

Personal Evolution for World Evolution

Rudolf Steiner's attitude towards Charles Darwin

Paul White
Auckland,
New Zealand

(A report of part of the January, 2009 Anthroposophical Society in Australia National Conference: *Individual Evolution for World Evolution – Personal Action, Planet Healing*, held at Mt.Barker, S. Australia.)

Peter Shirrmeister (a workshop leader at this year's Australian Anthroposophical Society National Conference) pointed out how, in contrast to some of the things Steiner wrote about Darwin , Steiner usually spoke about Darwin in ways which showed an affection for him and an appreciation for what Darwin had brought. Steiner particularly admired Darwin's "exemplary" methods of observation and description of nature. Indeed, as Johannes Kuehl (leader of the Science Section at the Goetheanum) pointed out, Darwin's theory of evolution was one of three discoveries that Steiner said had been necessary before anthroposophy could come into the world, the other two being spectrum analysis (discovered in 1868) and psychoanalysis.

In a letter to Marie Steiner, Rudolf Steiner wrote that it was thanks to Darwin that it was possible to speak of the spiritual in a way which would not have been possible before. Darwin was born into a world in which the dominant paradigm was embedded in religious mythology As Peter Glasby pointed out to us, this paradigm came under increasing pressure as the century progressed and such 'sacred' texts as the

Bhagavad-Gita and Buddha's teachings were translated, but it was Darwin who was at the centre of the eruption of reductionist science which had been developing in a rather slumbering fashion since the time of Bacon. And so it was that by the end of the nineteenth century the paradigm had shifted to the one we would still consider the conventional scientific paradigm today, in which matter is primary and life/soul/ spirit secondary. Darwin had brought a necessary shift away from a religious belief-determined paradigm but had not gone far enough. There was no place for what is essentially human in Darwin's picture.

A new paradigm: a shift from matter to human

Peter Glasby articulated the dilemma with this paradigm roughly as follows. If we look around us we see nature manifesting in its multifarious forms. But so too do we see the fruits of human labour, the products of what began as thoughts in people – manifestations of spirit. This surely creates a contradiction for a scientific paradigm which sees matter as primary in nature and man as no more than part of nature. Many now see in DNA the origin of life, but DNA is in fact the end of the process. To better understand the evolution of the earth we need to develop a new paradigm; one which gives primacy to spirit.

Rudolf Steiner's analogy with footprints might be helpful in this context. In one of his science lectures in Zurich in November 1917, he talks about the embryologist who having made his observations under the microscope goes on to develop his descriptions of "how the male germ unites with the female germ, and so on, how parts of cell nuclei are repositioned so that one thing or another develops". Steiner points out that :

.....someone taking the point of view of anthroposophically orientated spiritual science sees the footsteps in all this of a comprehensive spiritual influence that simply comes to expression in the changes which are apparent to the senses. If one wanted to consider the things seen under the microscope, with all kinds of staining methods applied, to be something that stood entirely alone, something one merely had to describe to know the processes of germ cell and embryonic development, one would be like someone who goes along a road where someone else had left his footsteps and believes that those footsteps were made by inner forces in the soil and not that another person had made them. The explanation for these footprints would be quite wrong if I were to say that there are all kinds of forces down there which push the forms up from below. Instead I have to assume that someone went that way, stepping on the soil. In the same way I must consider the spiritual principle if I want to come to the real facts.'

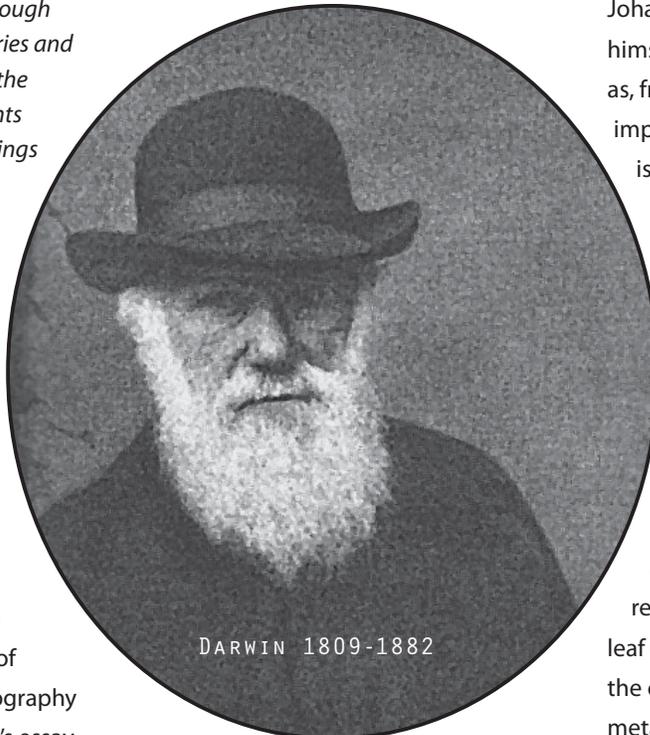
Later on in the same lecture, Steiner, while acknowledging the theory of evolution to be “one of the most significant achievements in intellectual history” makes clear how it needs to be taken a step further:

.....Someone working with the science of the spirit is thus on the one hand taking full account of natural science. On the other hand he has to go beyond it, beyond the things that are considered scientific today, not with speculation but with truly developed powers of insight through vision. These must replace theories and hypotheses – which are merely the outcome of speculation, thoughts that have been added – with things truly learned in the realm of the spirit. If one has advanced along this route, truly in such a way that nowhere are sins committed against facts that have been established in natural science, then the modern theory of evolution in particular will be seen in the right light.²

It should be noted in this context where Charles Darwin derived his theory of ‘survival of the fittest’ from. In his autobiography he talks of the impact Malthus’s essay on population, written at the end of the eighteenth century, had on him when he read it a couple of years after returning to England. Malthus had put forward the proposition that any population of organisms is always pressing upon, or else tending to multiply beyond, its available food supply. There will, as a result, be competition among each generation to survive. Those who possess some advantage over their competitors will survive. Darwin recognised in this a perfect explanation of evolution. Diversity within and among species was universally acknowledged.

Combine this fact with Malthus’s proposition and you had the theory of natural selection. Advantageous traits would be passed on through inheritance and so it was that the ‘more perfect’ evolved from the ‘less perfect’.

It would be unfair to shoulder Darwin with blame for the worst human excesses of the twentieth century but, as Johannes Kuehl pointed out, was it not belief in the survival of the fittest that drove Nazi cruelty not to



mention more recent ethnic cleansing atrocities? ‘This is how nature acts!’ Yet the theory did not come from nature but a concept abstracted from an observation of society at the end of the eighteenth century.

A different way of looking at nature was developed by Goethe.

Goethe did not seek to establish natural laws. These are always abstractions, something dead compared to living nature. Goethe sought to find pure phenomena, or archetypal phenomena as he called them. He wanted to use

human thinking not as something that might provide explanations for nature, discovering laws such as the conservation of energy or of matter, which are entirely thought up. No, Goethe sought to use thought to bring phenomena together in such a way that nothing of the human being himself would speak any more through these natural phenomena but the phenomena would speak purely out of themselves.³

Johannes Kuehl pointed out that Goethe himself avoided the term ‘evolution’ as, from its Greek origin (to unfold) it implies the existence of something that is evolving, preferring instead to use the term ‘metamorphosis’ which allows for free possibilities for the future. Metamorphosis refers not to an object but to the change observed, say between stages of development of a leaf. In relating one perception to another we are active in our thinking; thus it is that metamorphosis is a spiritual activity. It involves us recognising the constancy in the leaf (it’s the same leaf) and identifying the change (metamorphosis, see leaf metamorphosis on opposite page). Those of us who teach children need to develop this ability to see children in like manner, that is how much they have changed over the holiday yet how they are still the same children. Johannes Kuehl described this thinking that allows us to perceive metamorphosis as being experienced more in the upper body than in the head, a heart thinking if you like. We need to develop this capacity for perceiving nature and it will become for us a new organ for perceiving evolution. It is a thinking developed out of active interest in the subject and a thinking with very significant consequences. Indeed the evolution of the world

arguably depends on it.

Individual evolution for world evolution

A paradigm that gives primacy to matter and does not go beyond the concept of human as an animal can lead to the conclusion that the present ecological problems of the planet might best be solved by the removal of humans from it! Quoting Stephen Edelglass, Johannes articulated well the danger of such a view:

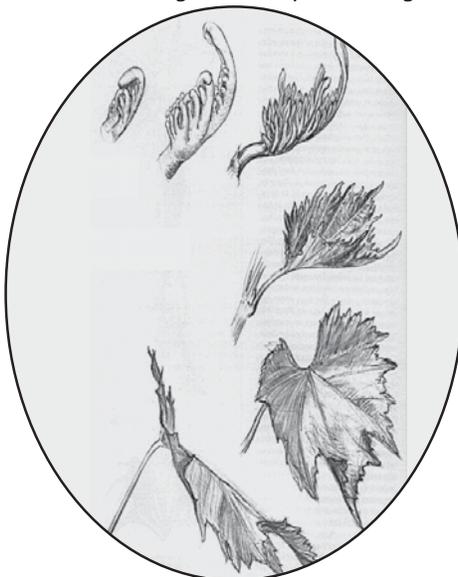
If we constantly think about a world where humans don't exist we shouldn't be surprised if we end up creating a world where they can't exist.

What would the world look like if we were to disappear from it? Johannes Kuehl told us how Europe would turn to woods and forests with far less biodiversity than is currently evident. Research suggests that the same would be true of rainforest areas. Nature, it would seem, is enriched by human care. This care must however be long term care (as the current state of my garden can attest to!). Our active interest in nature, in our gardens, our parks, our environment will change them. But, of course, our environment goes beyond, what grows on the land. In his final talk of the conference Peter Glasby suggested, provocatively, that the most significant problem of our time is that of cultural impoverishment. The person who is unmoved by a landscape, a thought or a piece of music (the list continues) might be said to be so afflicted. In a democratic society where cultural impoverishment reaches a critical point dysfunction arises. Those who believe that they can somehow ring fence themselves off from the cultural impoverishment of the majority have been misguided by a view of evolution that encourages exclusivity. A beauty of the English language is that the word we use to describe ourselves is both a noun and a verb: the human

being. Humanness is in a process of becoming. We have the responsibility to take everyone with us in our evolving. Cultural impoverishment is something to redeem, not to hide from. The evolution of the earth is in the hands of each of us.

On returning from the Conference I sought out Darwin's autobiography. Reading of the change he experienced in himself in his latter years gave new poignancy to Peter's parting speech. Before mentioning what Darwin wrote let me give a bit of background information.

In 1859 the final sentence of his seminal work "the Origin of the Species" began:



*There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally **breathed by the Creator** into a few forms or into one (my emphasis)".*

Twelve years later "the Descent of Man" was published in which all allusions to a Creator God were gone. The disbelief that had "crept over me at a very slow rate, ... was at last complete." In his autobiography, written in 1876 Darwin observed the extent to which his mind had changed over the preceding twenty to thirty years. Poetry, music and the writing of Shakespeare which he had formerly gained great pleasure from, he could now no longer endure. He went on to say:

My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. if I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once every week. (for the) loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.⁴

A perspective that places matter first inevitably runs the risk of devaluing things of a spiritual nature. Let us hope, for the sake of the earth, that Darwin's fate is not one we shall, out of wrong-mindedness, share.

References:

¹Steiner, R. (1955). Karmic relationships vol.1. (pp. 159-171). London: Anthroposophical Publishing Company.

²Steiner, R. (1917). Spiritual scientific findings concerning the natural world and the human being as part of the world. Contained in Steiner, R. (2004). Anthroposophy has something to add to modern sciences. Lower Beechmont, Australia: Completion Press.

³Steiner, R. (1917). The study of nature, social science and religious life seen in the light of spiritual science. Contained in Steiner, R. (2004). Anthroposophy has something to add to modern sciences. Lower Beechmont, Australia: Completion Press.

⁴Barlow, N. (ed.) (1958). The autobiography of Charles Darwin. London: Collins.

Paul White -took a class through from class 1-7 at Te Ra Waldorf School, Wellington, New Zealand . Currently, Paul is the Steiner lecturer on the B.Ed. (Steiner Education) programme at A.U.T University, Auckland , NZ .

pawhite@aut.ac.nz