



REVIEW

Darwin's On the Origin of Species: A Modern Rendition

by Daniel Duzdevich

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reviewed by Michael Ruse

Perhaps I was just the wrong person to ask to review this book. Of all translations of the Bible, I like the King James Version. I am not rigid on this. I realize that the language can come across as archaic. If you want to read St Paul's great poem to love, better to use a more modern translation than one that talks of "charity," with its Victorian connotations of orphans and widows. Modern translations do much to clean up the mistakes of the KJV. But I still like it more than others.

So when I am presented with a "modern rendition" of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, my teeth are already on edge. I like the *Origin* and think that Darwin writes well. I can imagine a modern rendition of anything written by Hegel, but Darwin? Let's have a look at a couple of passages, for after all, if ever the proof was in a pudding, it is this pudding. Here first is Darwin on the struggle for existence.

A struggle for existence inevitably follows from the high rate at which all organic beings tend to increase. Every being, which during its natural lifetime produces several eggs or seeds, must suffer destruction during some period of its life, and during some season or occasional year, otherwise, on the principle of geometrical increase, its numbers would quickly become so inordinately great that no country could support the product. Hence, as more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must in every case be a struggle for existence, either one individual with another of the same species, or with the individuals of distinct species, or with the physical conditions of life. It is the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms; for in this case there can be no artificial increase of food, and no prudential restraint from marriage. Although some species may be now increasing, more or less rapidly, in numbers, all cannot do so, for the world would not hold them. (Darwin 1964:63–64)

And now here is the modern rendition.

A struggle for existence inevitably follows from the high rate at which all living things tend to multiply. Every reproducing organism must suffer destruction at some point; otherwise its numbers would swell geometrically to such inordinate proportions that no region could support them. Because more individuals are produced than can possibly survive, there must be a struggle for existence – either one individual with another of the same species, or with individuals of other species, or with the physical environment. This is the doctrine of Malthus applied to the whole organic world; for here there can be no artificial abundances of food or prudent restraint from mating.

Although some species may now be increasing in numbers, they cannot all increase, because the world would not hold them. (page 40)

Well, frankly, I just don't see it. I think Darwin reads at least as easily as the new version, which incidentally is so similar that I wonder why it was done. Try the final famous passage. First Darwin:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being Growth with Reproduction; Inheritance which is almost implied by reproduction; Variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a Ratio of Increase so high as to lead to a Struggle for Life, and as a consequence to Natural Selection, entailing Divergence of Character and the Extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object which we are capable of conceiving, namely, the production of the higher animals, directly follows. There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (Darwin 1964:489–490)

Now the modern version:

It is interesting to contemplate an entangled bank, clothed with many plants of many kinds, with birds singing on the bushes, with various insects flitting about, and with worms crawling through the damp earth, and to reflect that these elaborately constructed forms, so different from each other, and dependent on each other in so complex a manner, have all been produced by laws acting around us. These laws, taken in the largest sense, being growth with reproduction; inheritance that is almost implied by reproduction; variability from the indirect and direct action of the external conditions of life, and from use and disuse; a ratio of increase so high as to lead to a struggle for life, and as a consequence to natural selection, entailing divergence of character and the extinction of less-improved forms. Thus, from the war of nature, from famine and death, the most exalted object we are capable of conceiving—namely, the production of higher animals—directly follows. There is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, while this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved. (page 304)

I try not to be a snob about these sorts of things. Several years ago the distinguished evolutionist David Reznick—he has an ongoing, seminal study of the guppies of Trinidad—approached me about collaborating on a book that looked at the *Origin* chapter by chapter, discussing it and talking about modern work on the subject under discussion. As it happens, I ended up just writing the introductory first chapter, but this was because in the

course of our work together it became apparent that Reznick really had his own vision of the *Origin* and that this was going to be the theme of our book. So I stepped down, not at all in pique because I felt that it was his vision and not mine and it would be inappropriate to put my name to it. Call me prejudiced if you like, but I think the book—*The Origin Then and Now: An Interpretive Guide to the Origin of Species* (Reznick 2009)—is well worth reading. Not so with the book under review. Don't waste your money, folks! The original is just as good if not better than the modern rendition. And, incidentally, if you buy the first edition facsimile put out by Harvard University Press (Darwin 1964), it's cheaper!

REFERENCES

- Darwin CR. 1964. *On the Origin of Species*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
- Reznick D. 2009. *The Origin Then and Now: An Interpretive Guide to the Origin of Species*. Princeton (NJ): Princeton University Press.

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