

CHAUNCEY WRIGHT'S VIEWS ON LAMARCK

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Chauncey Wright (1830-75) an American pragmatist was a great admirer of Charles Darwin. Wright advocated the neutrality of science in seeking the objective truth. In this search, Wright studied and analyzed the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson's idealism as well as John Stuart Mill's utilitarianism. In the area of the use of new faculties from old, Wright utilized Lamarckian terms in a panpsychic manner rather than in a materialistic design. He applied these terms *desire* and *habit* to the fields of both biological and social neo-Lamarckism. Yet, Wright did not fall into the trap as did many of his peer scientists and philosophers by labelling Lamarck a vitalist,

The interpretation of the modes of Natural Selection did not completely satisfy Wright's intellectual curiosity concerning the numerous pathways taken by life toward evolutionary progress. Although Wright was a friend and devoted follower of Charles Darwin he still urged additional investigations, discussions and debates regarding the significance of Darwin's theories to evolutionary thought.

Wright never achieved an academic chair at any university and therefore had less respectability and authority in the leading philosophical groups of his period. He died in obscurity and only in the past thirty years has his achievements been investigated and recognized for their true worth. In maintaining the constant need for scientific neutrality Wright found scientific truth in both Darwin's and Lamarck's theories of evolution.

INTRODUCTION

Chauncey Wright (1830-1875) was one of the earliest advocates of Darwinism on the North American continent. His philosophy included elements of skepticism, utilitarianism and views which coincided with pragmatism. As a member of the distinguished Metaphysical Club of Cambridge, Massachusetts, he attempted to convince the leading philosophers both pragmatists and non-pragmatists (William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, Oliver Wendell

Holmes, Jr., John Fiske and Francis Ellingwood Abbot) as to the merits of Darwin's theories.

In the early 1930's Gail Kennedy restimulated interest in Wright's intellectual life and writings. She described his early conversion to the Baconian method of interpreting nature through the use of empirical techniques. One of the major challenges of his career was to imbue his colleagues with a zealous positivism towards the Darwinian creed.

According to Kennedy, "Almost every one of Wright's papers published after 1860 is explicitly concerned with theological aspect of the controversy regarding evolution. His animus against attempts to convert the results of natural science into a theology is the thread that binds together the scattered essays."¹ Another authority on Wright's work, Edward H. Madden, corroborates that Wright's principle bequest to philosophy is the demand for nonbelligerent attitudes of transcendentalists toward scientific inquiry.

Madden further explains, "By 'scientific neutrality' Wright meant that science is uncommitted to any particular metaphysical or theological interpretation of its findings and free from all forms of contral imposed by metaphysical and theological authorities. After all, orthodoxy shows great resource in reconciling any scientific results with its own cherished convictions. According to Wright, the result of science can be accounted for as true by alternate ontologies so the establishment of scientific concepts and laws is independent of any particular ontology."² In a later article Madden brings to the surface the early interest of Wright in utilitarian expectations in evolutionary theory. Madden states, "Wright was a brilliant proponent of utility as well as of natural selection, but his views on utility, contained in letters, were known only to his friends untill after his death and the publication of his *Letters*. Darwin became acquainted with Wright's views on natural selection, which he valued highly, through the review-articles in the *North American Review*; but Mill who died before the publication of Wright's *Letters*, knew little if anything about Wright's utilitarian views."³

In the many papers, articles and books dealing with the philosophical development of Wright's posture and scientific method concerning evolution, there exists a limited analysis of his disposition to Lamarckian ideas. In this paper, the writer has analyzed the degree of compatibility of Wright's views of nature with Lamarck's theories; namely, use and disuse as well as transmission of acquired characteristics.

WRIGHT'S STRUCTURE OF SCIENCE

As a skeptic similar to Hume, Wright could not accept any individual

comprehensive abstract system which would function as the explanation of all casual acts in the entire cosmos. In his search for understanding of the physical and biological principles of the universe, he strongly rejected esoteric mysteries. He declared, "Mysticism is so stupid and spiritually self-engrossed that the better self, which it ought to contemplate as a particular representative of the endless solidarity of human life, is thought of by it as the individual mystic's immortal part. Mysticism is so blindly self-engrossed that it cannot understand utilitarianism but supposes this doctrine to mean a service of the higher or the virtuous inclinations of our nature to the lower, or merely to the gross well-being of human life."⁴

Wright also found difficulty compromising with the sentimental intellectual nineteenth century New Englanders who were still charmed by Emersonian transcendentalism. He rejected the Emersonian idealistic "Reason" over the Baconian method which was similar to his rebuff of mysticism. Joseph L. Blau confirmed this renouncement by stating "The key to Wright's opposition to transcendentalism was, then, his belief that there was no single, inclusive, metaphysical system which would serve as the foundation for discussion of matters of fact and evaluations."⁵

Asa Gray (1810-1888), the famous American Botanist, shared with Wright a number of scientific research projects. During this time he observed Wright's empirical search for verifiable sensible experiences. In describing Wright's procedure, Gray observed that he acted as if "... science advanced piecemeal on the basis of observation and experiment, using general ideas as hypotheses. The investigator should be free from the domination of a priori systems at all times, keeping ethical sentiments separate from scientific knowledge."⁶ Wright's thoughts were in harmony with scientific trends during this period, which emphasized empiricism and generalizations on established data.

The aesthetic writings of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) on utilitarianism had a significant influence on Wright's value system. Wright incorporated the ethos of utilitarianism by revealing that "The aims and lessons of the utilitarian philosophy are not, however, in any way opposed to, but are rather in alliance with, all that is noble and beautiful and delightful in the possibilities of human nature. It is only incidentally or perhaps by a mistake of its true scope and interests that it turns attention away from aesthetic pursuits to the broader but perhaps on the whole not worthier interests of science or industry or politics."⁷

Utilitarianism appeared to be more than just a philosophy to Wright but appealed and blended into his character. It became a vehicle for his

acceptance into the caste of the scholarly New England Brahmins. Wright felt that utilitarianism could almost serve in place of a formal religion. This view is substantiated by J. J. Chambliss' analysis that "Wright sees the utilitarian standard as a substitute for the theologian's will of God, as finding the standard within the social conditions of life itself, rather than external to life. But it is not the same kind of substitute as is the theologian's will of God. The utilitarian standard is not fixed, eternal; therefore, what the standard consist of i.e. what the greatest good for the greatest number is changing"⁸.

Not believing in a predesigned universe, Wright saw no need for the concept of necessity. According to Harry K. Wells, "The central doctrine Wright preached was that there was no necessity in nature or society. By denying necessity he denied that there was necessary laws of motion in the universe, that reality had a structure, that the development of nature and society follows general laws of motion. If there is no objective necessity then science cannot discover what is not there to be discovered. Thus what science calls laws of motion and development were to Wright only habits of human behavior.

The entire membership of the Metaphysical Club was indebted to Wright for stressing this doctrine of *no necessity*⁹.

This theme remained with the members of the club. Forty-eight years after Wright's demise Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (1841-1935) wrote to Professor Morris Raphael Cohen (1880-1947), "That we could not assert necessity of the order of the universe I learned to believe from Chauncey Wright long ago. I suspect C. S. P. got it from the same source"¹⁰.

Although Wright's structure of science seemed to incorporate empiricism, utilitarianism and some phases of pragmatism, he insisted at all times that science must retain its neutrality from all theological and metaphysical systems.

WRESTLING WITH THE DARWINIAN TRAP

In a recent article, Mary Alice White stated that "Before 1898, learned people were very much influenced by Darwin's work and had interpreted Darwin's theory of evolution to mean that the mind of man was an extension of the animal brain, only more developed. To show the similarity between the animal mind and human mind, anecdotes were recounted of how intelligent certain pets were"¹¹.

Shortly after Darwin finished *Descent of Man* (1871) he met with Wright

in England. Because Darwin was aware of Wright's training in psychology and psychozoology, he hoped that Wright would make an "attempt at solving 'Darwin's problem' of bridging the supposed evolutionary gap between animal and human intelligence."¹² Darwin himself "was inclined to solve the problem in terms of variations of language, due to 'unconscious selection' and in this connection he wrote to Wright: 'As your mind is so clear, and as you consider so carefully the meaning of words. I wish you would take some incidental occasion to consider when a thing may properly be said to be effected by the mind of man.'"¹³

Wright's response to this problem resulted in his brilliant essay, *The Evolution of Self-Consciousness*, which appeared in the *North American Review* of April, 1873. Wright's emphasis was on "putting old capacities to new uses man might have arrived at self-consciousness. In speech the tongue and the lips are put to new uses. 'Natural selection is not necessarily concerned in the first production of any form, structure, power, or habit, but only in, perpetuating and improving those which have arisen from any cause whatever.' It is not necessary to create a new soul, but only to perfect the mind as an instrument of survival. Wright comes to the strange conclusion that the self is not naturally selfish. He explained how love of self is social in character and leads to a love of mankind. Wright quotes Cicero: 'Nature has inclined us to the love of mankind; and this is the foundation of laws.'"¹⁴

Gail Kennedy further elaborated "The grain of truth in the contention that certain human characters and traits, e.g., brain power, language, moral discernment, volition, and self-consciousness cannot be accounted for by the agency of natural selection is that evolution is not merely a continuous development of certain kinds of powers and functions, but admits of novelty, by the emergence of new uses for existing powers. These new uses are related to the existing powers only as accidents. Thus an original power of locomotion may be used in divers ways, as crawling, walking, swimming, etc.; again, one organ may have different potential uses, e.g. the voice may be used as an organ of emotional expression or of communication, the hands for gesturing, manipulation, etc.; or one use may be common to different organs, e.g. lungs and gills. It is evident that genuinely novel powers, involved potentially in present uses and organs, can and do emerge in the course of evolution."¹⁵

Wright was not completely satisfied in resolving the question concerning the evolution of self-consciousness through his process of hybridizing Millian utilitarianism and the Darwinian theory of natural selection. He continued to investigate and perhaps both Mill's and Darwin's work kept moving him

away from his central point that science cannot be influenced by any form of mystical interpretation such as the term *desire*. John Stuart Mill used the term *desire* in reference to man's desire towards good and ethical systems of behaviour.

Wright stressed the neutral character of science, and in general, tended to avoid an anthropomorphic view of nature. His views of human nature, however, may have been influenced by Mill especially in his classic work, *Utilitarianism*. Here Mill emphasized that human will and virtue are grounded in desire or the pleasure principle which eventually becomes a constant of human behavior through the mechanism of habit.¹⁶ Similarly, Wright's utilitarianism is linked with a 'philosophy of habit'. Human motives are effective to the degree that they are related to human habits and "natural inclinations."¹⁷

One of the major points in Wright's essay is the rise of new faculties from old. This theme can be used as an example of Lamarck's Law I, namely, that the development and effectiveness of organs are proportional to the use of those organs. The term *desire*, as used by the utilitarians, implies the passing on from one generation the social transmission of man's cultural heritage. This appears to be compatible with Lamarck's Law II, namely, that everything acquired or changed during an individual's lifetime is preserved by heredity and transmitted to that individual's progeny. However, Wright partly fell into the Darwinian trap of humanizing the translation of the term *les besoins* into meaning a wish or an intelligent want. H. Graham Cannon states, "Now Lamarck clearly always used the word 'besoin' in the sense of an animal experiencing a want, His detractors used it in the other manner, that is, as something involving the will, as a desire. An animal desired an organ, therefore it evolved! Darwin himself was one of the worst culprits, but only in his private letters to other scientists. In one letter he calls on Heaven to protect him from such Lamarck nonsense as that adaptations arise 'from the slow willing' of animals."¹⁸

Torn between his demand for scientific neutrality and the seemingly mystical aspects in the Darwinian thesis, Wright sought to resolve the question of the evolution of self-consciousness without introducing vitalism. In wrestling with this problem, Wright subtly wrote, "While the general doctrine of evolution has thus been successfully redeemed from theological condemnation, this is not yet true of the subordinate hypothesis of Natural Selection, to the partial success of which this change of opinion is, in great measure, due. ... It would seem, at first sight, that Mr. Darwin has won a victory, not for himself, but for Lamarck. Transmutation, it would seem, has been accepted, but Natural Selection, its explanation is still rejected by many converts to the general theory, both on religious and scientific grounds."¹⁹

Wright came to the conclusion that self-consciousness is engendered within a species and appears through the use of its anatomically and physiological development. These ideas were similarly expressed by Darwin's friend Thomas Henry Huxley (1825-1895) who advocated in his theory of epiphenomenalism that the flow of consciousness was the result of gradual growth and filamentous connections of complex neurological synapses.

CONCLUSION

Chauncey Wright struggled his entire life for the recognition that he never received. Not being born into a family of wealth or one of intellectual heritage, he strove to grasp the cudgel of academic approval. His major contribution to nineteenth century intellectualism was the demand for the "neutrality of science." During the last years of his life Wright was still perplexed by the mechanism of natural selection. He wrote, "The 'that,' the fact of evolution, may be regarded as established. "The 'how,' the theory of explanation of it, is the problem immediately before us."²⁰ Wright was not completely convinced that the theory of Darwinism was the only pathway to interpreting evolutionary patterns and called for recognition of other views. He strongly supported this concept when he declared "That the further discussion of rival hypotheses on the causes and modes of evolution will profit... since there have grown up general methods of investigation and discussion, which prescribe limits and precautions for hypothesis and inference; and, more than all, for the conduct of debate on scientific subjects, that have been of the greatest value to the progress of science, and will, if faithfully observed, doubtless direct the present discussion to a successful issue."²¹

Wright's high regard for Lamarck is reflected in a response to Mr. Mivart, "Lamarck's principles of the direct effect of habit, or actual use and disuse, has never been abandoned by later evolutionists; and Mr. Darwin has given much more space to its proof and illustration in his work on *Variation under Domestication* than any other writer. Moreover the physiological causes which produce reversions and correlations of growth, and which, so far as they are known, and quite independent of natural selection, and are also assigned as causes of change. But all these are subordinated in the theory to the advantage and consequent survival of the fittest in the struggle for life, or to natural selection."²²

Unfortunately Wright did not live long enough to have surmounted the Darwinian dilemma, and Philip P. Weiner may be correct in stating that "Wright pointed out that Darwin's speculation concerning pangenesis was no more than a 'provisional hypothesis.' Although he accepted—as did most

of his contemporaries, e.g. Samuel Butler, Alfred Wallace, C. S. Peirce, G. Stanley Hall—the Lamarckian view of the transmission of gradually acquired adaptive characters, Wright was cautious enough to state his acceptance with plenty of 'ifs.'²³ "No better evidence of Wright's sincerity and steadfast adherence to his method as a scientific critic and philosopher can be given than his abandonment of the Lamarckian idea of 'use' as an evolutionary factor, in his last letter to Darwin in February 1875."²⁴

If Chauncey Wright had lived to reach his full intellectual maturity, perhaps he would have been able to resolve the Darwinian pitfall and serve as a source for American philosophers and scientists to appreciate the genius of Lamarck.

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