 1877 he published the first book on this subject, *Life and Habit*, in which he developed the doctrine that heredity, and therefore evolution, depends not on the natural selection of chance variation or "sports", but on an "unconscious memory", transmitted as habit from generation to generation, and tending constantly to grow with the life of the race. By the expression "unconscious memory" he meant latent memory of an individual of the experiences of each one of its ancestors right from the primordial cell to its parents which have become automatic due to repeated practice through innumerable generations. The infant's unconscious performance of so many processes of extreme intricacy like breathing, seeing, hearing, digesting etc. had behind them long experience and recollection. Unconscious Memory thus consists of perfect knowledge of some intricate processes and intense purposive will about both of which the possessor is unconscious. *Life and Habit* was followed by *Evolution Old and New* (1879), *Unconscious Memory* (1880), and *Luck or Cunning?* (1886), in which Butler's biological theories were further developed. By means of these writings he held that he had achieved "the re-introduction of teleology into life". Natural selection as interpreted by Darwin seemed to Butler to remove all idea of purpose from universe. Against this view, he maintained that variation was due, not to "luck", but to the striving (or cunning) of the individual in adapting itself to its environment, and handed on by the inheritance of "conscious memory" or "habit".

Butler owes a great debt to Lamarck, and he freely acknowledges this debt in the concluding pages of *Life and Habit*. But this theory is a definite improvement on Lamarck's theory. The difference between Lamarck and Butler is not one of kind but of degree. According to both, purpose, will, effort and heredity are the most important factors that operated in the evolution of species. But Butler's concept of heredity is different from that of Lamarck. Lamarck assumed that the effects of use or disuse of particular organs on an individual during its life-time are inherited and passed on to the next generation, but he did not link on the experience of the race to that of the individual. Butler, on the other hand, held that the phenomena of heredity were mainly due to the continued personality, and memory of past experience. "Until continued personality and memory", said he, are connected with the idea of heredity, heredity of any kind is little more than a term for something which one does not understand. By thus identifying each living form with each generation of its ancestors up to the primordial cell, Butler made purpose and will as inhering characteristics of life. The low kind of livingness in every atom of matter, from which all forms of life have evolved through

variations, was instinct with consciousness, volition and power of concerted action. Thus, according to Butler, it was will, purpose and effort and not the direct action of the environment on which mechanistic theories lay their emphasis, that produced variations, the accumulation of which through heredity transmission in time amounted to specific and generic differences. One more difference between Lamarck and Butler may be mentioned. The former held that life originated from dead matter by a process of spontaneous generation, while the latter looked upon the so called inorganic world as living up to a certain point.

Butler draws special attention to the fact that we are unconscious of vast quantities of actions, psychical as well as physical, which we habitually perform. Such actions are dependent on series learnt by memory or learnt by heart, as we say. To repeat an action unconsciously, the series must be gone through, memory being dependent on environment, to bring out the series. These unconscious series can become conscious, more or less, in the case of disturbance of environment which is requisite to the consciousness of the series.

Extremes meet in consciousness. When our acquaintance with a thing is so familiar that we are conscious of it, we know it in our sleep. But we remember it demonstrably. Unconsciousness covers high products as well as low. It covers old habits in our experience and also ancient biological habits- the functions of our bodies which are instinctive- the upright position, for example, swallowing, breathing, the circulation of blood, largely.

Life goes in curves of attention, which correspond to curves of consciousness, of memory. Consciousness is memory of things present, so to speak, memory is consciousness of things past. Our body and mind are but tools

indeed, as Butler was never tired of pointing out, but they are more controlled of the spirit than tools are- the spirit of life is not a product of mechanism, but mechanism is a product of life.

4. Conclusion

It is fact that scientists ignored Samuel Butler. It was because he was not a man of science. In the field of strict biology his influence has been comparatively small, but in the wider field of philosophical speculation, however, his influence has been very great. Butler was one of the first to question the implications of Darwin's theory of the Survival of the Fittest. These implications amounted to the complete elimination of mind from universe, which cause inevitably to be regarded as a piece of mechanism functioning by chance. Butler reintroduced the idea of purpose, and sought to show that the conception of a mindless universe failed to account for the facts either of biology or of psychology.

As an alternative to Darwin's view, Butler propounded the theory of creative evolution. According to this theory evolution is the expression of a purposive, all pervasive world force (to be known as "Elan Vital" in Bergson, and "Life Force" in Shaw) which may be described simply as "life". It is the nature of "Life" to change and to evolve and in the course of its evolution, it directs and moulds matter in the interest of the purpose that it unconsciously has in view.

The fully developed theory of evolution formulated in the twentieth century by a host of speculative philosophers owes its origin to the Butler's initiative in this field. Butler's contribution in literature, as an evolutionary thinker, is the handing down of a tradition of intellectual enquiry into the various existential problems of life.

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