Some bad fruits of evolutionary theory

Evolution's Dangerous Ideas: Eugenics, lobotomies, using X-rays to speed up evolution, and other dangerous ideas inspired by Darwinism

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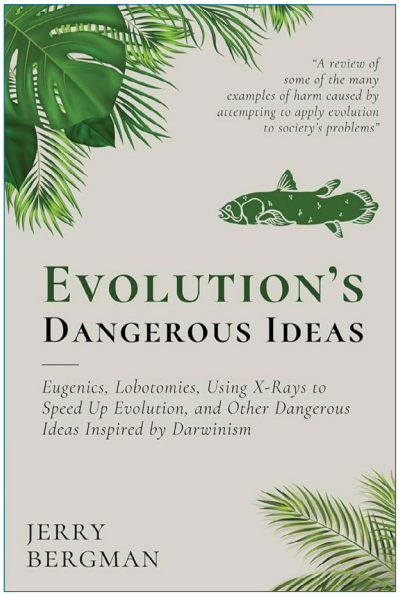

John Woodmorappe

Author Jerry Bergman has long been involved in the creationist movement and has taught at several universities. He has 9 earned degrees, including 5 graduate degrees, and 1,800 publications. Many of his works have been translated into several languages.

By way of introduction, evolutionist triumphalists insist that evolutionary theory is central to the biological sciences, and even that 'nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution'. Very well, then, let's play this game. The all-glorious 'light of evolution' has steered the biological sciences down quite a few blind alleys. As Bergman elaborates in this work, it has also created policies that have harmed people. We can ask how many people have needlessly suffered because of evolutionary theory.

The Lord taught us that by their fruits you shall know them (Matthew 7:15–20). As Bergman recounts in this book, evolution has borne quite a few bad fruits, most of which are forgotten today. Bergman's book brings some of them to light.

'But', we are told, 'science is corrective'. This is disingenuous. In time, science was corrected all right, but this correction took place despite, and not because of, evolutionary theory!

In terms of specifics, Bergman gets into such topics as X-ray–induced mutations, education, and the Holocaust, frontal lobotomies, various evolution-related hoaxes, the nature of Neanderthals, eugenics, and cosmology. I can examine only a few of these subjects.

Does 'being educated' imply being superior?

Educated evolutionists often sneer at religious believers, especially Christian believers, as 'Taliban', as 'theocrats', as 'backwoods fundamentalists', and the like. In contrast, Bergman reminds us that 'being educated' and believing in evolution does not make one a better person. He writes:

> "Before the war, Germany boasted more Nobel laureates in science than any other nation, including the United States … . A major reason why Nazi ideology was embraced by intelligent people was because the German educational system had inculcated Darwinian and social Darwinian ideas into students for years prior to the Holocaust. All levels of German education, from preschool to college, aggressively indoctrinated students in eugenics" (p. 34).

'Speeding up evolution' a colossal failure

Darwin exploited the fact that there was inherited variability among living populations in nature. His evolutionary theory imagined that this process goes on indefinitely, eventually giving rise to all the living things we find on Earth, from one common ancestor.

Such a scenario immediately runs into the problem that variability among living populations is limited. Thus, for example, a breeder can breed a larger dog from a smaller dog, but cannot breed a mouse from a dog, let alone a dog from a bacterium.

For this reason, evolutionists have long supposed that mutations increase the natural variability in a population, and then natural selection preserves the few favourable mutations. This is called the 'neo-Darwinian synthesis'.

This presumed process occurs over long stretches of time. This, of course, cannot be observed. But evolutionists reassure us that, given enough time, anything can happen. Can it?

Some evolutionists, instead of appealing to the mystification of time and to the customary just-so stories, have tried to test this idea. They artificially increased the mutation rate, by many orders of magnitude, to see what kind of biological novelty would arise. Hermann Joseph Muller (figure 1) won the Nobel Prize for experimentally subjecting fruit flies to X-rays, thus inducing millions of years' worth of mutations. The results were a disappointment to evolution.

Image: Alfred De Bat, Wikimedia / Public Domain

Figure 1. Hermann Joseph Muller performed accelerated mutation experiments on flies, but never succeeded in creating biological novelty—a prerequisite for evolution—in this way.

The flies did not become anything new: they were still the same species of fruit fly.

As Bergman stresses, the real issue is not the survival of the fittest (a triviality), but the *arrival* of the fittest. Neither any 'super flies' nor completely different new creatures that Muller may have dreamed of obtaining ever arrived. Nothing significant had emerged that was worthy of preservation by natural selection due to being 'more fit'.

Evolution and phrenology

Phrenology is the onetime belief that the bumps inside one's skull could predict various socio-biologic characteristics of that person. Bergman realizes the connection of phrenology to evolutionary thinking. It got a major boost from secularists in this regard (p. 102). As an example, phrenology was used to deduce criminal tendencies in people. And criminality, in turn, instead of being the moral issue that was long recognized, was attributed to an evolutionary holdover of the human's alleged animal ancestry.

Bergman could have added that phrenology had an occult component. Belief that the bumps inside one's skull predict one's intellectual capabilities or moral character is similar to palmistry, which teaches that the morphology of the creases on the palms of one's hand predicts the moral character of the person. This kind of thinking lives on in the present, as in the form of reflexology and aspects of Traditional Chinese Medicine. Reflexology teaches that the soles of one's feet are a 'map' of the internal organs inside the body. Stimulating the part of the sole that allegedly corresponds to the liver, for example, releases 'life energy' that goes to the liver, and therefore improves liver function. Acupuncture involves needle stimulation of alleged meridian lines. Of course, most western scientists, at least, regard acupuncture and reflexology as pseudoscience. They attribute their alleged successes to the placebo effect or to the coincidental release of pain-killing chemicals in the body by needle stimulation.

The rigid, onetime evolution-based compartmentalization of the brain

The author delves into lobotomy, which became a major surgical procedure in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It was based largely on the evolutionary belief that the evolutionarily advanced parts of the brain could (and sometimes should) be severed from the primitive 'reptilian' parts of the human brain (p. 75) and that this procedure would potentially cure a variety of psychiatric problems.

Bergman could have added that the evolutionary 'layered brain' concept resembles the long-discredited embryonic recapitulation argument. According to the latter, embryonic development is a 'movie' of the evolutionary history of the organism. The human embryo supposedly goes through a 'piscine stage', an 'amphibian stage', etc. Moreover, the adult human body retains the vestiges of these stages. For instance, the 'gill slits' in the human embryo are retained as pharyngeal pouches in the adult. In the 'layered brain' concept, the human brain is said to develop from the 'reptilian stage' to the 'early mammalian stage' to, finally, the 'human stage'. In the adult human, the limbic system is believed to be a retention of the 'reptilian stage'. This idea is, in part, based on the prejudice that basic emotions, such as the pleasure of eating, are a characteristic reptilian trait, and that we have inherited such 'primal' emotions from our reptilian ancestors.

Bergman could have added that, even on its own terms, the 'layered brain' idea is silly on its face. To speak of a 'reptilian brain' being a 'stage' or 'layer' of the eventual human brain completely ignores all the capabilities that reptiles have that humans do not. For instance, the cobra slithers without legs and delivers a venomous bite. Nothing in any part of the human brain, including its presumed 'reptilian' part, corresponds to any such capabilities.

Without a doubt, the evolution-based 'layered brain' concept delayed the discovery of the fact that different parts of the brain can work together, and especially the sobering fact that one part of the brain can take over the function of another part. So, once again, the science of biology (specifically neurobiology) has made advances, but despite, and not because of, evolutionary theory.

Evolutionary thinking gave second wind to racism

Evolutionary theory reinforced the belief that blacks were innately inferior to whites. This led to experimentation on blacks, such as the infamous

Tuskegee study of syphilis in blacks. The direct connection between the Tuskegee study and evolutionary beliefs is reinforced by Harvard professor Allan Brandt, who is quoted by Bergman (p. 219).

We are told that racism existed before Darwin. Of course. But never had racism gotten so much traction, thanks to 'the authority of science', as embodied by Darwinism.

Evolutionary thinking once made Neanderthal man a savage

Bergman recounts the discovery of Neanderthal man. At the time, and for a long time thereafter, artistic reconstructions of Neanderthals showed a savage brute that was almost an animal. It matched the prevailing evolutionary preconceptions. Now, despite evolutionary thinking, Neanderthal man is recognized as not only human-like, but also as a possible member of our own species. So, once again, evolution had led to bad science, even in the most evolution-relevant sciences, such as paleoanthropology.

Evolutionary thinking fed a variety of hoaxes

The author discusses some forgeries and related developments. This includes the popular account of the Tasaday tribe as a very primitive, early evolved tribe. It turned out to be no such thing. However, the success of the hoax points to the power that evolutionary thinking has on the public imagination. For example, we try to 'find' very primitive people because we expect to find them.

These hoaxes speak volumes about the expectations created by evolutionary thinking and the fraudsters' realization that such widespread evolutionary thinking is a fertile field for exploitation. It is natural.

Bergman goes further. He comments:

> "The history of the Fiji Mermaid illustrates the readiness of both highly educated persons and people in general to accept any theory no matter how outlandish in lieu of the creation account that God created life as revealed in Genesis" (p. 250).

Exactly right.

Evolutionary thinking oversimplified genetics

The baleful effects of evolutionary thinking extend to relatively mundane biological matters. Bergman suggests that the one gene–one trait idea is a mistaken overflow of evolutionary theory. This kind of thinking was part of the classic biology classroom activities that we likely experienced in the past, including the understanding of eye colour, earlobe attachment, hair colour, the hitchhiker's thumb, the widow's peak, the ability or inability to taste the bitter compound phenylthiocarbamide (PTC), and tongue rolling. It is now realized that these traits occur as a continuum, and not in a present/absent fashion. In addition, more than one gene governs these traits. To make matters even more complicated, more than one trait can be governed by a single gene (genetic pleiotropy).

Malthusian theory and the myth of catastrophic global overpopulation

Bergman brings up Malthus, at least the way he is presented in textbooks. According to Malthus, a population increases exponentially while the resources to support the population, at best, increase only linearly. The 'inevitable' result is that, at some point, the population growth becomes unsustainable, and the population must crash, often catastrophically. It makes sense, but it is untrue.

As shown by Bergman, the increase in resources can *also* be exponential; moreover, it can keep outpacing the population growth. This is borne out by the facts. The earth today has a human population many multiples that of centuries ago, but even more multiples of the level of food production of centuries ago. There is no comparison of old-fashioned subsistence agriculture with today's mechanized agriculture.

Finally, Bergman points out that much food is wasted, and present-day food production could support a global population of 50 billion people!

Population bomb or population bust?

Enter Paul R. Ehrlich and his sensationalistic and scaremongering book, *The Population Bomb*. It followed Malthus. Ehrlich's 1968 bestseller warned us that the human population was growing out of control, and that soon there would be mass starvation in many parts of the earth, including in developed nations such as the USA. This evokes some personal memories. As an impressionable teenager, I was taught Ehrlich's ideas as fact in high school, and took it all in, with some seriousness and sadness. When none of these catastrophic predictions took place, I became put off by all the world-is-ending dogmas and learned to be skeptical about modern doomsday predictions, such as those today that concern impending global catastrophe.

Ehrlich's ideas relied on the premise that the exponential character of global human population growth, as exhibited in the 1960s, would continue the same trajectory for many more decades. It did not. Population growth has slowed in many places. In fact, many Western nations now cannot even replace their current populations. The demographic decline is particularly noticeable in countries with low immigration rates. It is creating serious concerns about a shortage of working adults to fund the support of an aging population.

Moreover, as the standard of living continues to increase in Third World nations, their population growth

rates will also decline. For the first time in centuries, an actual global drop in human population is being seriously contemplated. Some have even raised the spectre of eventual human extinction. Of course, just like the original population bomb scare, such projections assume a constant trajectory of events far into the future.

There could come a time when the entire world is so prosperous, and otherwise disinterested in having children, as is the habit in many Western nations today, that the extinction of humanity becomes a possibility. But this, just like the original population bomb scare, assumes a constant trajectory of events far into the future.

Conclusions

Was evolution crucial to all these false ideas that Bergman discusses or was it tangential? The distinction is not crucial: the messaging must be internally consistent. Evolutionists cannot simultaneously claim that evolution is central to the thinking behind the biological sciences and then conveniently dodge responsibility for the baleful influences of evolutionary thinking upon the biological sciences.

Evolutionary theory has driven the biological sciences down many blind alleys, and some of these, in retrospect, are even silly. This consideration is further aggravated by the fact that these blind alleys have often harmed humans. Think, for example, what happened when racism got the backing of 'the authority of science' that evolution provided.

Evolutionary theory thus fails as any sort of grand organizing principle that inspires or directs the biological sciences to the benefit of humanity. What kind of crass presumption is it, then, that causes the frequent, mindless repetition of Dozhansky's maxim that 'nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution'?