

Evolution as eschatology

A review of
*The Evolution-Creation
Struggle*

by Michael Ruse
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Michael Ruse is possibly the most prolific evolutionist writer on the creation-evolution conflict. This philosopher has been at it for thirty years and shows no signs of tiring of the topic. He has a lot to say, as evidenced by his approximately three-dozen books. In this book, Ruse intends to explain why the creation-evolution conflict is so emotional and so long lasting. Ruse's answer is very similar to one creationists have given many times before. This conflict is much deeper than a disagreement between two views of facts, and much more complex than merely a war between science and religion. Rather, the creation-evolution conflict is a struggle between two religions. However, Ruse comes to this conclusion in a different manner from that which you might expect. Ruse interprets the two 'religions' present in the evolution-creation struggle in terms of eschatology (which he broadly uses to encompass any view of the future), while creationists usually speak in terms of naturalism versus theism. Ruse's novel interpretation bespeaks creativity at the least.

Making progress

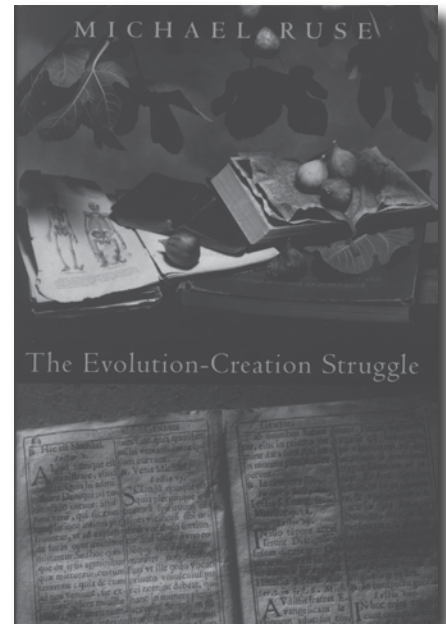
Ruse's book at first seems to be a review of the history of evolutionary thought, highlighting some specific cases of relationship between Christianity and evolution. He starts by going back to the 18th-century Enlightenment era as a 'crisis of faith'. Ruse says that Christianity responded to the rationalism and scepticism

in that era in two ways. First, there was a humanistic type of faith in the ability of man to advance in the world. Ruse uses the term 'progress' as shorthand for referring to this optimistic philosophy. Since progress is a view of the future, he classifies this as 'postmillennialism'. The other post-Enlightenment line of thought, according to Ruse, was a literalistic Christian faith, the descendants of which were destined to come into mortal conflict with the descendants of progress faith.

Ruse believes that the humanistic 'postmillennialists' of the Enlightenment (a confusing classification) and their descendants prepared fertile ground for evolution. Their gospel of progress fitted perfectly: evolution claimed that life itself had progressed, from bacteria to Beethoven.

Before long Ruse gets to more familiar waters, as we meet the usual heroes of evolution: Darwin, Wallace, Huxley, Spencer and friends. Ruse brings out the fact that the concept of 'progress' was important to many of these evolutionists. Unfortunately, Ruse risks overwhelming readers with a barrage of names before his main argument becomes clear. Apparently to relieve the reader, he liberally sprinkles the text with poems illustrative of one point or another along the way—which only obscures his argument even more. But despite the distractions, it soon becomes obvious that Ruse is not attempting to write a condensed history of the conflict, but is making a specific point about the impact of 'progress' on the evolutionist leaders.

The 'progress' that Ruse is talking about is a philosophical outlook on life that emphasizes improvement and advances in life, society and culture. It sounds almost religious, and that is just the point that Ruse is making. These leaders of evolutionary theory did not view evolution as just a dry 'fact' of science. Evolution was to them a scientific fact indeed, but more than that, it was a confirmation of a life-principle, *viz.* progress. There



was no consensus on exactly how this principle should be lived out, but it was nevertheless used in many ways as a foundation for ethics. As an example, Ruse points to the laissez-faire Herbert Spencer and the socialist Alfred Russel Wallace (pp. 107–111, 124–125). Both justified their opposite views of society (free-market Spencer versus socialist Wallace) on grounds of progress.

Ruse carries the story of the progress of 'progress' right up to the current evolutionists. However, some leading evolutionists such as the late Stephen Jay Gould explicitly rejected evolution as progress.¹ Still, Ruse seeks to demonstrate that a progress worldview is alive and well today, held to at some level among nearly all the first-rank evolutionary thinkers, where there is a fervent belief in the hope of a better future. Up to this point, we have not seen exactly how this relates to the creationists.

Creationists left behind

According to Ruse, the evolutionists are progressives; the creationists are doom and gloom 'end-timers'. Ruse's chapter on the biblical literalists opens with a humorous analysis of the best-selling *Left Behind* series in evangelical culture (pp. 236–237). Ruse then addresses the connections between creationism and the 'end times'. Of course, a number of leading

creationists have written and spoken on both topics, so Ruse has a fair number of quotes to make a connection. (He does not mention *Answers in Genesis*, which takes no position on eschatology.) Ruse doesn't stop there, but goes out on a limb making tenuous connections between ID advocates and either pre- or a-millennialism (pp. 259–261). While he notes that 'with these diverse attitudes and religious commitments, we should not expect to find a consistent line of ardent premillennialism', he still insists that they 'all strongly oppose postmillennial hopes' (pp. 259, 260). Postmillennialism is reserved to the evolutionists.

Secular religion

So what is Ruse trying to prove? Ruse spends most of the book on one aspect of the intellectual history of evolution (progress). He gives much shorter coverage to origins and eschatology in the history of evangelicalism. Finally, in the last chapter, he ties it all together. The broad point is that evolution and creation are so diametrically opposed that they lead to opposite views even of the future. Both views affect the way we live our lives.

To his fellow evolutionists, he emphasizes that evolutionists have a religion of progress, with evolutionary ethics to accompany it. His conclusion fleshes out the premise from the prologue:

'in both evolution and creation we have rival religious responses to a crisis of faith—rival stories of origins, rival judgments about the meaning of human life, rival sets of moral dictates, and above all what theologians call rival eschatologies' (p. 3).

Ruse makes it clear that he considers evolution to be a scientific fact, but he admits that it is generally accompanied by some sort of 'evolutionism'. And evolutionism, he says, is nothing less than a secular religion. In light of the fact that both creation and evolution have a 'religious' nature, Ruse warns fellow evolutionists



Although it does not include any elements of traditional 'end-times' imagery, Ruse argues that evolutionism is a religion complete with an eschatology.

that it is a grave mistake to think that religion and science live in different domains, respectfully 'non-interfering' with each other.² Scientists will have to deal with the implications of science to religion, and vice versa. Ruse speaks up for intellectual honesty, saying that evolutionists must stop pretending that creationists are the only ones whose religion gets involved in their reading of science. To much of this conclusion, creationists can respond, 'Amen'. But his argument reaching the conclusion is not exactly ironclad.

Much of Ruse's argument rests on eschatology, and upon examining this more closely we find three significant shortcomings: first, sloppy terminology; second, artificial categorization; third, lack of causation.

Terminology

Ruse's carelessness with terminology leads to both confusion on the part of the reader and hasty overgeneralizations. Ruse uses the term 'eschatology' very broadly. By eschatology, he means ones' view of the future. This could mean paradise, judgment, and the 'end of the world' (what most people think of), or it could mean something more like a very

long-range weather forecast. In this latter category are the evolutionists, who view the world as progressing toward a more highly evolved state. In reality, 'eschatology' means the doctrine of last events, from Greek *ἔσχατος* (*eschatos*) meaning 'last'. This contrasts with origins or first things, which is sometimes called 'protology' (Gk. *πρώτος* *prōtos*, first).

Ruse's inattention to traditional eschatological terms also leads to a misuse of the term 'postmillennial'. Postmillennialism, contrary to the impression Ruse gives, is neither humanistic nor evolutionary. Instead of being based in a faith in human progress, conservative postmillennialists believed that progress in the extension of God's kingdom on Earth would result from following the Great Commission, leading to the direct reign of Christ over the earth. Evolutionists have no concept of Christ's personal rule in the 'Millennium'. Postmillennialism has a long history among conservative Christians, starting with the Puritan era in England. The great preacher and scholar Jonathan Edwards was a famous advocate of postmillennialism, and postmillennialism was the majority position among American evangelicals until approximately 1870.³ Using the

term ‘postmillennial’ to mean optimistic humanism, without acknowledging the conservative Christian understanding, is simply sloppy.

Terminology is a key in shaping how we perceive events, ideas and people. Ruse hasn’t lost sight of this, and his entire book is making two connections in the minds of readers: evolution goes with progress and optimism, and creation goes with doom and pessimism. Who would want to be against progress, and who would want to be on the side of doom? The latter sounds, quite frankly, doomed!

Categories

Ruse’s second problem is artificial categorization. Ruse discusses E.O. Wilson of Harvard, a self-proclaimed believer in progress. Yet Wilson is also famous for his pessimistic warnings about pending environmental disaster (pp. 209–211).⁴ So perhaps Wilson should be classed as a premillennialist who believes that doom and gloom are coming, and action to save the environment will substitute for the return of Christ in ushering in the Millennium!

But any problems categorizing evolutionists pale in comparison to his attempts to classify creationists, and indeed conservative Christians as a whole, in terms of a single eschatology. It is historically safe to say that a majority of modern American creationists were connected with a dispensational premillennialism, at least those who published any opinion at all on eschatology, but that does not imply creationists are monolithic in their thought here. As Ruse should be aware, many (if not most) of the modern (conservative Christian) postmillennialist leaders are young-earth creationists, e.g. Gary DeMar and Gary North.⁵

Eschatology is a hotly debated issue, and highly flexible as a sociological interpretive device. While Ruse presents creationists as almost inextricably linked with dispensational eschatology, different views are always available. For example, respected historian George Marsden has linked dispensational views and the gap

theory, rejected by young-earth creationists.⁶ Marsden merely draws parallels between the theories, not considering this to necessarily link the gap theory with dispensational thought. And rightly so, because generalizing on this topic is impossible. After all, it was dispensationalist leader C.I. Scofield (1843–1921) who was an influential advocate of the gap theory, and dispensationalist Henry Morris who became the most influential in debunking the gap theory.

Causation

Even accepting that Ruse has given an accurate historical generalization, he has not shown that this link is a philosophically significant one for creationist belief. That is, Ruse has not demonstrated that the belief system underlying a particular protology for view of origins necessarily requires belief in a particular eschatology. Indeed, a strong argument can be made that no such correlation can be proven: creation does not stand or fall with a particular eschatology.⁷

Conclusion

Ruse properly notes that both evolutionist and creationist eschatology interpret the future in terms of the way they see the beginning. Evolutionary ‘eschatology’ interprets the future in terms of naturalism and uniformitarianism. What is happening now has happened from the beginning and will continue to happen indefinitely into the future. Creationist eschatology is also based on their view of the beginning. But Ruse fails to note the key common thread in biblical creationist eschatology. This eschatology in whatever form—premillennial, postmillennial, or even amillennial, is based on the Bible and interprets the future in terms of the world’s supernatural origin. God created this world good in the beginning, and will restore this New Earth in the future. If this is recognized as the common distinction, it entirely reshapes the terminology. Properly understood, what is really believed by all creationists gives them the

optimistic high ground.

The Evolution-Creation Struggle has some useful insights. What Ruse calls ‘progress’ has an important role in shaping ethics, not just eschatology. In other writings, Ruse has mentioned progress as the first moral value deduced from evolution,⁸ and he gives some historical examples throughout this book of how this happened. Also, creationists will find the last chapter very interesting, as Ruse encapsulates his analysis of evolutionism as religion. He explains how he distinguishes evolution as religion from evolution as ‘fact’, and gives strategic suggestions to fellow evolutionists involved on the frontlines of the battle. This book is not without some valuable content. But Ruse’s over-emphasis on eschatology is his least useful contribution to our understanding of the evolution-creation struggle. It is original, though.

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