Week 6: Science and Religion


Additional Background:

Stephen Jay Gould argued that anyone who claims to be educated should read Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* cover to cover. Unfortunately it is 490 pages long. To compromise, I chose only chapter 3, “Struggle for Existence.” Why do you think many people were captivated by his argument? Why do you think many others were not convinced? What is the balance of factual statement, justified conclusion, and tentative speculation in his work? What do you think of Darwin’s writing style – is this a model to emulate?

In *Origin of Species*, Darwin dodged the question of human origins. Twelve years later he published *The Descent of Man*, which took the issue head on. Again, it’s a long book, so we are only reading a brief excerpt. This excerpt presents his conclusions - remember, he has already provided hundreds of examples and arguments. Like many scientists we’ve read, he starts humbly, stating that he is only making speculations, that he has been led inexorably by data to conclusions, etc. Does he seem so humble when discussing the origins of religion, the superiority of humans, his concerns about the future of humanity in the absence of an ongoing struggle for existence? As with *Origin of Species*, do you think his conclusions are inspiring examples of the power of science or a bleak, passionless, vision of life? In this excerpt, Darwin writes, “There should be open competition for all men; and the most able should not be prevented by laws or customs from succeeding best and rearing the largest number of offspring.” Do you think this would produce a community of people that would be productive as a society?

John Hedley Brooke writes that “it was easy to read [Darwin’s] theory as disruptive of moral responsibility and, by implication, of the stability of society,” (p. 194). Why did some people read it this way in Victorian Britain? Can it be read this way today? Brooke emphasizes that the controversy over Darwinism in Victorian England was not simply a clear-cut debate between scientists supporting evolution and theologians opposing it. What were some of the arguments presented by those Anglican theologians who claimed that scientific evolution could support a more refined conception of Christianity? Do you think the idea of evolution can coexist with Christianity?
The Caputo article: How are the terms *academic freedom*, *dogma*, *scientific theory*, *scientific explanation*, and *fact* used in the current debate over the teaching of evolution? How does it square with your own understanding of these terms? Why do today’s critics of evolution present themselves as advocates of science?