
SCIENCE AND RELIGION

Does Life Have Personal Meaning?

The "triumph" of the species is now solemnly proclaimed as the eternal law of the universe. And that proclamation is made with the most cynical disrespect of the individual.

by Carsten Johnsen

Human beings, especially youth, have a deep-seated desire for meaning, purpose, and a standard of perfection in life. Unfortunately, advancement in age tends to destroy the idealism of meaning and perfection.

Probably nineteenth-century evolutionary theories constitute the greatest threat against concepts of meaning and perfection.

What, then, is the precise attitude of evolution toward perfection and meaningfulness? It would be wrong to say that it is entirely negative in all respects. Evolution seems to believe in a definitely forward-pressing tendency. It speaks most eloquently about a certain goal in life, an end of the most impressive magnitude, a high degree of "meaningfulness" at the center of the sober realms of biological science.

In the mind of the nineteenth-century English philosopher Herbert Spencer, evolution became almost synonymous with an increase in *all* values in our world. There was a universal law of *blessed necessity* that supposedly directed everything toward a wonderful perfection. In his view even the emotional nature of man could not avoid being lifted up toward an ever-more-desirable state. Such a view was the inevitable result of the entire surging spirit of universal progress that character-



ized the times. Just as his contemporary, the French philosopher Comte, had not been hindered by a stern positivism from including such sublime values as altruism in his pe-

culiar system of human progress, so Spencer, in portraying a new type of humanity, used terminology more characteristic of the Gospels than of hard natural philosophy.

However, one cannot refrain from asking, How could a universal law of evolution lead so inevitably to the highest summits of human perfection, in mind and spirit as well as in body, when it remained so utterly imperfect in itself—imperfect above all in the means it uses to reach the end of perfection? Would not the result of such a process be a cold and unfeeling state inconsistent with our inborn concept of meaning and perfection?

We all know the terrible clash that came—and was bound to come—between orthodox Christianity and the new "religion" of the nineteenth century.

More than ever before in the history of natural science, the simple record of the creation of life, as found in the first chapter of the Bible, came to be looked upon as a myth of a naiveté bordering on the ridiculous.

In this article we are not primarily concerned with the arguments of dogmatic Christian theology or of dogmatic biology. Our task here is not to show who is right in the strife regarding biological and cosmological facts. Whether it be the evolutionist,

the Christian fundamentalist (or special creationist), or a third group—that of the theologian bridge-builders who try to reconcile the two extremes, is outside the scope of our present examination.

The question that interests us is, In what spirit was the battle fought at its inception? We can go back to the time when there was no open battle at all and ask, In what spirit were those ideas reached that were bound to cause the battle sooner or later? Was it with a heavy heart that the intellectual elite of Occidental culture who arrived at the conclusion that the old opinions, so confidently held by the Christian scholars of “darker” ages, must be abandoned as untenable myths? No. Often it was with iconoclastic joy, and seldom with any concern about the more tragic consequences.

Personal meaning of prime importance

What are the more tragic consequences? The loss of a standard of perfection, the decline of the hope that individual human life has enduring meaning. To Christianity, and also to Humanism, the concept of *personal life* and *personal meaning* is of prime importance.

Schopenhauer, of Germany, writing at the same time as Comte, expressed a pessimism that included disbelief in the preservation of individual human life. But long before Schopenhauer or Charles Darwin it had been impressed on human minds that nature is concerned only with the survival of the species, not the individual. Hence the development of a forceful myth in human thinking—the species is the only true value. That myth probably had its source at least as early as Platonic philosophy (fourth century B.C.), for to Platonism real existence was attributed only to the *general thing*, the *idea*.

Thomas Aquinas, the great Christian philosopher of the Middle Ages, refused to succumb to the appearance that the individual is of consequence only as a member of the species. He said, “Individuals, too,

belong to nature’s principle plan.” But his protest was soon forgotten by modern philosophy, and Plato’s dualism once more gained the ascendancy. Schopenhauer’s duality of *Wille und Vorstellung* is, in fact, nothing but the old duality of the *idea* versus the *world of phenomena*. Once more there was taught a radical dualism of the *general* versus the *individual*, and of these two the individual is considered to be of illusory value. In Schopenhauer’s scheme the individual is destroyed simply because it is not worthy of being preserved.

The historian observing the development of human ideas may be impressed by the cocksureness with which the particular idea of a “crushing superiority of the species” has been heralded as almost an axiom of both scientific research and philosophical speculation. When Thomas Aquinas arrived at a totally different conclusion it was probably owing to nothing but the greater spirituality characterizing both him and the age he represented. Who can say that nature’s entire intention is set on the species? One might rather say that nature’s intention is directed toward something higher than both the species and the individual—that is, something including both of them.

Of course, in the pursuit of so lofty an aim, it may easily appear—in a given case—as though nature had really made the survival of the species her primary object. Every one of us knows only too well the conditions prevailing as far as life is concerned (we mean life in our world at the present time)—individuals are corruptible. But one chance for biological continuation still exists in this world—the species has a possibility of being maintained. At least it has succeeded in maintaining itself thus far. So nature simply seizes the chance open to her. What else could she do? She saves the species.

But to conclude that this is her preference or that it gives her full satisfaction is too bold. In fact, would not that be tantamount to

making a postulate that we think none but an obstinate Platonist would be inclined to offer: The highest form of life toward which *any* biology, under *any* circumstances, can be assumed to aspire is not the *individual* entity, but the *generic* one.

Of course, it is a fact that survival—here, today—reaches no higher level than that of the species. But is that equal to proving that no higher level has ever been reached or that no higher level can ever be reached in the future?

Individual element essential

We have stated that the truly meaningful in human life cannot, in any possible way, do without the individual element. In other words, precisely that life of the *individual* person, which nature is said to consider unworthy of being preserved, is the life that has any importance at all in the sense of a genuinely human finality.

We are here appealing to man—not necessarily to men with Christian sympathies, but to men with sound human sentiments and sound human reason. Frankly speaking, how could any man today actually have any chance whatsoever of finding any deeper sense in human existence unless he is able to pass beyond what has been scientifically given in the field of biology even thousands of years before Darwin’s age—individuals die; only species go on living?

And what happens to discourage mankind completely in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the great age of evolutionism? The “triumph” of the species is now solemnly proclaimed as the eternal law of the universe. And that proclamation is made with the most cynical disrespect of the individual.

One may, of course, also call it a simple *ignoring* of the individual. One may even call it *idealism*. So it was called in ancient Greece—and in modern Germany. The same principle that Darwin applied to biology was unscrupulously applied to history by the early nineteenth-century

German philosopher Hegel.

A perfect way required

Let us assume the possibility that the ultimate goal reached by this carnage after millions of years is a certain perfection. Still, the human observer to that drama might legitimately object: finality to *me* means something more than a perfect goal, it also means a perfect way toward that goal. Is the way suggested by the evolutionist perfect?

It is often said that the mills of God grind slowly. But what a cruel slowness this would be. Think of the streams of blood running from that crushing millstone of evolutionist creation (theistic evolution) down into the sands of eternity. How could any creature with secret longing for a meaning-filled life—or a creature with any trace of decent feelings left in him at all—discern anything reminiscent, even remotely, of perfection and finality in this process of “natural selection”?

Admittedly, even the creationist biologist (or the fundamentalistic theologian) is bound to face the facts of a fearful amount of cruelty and suffering in this world of ours. But with childlike faith in the God of Christianity and in a revelation meaningfully handed over to the human race by that God, he may at least refer to the historical accident of the introduction of sin into this world. The responsibility for imperfection may thus be placed on the shoulders of beings endowed with sufficient intelligence and sufficient freedom of volition to be perfectly able to make their own choice between good and evil—a voluntary choice absolutely indispensable for the highest happiness of intelligent creatures.

No place for moral or human arguments

But what is the situation when we come to the huge slaughterhouse of modern evolution? Within its lugubrious walls we find no place for any moral or human arguments. How could a human soul with a sincere

thirst for perfect righteousness manage to account for the infinite grimness of cruelty and suffering there? At what stage of that illustrious race toward final perfection could the evolutionist-minded theologian endeavor to introduce the historical element of a fall into sin? Was it perhaps the primeval mollusks that fell into sin? Or was it some naughty amoeba 'way back somewhere at the dawn of the eons that brought guilt and ensuing misery over this world “for ages on ages”?

This is not meant as a sarcastic joke. It is the desperately serious question of that noble creature whom Kant (late-eighteenth-century German theistic evolutionist) describes as still having within his human breast an endless yearning for justice and perfection. How is he to find a trace of divine righteousness in such an eternal trampling down of individuals—individuals more or less provided with senses and feelings—in completely inhuman carnage through millions and millions of years, for the purpose of paving a road toward eventual perfection? In the last analysis even that purpose is as blind as a bat.

There may be any amount of subtle speculation in such a theory. There may be other fascinating aspects also. But one thing there is not—*meaning*. There is no Christianity either. For Christianity cannot be imagined without true meaning—something that can completely fill human lives.

The inescapable fruitage of evolution

Small wonder, then, that a hitherto unheard of dechristianization has followed in the wake of evolutionist theories in every country in which they have been asserted.

As far as we can see, the relentless evolutionistic attack against the *individual* and the *personal* is the most cunning and cruel attack against meaningfulness in human life ever launched throughout the history of human philosophy. Let us be logical and consistent in our reason-

ing. (Intellectual integrity demands nothing less.) The atheist group of modern existentialists are a thousand times more logical than the bridge-building evolutionist theologians. At least the atheist group has drawn the only intelligent conclusion from the opinion that is now almost universally accepted—the evolutionary theory about the “perfection” that now exists. They say, “Everything is absurd.”

There is no alternative to that absurdity except the one presented by genuine Christianity—a Christianity including special creationism, the *sine qua non* of true meaning in this world.

Even Thomas Aquinas, a child of the dark Middle Ages, but one of the sharpest human intellects this world has seen, grasped the essential truth that human life on this planet can be satisfactorily perpetuated by one means only—the one presented by the Biblical resurrection. But who has ever heard about a resurrection of whole species? The resurrection proclaimed by the gospel is a resurrection of the individual. Just as human birth and death, human sin and redemption, are not collective, but an individual experience, resurrection also is a highly individual experience.

The value and importance of the individual is not an invention of the Renaissance, as some seem to believe. Rather, a full appreciation of the individual is as old as Christianity, as old as God's creation of free moral beings. The scholastics of the Middle Ages, however queer and erroneous some of their ideas may have been, still retained some of that appreciation. They had a lot more of it than many who today boast of being such incomparable individualists. ■

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