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DARWIN VS. BEAUTY:
Explaining Away the Butterfly

by Jonathan Witt

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There is nothing necessarily illogical about seeking to "explain away" something, since the something in question may be an illusion; but a first step in understanding Darwinism's response to the beauty of the butterfly—and to beauty generally—is to recognize that Darwinism does seek to explain away our experience of it. In particular, it seeks to *explain away* our sense that beauty in some way connects us to the transcendent.

To his credit, Charles Darwin recognized there were instances of extravagant natural beauty that outstripped the explanatory power of Darwinian natural selection, so in *The Descent of Man* he developed his theory of sexual selection to fill the explanatory gap. There Darwin argued, in essence, that the peacock has an extravagant tail, Shakespeare an extravagant gift for spinning tales, and Mozart an extravagant ability to compose, the better to attract a mate.[1]

His explanation, while scientific in its orientation, was part of a larger philosophical project known as reduction— the idea that the best way to understand something is to identify its material parts, and to do so at lower and lower levels (from traits to cells to molecules to atoms, and so on). At its most extreme, reductionism views things as ultimately just the sum of their parts. Thus, to a Darwinian reductionist, the grace and beauty of the butterfly or the songbird or the poet ultimately spring from some advantage this beauty lent the creature and its ancestors for survival and reproduction ("survival of the fittest").

And at this point Darwinism is only getting warmed up. Darwinian reductionism is the great equalizer, boiling all of life down to either natural selection or sexual selection, and beneath that, to genetics. "Now they swarm in huge colonies, safe inside gigantic lumbering robots, sealed off from the outside world, communicating with it by tortuous indirect routes, manipulating it by remote control," explains evolutionary apologist Richard Dawkins. "They are in you and in me; they created us, body and mind; and their preservation is the ultimate rationale for our existence. They have come a long way, those replicators. Now they go by the name of genes, and we are their survival machines."[2]

If we imagine that the higher things in life are somehow exempt from this reductionist acid, Harvard sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson sets us straight. He leads into the matter by suggesting that when humans have grown wiser, the human mind "will be more precisely explained as an epiphenomenon of the neuronal machinery of the brain. That machinery is in turn the product of genetic evolution by natural selection acting on human populations for hundreds of thousands of years in their ancient environments."[3] A bit later he adds, "The social scientists and humanistic scholars, not omitting theologians, will eventually have to concede that scientific naturalism is destined to alter the foundation of their systematic inquiry by redefining the mental process itself."

As for the beauty of artistic genius, the "sensuous hues and dark tones have been produced by the genetic evolution of our nervous and sensory tissues," he writes. "To treat them as other than objects of biological inquiry is simply to aim too low."[4]

Wilson puts a brave and noble face on his recommended approach, implying as he does that his opponents are aiming "too low." But what exactly is high about Darwinian reductionism? Treating artistic beauty as a mere byproduct of evolution doesn't lead to a higher, deeper, or nobler understanding of art. It undermines the very foundation for saying anything is noble or low or wicked.

Think about some of the great poems, paintings, or novels. They probe the world of flesh and blood, but at the same time they draw us into things spiritual: the sublime and the ridiculous; love, heroism, and envy; good and evil. If Darwinism is right, however, some of our ancestors had an evolutionary mutation that caused them to imagine that a spiritual dimension—including things like nobility—actually exist. Since the illusion made them better at surviving and reproducing, the mutation passed from one generation to the next in a growing population of deluded ancestors, creatures who worked out their delusion in everything from poetry to painting to music. So goes the story of Darwinian reductionism.

One might respond, "Well, that's just the price of honest, unflinching rational investigation." But the conclusion is far from rational, and for at least a couple of reasons. First, the theory of sexual selection moves rather than solves the problem of extravagant beauty in the biological realm. Consider the tail of the peacock. Their enormous tails slow them down, making it easier for predators to catch them. Darwin's complementary theory of sexual selection says that peahens are attracted to large tail feathers (or more specifically, to the abundance of bright blue spots on the tail feathers), and they use these as a selection criterion when choosing a mate. The problem is that now there's another trait to be explained besides the enormous tail feathers of the peacock: namely, the tendency of peahens to choose peacocks with impractically large tail feathers. According to the Darwinian story of natural history, this trait wasn't created by an intelligent designer; it emerged gradually by natural selection. But why would nature tend to select peafowl that prefer large tail feathers on their peacocks?

Imagine you have a population of peafowl. Some of the peahens select their mates in the ordinary way—according to how fast the peacocks can take off, by how well they can handle themselves in a fight with other peacocks, that sort of thing. But a

curious cluster of genetic mutations bestowed on one peahen the gift of appreciating artistic effects, including an impractical thirst for big, beautiful plumage. Consequently, she and some of her female offspring start selecting peacocks with bigger tail feathers. The question is: why would natural selection prefer these peahens with their impractical disposition over peahens with survival-oriented selection criteria, criteria that would help their offspring better survive amidst a host of predators searching for dinner? Darwin's theory of sexual selection doesn't answer this question. Thus, it moves rather than solves the problem of the impractical peacock tail.

A second and more wide-ranging way that Darwinian reductionism is less than fully rational is in its commitment to the principle of methodological materialism. This is the investigative rule that says that investigators may consider only theories fully consistent with atheism. (It's not usually described this starkly, but that's what it boils down to.) According to the dictates of methodological materialism, if the extravagant beauty of butterflies or birds, if the origin of life or the universe or the fine tuning of the laws and constants of nature, if any of these features of our world points strongly toward a creative intelligence beyond the purely material, the flow of the evidence must be resisted.

This is what passes for scientific rationality in our age. But it isn't hard-nosed realism at all; it's priggish dogmatism. It's the man in the seat beside you at a Beethoven concert insisting that everything you're hearing is only so many notes, which are only so many sound waves, which are only so many perturbations among so many gaseous molecules amidst the machinery of your eardrum, the whole experience a curious stew of physics and sexual selection working its soulless magic on a delusional audience. The prig has talked all about the parts but has missed the whole—has missed the genius.

In the midst of such reductionism, the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* strikes a hopeful note: "Although we are reminded that the man of the second half of the twentieth century no longer believes in geniuses, they can hardly be abolished by an act of 'cultural will.'"[5]

The evidence of artistic genius, whether human or natural, remains all around us. The evidence that we live in a world not only red in tooth and claw, but also overflowing with beauty and meaning, remains all around us.

Perhaps, then, we should take the existence of beauty in nature as a starting point, since we're much more directly acquainted with *that* than with the truth of the various theoretical attempts to explain them away. We need only leave the flatland of Darwinian reductionism to see them for what they are. When we do, we will find a richer explanation not only for the beauty of the butterfly, but also for the origin of species. In doing so we will have left the world of Aldous Huxley's ironically titled *Brave New World*—with its utilitarian pleasure seekers oblivious of the transcendent—and will have returned to the far richer universe of meaning and wonder that led William Shakespeare's Miranda to exclaim to her father Prospero, "How many goodly creatures are there here!...O brave new world!"

Does sex come into it? Of course. But that, too, is a work of genius.

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NOTES

1 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press), 1981.
2 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 19–20.
3 Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 195, 204.
4 Ibid., 11.