

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Evolution and the Humanities* by David Holbrook

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women's, and foreign-policy issues, but the central premises of the New Deal leave them cold.

None of these criticisms, however, vitiate the thrust of the analysis of Ferguson and Rogers, which is that elites—and not voters, however appealing they may have found Ronald Reagan—have determined party strategy and public policy in the past decade. In terms of understanding both Reagan's success and the weakness of the opposition, *Right Turn* marks a major breakthrough in our understanding of contemporary American politics.

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William B. Hixson, Jr.

Holbrook, David. *Evolution and the Humanities*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987. vi + 228 pp. \$32.50.

The title of this book is misleading: it has little or nothing to do with the humanities. It is, in fact, a sustained attack upon the theory of evolution based upon a refusal to accept that idea that human beings, their intelligence and their cultures, could possibly be the products of a largely accidental evolutionary process. Holbrook came to write the book, as he explains, because he could not reconcile what seemed to him to be the meaninglessness of Darwinian evolution with the evident meaningfulness of human existence long recognized by poets, artists and writers. For Holbrook, since there is meaning in all we do or make or say, Darwinian evolution must be wrong.

This conviction sent Holbrook scurrying off on a search of the literature for anyone who has challenged, preferably from within the discipline, the dominant Darwinian paradigm. His technique is to cobble together, in a sort of scissors-and-paste criticism, quote after quote from authors he has read, interspersed with his own comments. Chapters are devoted both to heroes—scientists such as Denton, Grassé and Michael Polanyi, philosophers such as Marjorie Grene and E. W. F. Tomlin—and to villains—Darwin and the creators of the modern synthesis, Jacques Monod, Richard Dawkins. This repetitious and rambling pastiche leads nowhere, to no conclusion other than that natural selection must be wrong, to no proposal for an alternative theory. In fact the book contains no vigorous argument at all. Not only is Holbrook very obviously no scientist, he is no philosopher either.

Holbrook's own views are hazy, to say the least. There is little in this book that will bring joy to the creationists. Holbrook does not believe the world began in 4004 BC. Indeed he does not believe in God at all. Nor does he dispute the findings of geologists as to the age of rocks, or the fossils contained within them. He is even prepared to admit that evolution has taken place. What he cannot accept is that this could have occurred through a series of accidental mutations acted upon by natural selection. What Holbrook seeks instead is a directed, purposeful, meaningful process culminating in humankind. Although he denies being either a vitalist or an animist, he believes there must be some vague "gradient" of consciousness which could be incorporated into an evolutionary hypothesis that would stand somewhere between the unacceptable religious notion of "God's purpose" and the equally unacceptable "rigorous materialism" of reductionist biology. He seems to be searching for something between Bergson and Teilhard de Chardin. Un-

fortunately no such hypothesis is presently available, so all Holbrook can do is flail away at Darwinian evolutionary theory in what eventually becomes an embarrassing display by someone who appears part of the time at least to be out of his intellectual depth.

Since modern evolutionary theory needs no defense from me, I shall limit myself in this brief review to making two points: the first is that Holbrook has little or no understanding of how knowledge evolves (even though Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* figures in his bibliography); the second is that he fails to appreciate the relationship between matter and meaning (between fact and value)—and thus between meaning and evolution. Appreciation of these two points would enable Holbrook to realize that the Humanities do not need “saving” from evolution at all: indeed Darwinian evolution presents an exhilarating challenge to philosophers and artists, the challenge of creating the meaning of our own existence.

On the first point, Darwinian theory of evolution may well eventually prove to be inadequate and be replaced by a more comprehensive paradigm. But it seems unlikely that a replacement paradigm would be any more acceptable to Holbrook, for any new paradigm must account for all that the modern synthetic theory of evolution now covers. Such a paradigm change will only occur, moreover, when the fertility of the present theory is all but exhausted. It is a measure of the truth content of Darwinian evolutionary theory that it has proved to be such a fertile source of research programmes for thousands upon thousands of biologists, even if not for the handful Holbrook has consulted.

On the second point, it suffices to note that an explanatory theory establishes only causal meaning, not implicative meaning. It is open to anyone to discover whatever meaning she or he wishes in things and events: about such meaning science has nothing to say. This is the reason mainstream churches have been able to live with evolution. For most Christians, evolution merely reveals the way in which God in his omniscient wisdom chose to create the world, knowing happily in advance that humankind would eventually arrive on the scene. In fact Darwinian theory of evolution negates no meaning we like to project upon it, whether Christian, Buddhist, or atheist. Even for atheists the mystery of life remains a mystery reinforced by accident, not destroyed by it.

No review of this confused and jumbled diatribe can fail to add a final note on the extraordinary sloppiness of the proofreading. I have never read a book so full of errors. Literally hundreds are sprinkled through the text: sentences don't make sense; quotes are misquoted; names are misspelled. Ernest Haeckel is spelled in three different ways, two of which make the index (Haeckel and Maecell). The sloppiness of the proofreading accords regrettably with the sloppiness of the argument. This is such a thoroughly bad book in practically every conceivable way that one wonders how it ever came to be published.

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