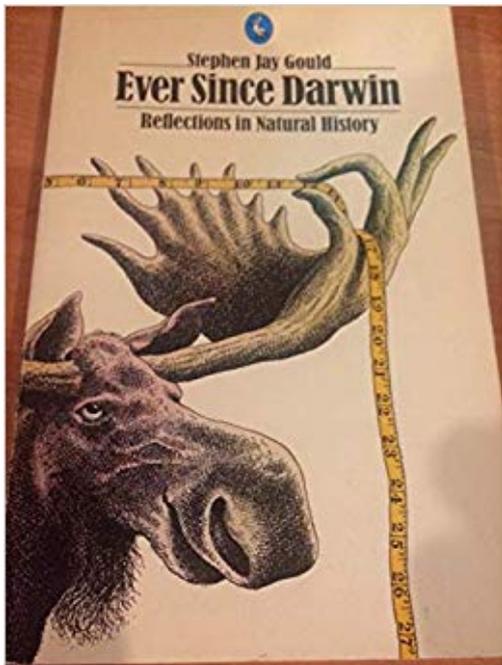


Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History (Pelican) by Stephen Jay Gould



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"A remarkable achievement by any measure. [Gould] is profoundly intelligent, a writer of great natural wit, and his sophistication and learning range far beyond the parameters of his academic field, biology. . . . One is hard pressed to single out past writers who could wear the sobriquet of natural history essayist with such distinction."n- David Walsten, Chicago Tribunenn"A shrewd and learned intellectual whose essays on Charles Darwin have the style and address of what in other circumstances might be the writing of a literary critic upon Stendhal or Proust or other such major figure in the world of letters."n- P. B. Medawar, The Sciences



Reviews of the **Ever Since Darwin: Reflections in Natural History (Pelican)** by Stephen Jay Gould

deadly claw

It's always a pleasure to read Stephen Jay Gould, although I don't always agree with him.

I'll start my critique with the spelling/typographical errors in the book, then go to the substance issues:

- 1) On page 84, "evolution proceeded in straght lines" should obviously be, "evolution proceeded in straight lines."
- 2) On page 86, he writes, "My sample included seventy-nine skulls and antlers . . . ", but on page 87, the caption to the graph says, "the actual data include 81 individuals." Which is it, 79 or 81?
- 3) On page 209, twice "the idea [or dogma] of cerebral primary" was mentioned. Obviously, this should instead be, "cerebral primacy" (it was spelled correctly twice later, on page 211 & 212).
- 4) On page 237, "could offer no explanation other then" should instead be, "could offer no explanation other than."
- 5) On page 262, he writes, "the situation becomes much more complex with twelfth cousins, four times removed." Twelfth should instead be twelve in this sentence ($12 \times 1/8 = 1.5$).
- 6) On page 265, the question, "How can it help us understand the contradictory amalgam of impulses toward selfishness and altruism that form our own personalities" should end with a question mark, not a period.
- 7) I'm not persuaded by his arguments in essay 17 (The Reverend Thomas' Dirty Little Planet):
 - a) On page 141, he writes, "Often, religion has actively encouraged science. If there is any consistent enemy of science, it is not religion, but irrationalism." Well, religion itself is anti-scientific . . . it is itself irrationalism personified. Did Gould forget the Inquisition?!
 - b) Again on page 141, he writes, "Burnet began his inquiry to determine where the waters of Noah's flood came from." There's no such thing as Noah's flood; it's a fiction.
 - c) On page 143, he writes, "Utterly fantastic? (referring to Burnet's account of earth history) Sure, for 1975; but not for 1681." Well, if it's fantastic for 1975, then it's fantastic. Period.
 - d) Again on page 143, he writes, "Reason and revelation are two infallible guides to truth." What nonsense. There's no such thing as revelation.
 - e) On page 143/144, he writes, "Burnet's God is not the continuous and miraculous actor of a prescientific age, but Newton's imperial clock-winder who, having created matter and ordained its laws, let nature run its own course." Nature can run its own course; no God is needed!!!
 - f) On page 144, he writes, "I do not, of course, argue that Burnet was a scientist in any modern sense of the term." The problem is not that he wasn't a scientist, but that he didn't think scientifically. Some modern scientists are religious. So, they are scientists in their work, but they don't "think scientifically" in their private life.
 - g) Again on page 144, he writes, "Burnet assumed the truth of scripture and fashioned a physical mechanism to make it happen . . ." Yes, that's the problem.
 - h) On page 145, he writes, "John Keill, an Oxford mathematician, argued that Burnet's natural explanations were dangerous because they encouraged a belief that God is superfluous." Well, that's exactly what "God" is. So, you can't have it both ways and believe in God and then believe he's unnecessary.
 - i) Again on page 145, he writes, "It was the dogmatists and anti-rationalists who got Burnet in the end, not the theists." In my opinion, theists are by definition dogmatists and antirationalists. They are all one and the same.
 - j) On page 145, he writes, "Scientists have persecuted dissenters, resorted to catechism, and tried to extend [their] authority to a moral sphere where it has no force. Yet without a commitment to science and rationality in its proper domain, there can be no solution to the problems that engulf

us." I don't believe that science "has no force" in the moral sphere, and I don't believe in Gould's concept of "non-overlapping magisteria" which is what's implied in his use of the phrase, " in its proper domain."

8) On page 152, he writes, "A dynamic constancy may seem fundamentally at odds with clearly directional aspects of the history of life and the earth. But medieval Christianity could encompass both views in its concept of history." Who cares what medieval Christianity (or any other religion for that matter) could do?!!

9) Again on page 152, he writes, "The New Testament is a replay of the Old. Mary is like the burning bush because both held within themselves the fire of God, yet were not consumed. Christ is like Jonah because both arose again after three days in extremis." What?!!!! I couldn't believe a respected scientist would utter such nonsense. At least Richard Dawkins has the courage of his convictions and disavow any sort of religion.

10) On page 237, he writes, "With Konrad Lorenz as godfather, Robert Ardrey as dramatist, and Desmond Morris as raconteur, we are presented with man, "the naked ape," descended from an African carnivore, innately aggressive and inherently territorial." I read and liked very much Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape* and agree completely with its assessments. It didn't strike me at all as "pop ethology" or "outright racism." Morris was talking about humans in general, not about blacks.

11) On page 238, he writes, "If we are programmed to be what we are, then these traits are ineluctable. We may, at best, channel them, but we cannot change them, either by will, education, or culture." I don't agree that this is necessarily the conclusion of the claims he's talking about.

12) On page 240, he writes, "when Lorenz compares us with geese and fish, we stray even further into pure conjecture; baboons, at least, are second cousins." Here he defeats his own previous argument.

13) On page 251, he writes, "the statement that humans are animals does not imply that our specific patterns of behavior and social arrangements are in any way directly determined by our genes." I disagree.

14) I don't agree with him at all in his criticism of Chapter 27 of E.O. Wilson's book, *Sociobiology*:

a) On page 253, he writes, "[This chapter] abounds with statements about supposed human universals. For example, "Human beings are absurdly easy to indoctrinate—they seek it." Or, "Men would rather believe than know." I can only say that my own experience does not correspond with Wilson's." I disagree; my experience does.

b) On page 254, he writes, "Since Wilson believes that repeated, often genocidal warfare has shaped our genetic destiny, the existence of nonaggressive peoples is embarrassing." How did he know that? Did Wilson himself tell him it was embarrassing, or is this just a conjecture?!!

15) On page 269, he writes, "I am disturbed by the erroneous idea that genes are discrete and divisible particles, using the traits that they build in organisms as weapons for their personal propagation. . . . they do not directly code for any bounded piece of morphology or any specific behavior. Morphology and behavior are not rigidly built by battling genes; they need not be adaptive in all cases."

First of all, I don't agree that this is an erroneous idea. Second, I do believe that genes code for specific morphology and behavior, even if these are not adaptive in all cases. They are simply adaptive to the genes.

Tane

About 75% of the way through and have found many "essays" (chapters) provide background I use in everyday action as a zoo docent... and some of it even informs my conversations with other gym rats. Of course, the straight biology-genetics can be a bit dated, but the essence holds up amazingly well. Bonus: Gould is a delight to read and he pulls material not only from biology but also from geology (and theology, and philosophy, and more). He's definitely got a 'point of view' but he also finds it possible to praise those he disagrees with. Just last night I read the chapter on the why-all of size and structure, and Gould not only discussed things like bone cross-sections, but also explained tape-worms, brainpower limits, and the construction of cathedrals. A delight on every page!

Kardana

In January, I reviewed, the Sixth Extinction (by the journalist, Elizabeth Kolbert) and, like others, found it wanting. I thought it better to read books by scientists with good editors. So I tried to find such a book structured as Kolbert's, i.e. short treatments of disparate matters touching upon evolution and extinction. This 1977 collection of essays fit the bill. Even now, Gould's work stands up and provides the depth lacking in Kolbert's. If this format appeals to you, I recommend this book.

Excellent

When it comes to popular writings on Evolution, the two names I most often hear are Dawkins and Gould. While I've read several books from Dawkins, this is my first one from Gould. This one is in the essay format which it seems is the norm for Gould's books. Overall the essays vary in quality but for the most part they're good, although some are a little dated (which happens with any science books published 35-40 years ago). My favorite ones were the first section over Darwin and a section which looks at odd organisms. In this later section, you get some interesting essays such as one over the Irish Elk and my favorite essay about the lamprolaima mussel, which makes itself look like a swimming fish in order to get attacked by larger fish, then it shoots spores into the larger fish. This book makes me want to read more of his works.

Barit

This was a wonderful reading experience. Dr. Gould is a truly gifted writer with a wonderful wit and colorful style. He has a broad range of interests and knowledge and an interesting circle of friends and colleagues upon whose wisdom he also draws (Astronomer Sagan, Geologists Press and Siever, were among those with whose work I was familiar). He also manages to approach "accepted" theories from unusual directions, sometimes with novel and provocative results! The collection of essays includes an interesting work on the effects of the personality of the Captain of the Beagle on the formulation of Darwin's theories; a subject that had certainly never occurred to me. There is also an interesting discussion of the human baby as an unfinished embryo, with interesting implications for the upper limit on brain size and for human evolution as a whole. The effect of size on intellectual potential of the brains of different species, for instance ants vs humans, is the topic under discussion in the Sizing up of Human Intelligence. The interaction of planetary size and surface area and the concomitant implications for development of life is the subject of another article. The effect of social milieu on the development and acceptance of scientific theories is also discussed as is the hindsight criticism of "wrong" theories and their proponents. Probably most interesting, and certainly most urgently in need of repetition even now, is the tendency to use scientific "fact" or verbal slight of hand to support social status quo or even abuse by those with a political agenda. Many of the essays could be well used in high school classes to teach and encourage critical thinking and novel approaches to what is commonly held as "fact." I would not just recommend the book to you, I would encourage you to read it cover to cover!

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