Samuel Butler

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England produced one man of genius whose opposition to Darwinism began shortly after the appearance of the *Origin of Species* and continued unabated on all planes of thought – biological, social, metaphysical, and religious – until his death in 1902. This was Samuel Butler, the grandson of Darwin's old headmaster at Shrewsbury. When the *Origin of Species* appeared, Butler was on his way to New Zealand to earn a competence raising sheep. He read the book there in the solitude of his ranch and at once became a convert to the idea of evolution. The hypothesis even spurred him to write for a local journal a skit called *Darwin Among the Machines*, the leading idea of which – that of machinery evolving by itself and ultimately conquering man – has since acquired the taste of an unpleasant truth. This idea of course also contained the germ of the satire *Erewhon*, published when Butler returned to England.

More reflection and several rereadings of the *Origin of Species* gradually made Butler very much dissatisfied with the Darwinian theory of Natural Selection as it stood. Perhaps his own fancy about the machines gave him the clue to the weakness of Darwinism – what he ultimately came to call the *Deadlock in Darwinism*. The deadlock was simply that machines, having no purposes of their own, could not evolve; but since animals and plants were treated by Darwin just as if they were machines, Darwinian evolution was impossible. The operation of Natural Selection might conceivably aid us to understand which forms survived, but it could never tell us how these forms had come to be. Natural Selection was an undoubted fact but could never be a theory or a cause. As Butler put it, "To me it seems that the 'Origin of Variations,' whatever it is, is the only true 'Origin of Species.'"

In examining Darwin's text, Butler had found that small random variations were taken for granted or occasionally ascribed to a somewhat metaphysical entity called Variation, in order to provide Natural Selection with something to work on. But Butler also found Darwin relying in several places upon use and disuse, and he traced the origin of this hypothesis to Lamarck, whose name and work Darwin openly discredited. This led Butler to Buffon, Goethe, and Erasmus Darwin, and he thus became the first careful historian of the evolutionary movement. After comparing Darwin's theory in all its vacillating forms with

the theories of the earlier trio, Butler came to the conclusion that the grandfather, and not the grandson, had met most nearly the difficulties involved in any evolutionary hypothesis. The grandson had of course marshaled many more facts indicative of evolution than the grandfather; he had, as Butler proclaimed, taught people about evolution; but he had not made out a convincing case for the mode of species change. He had at most emphasized in Natural Selection a fact previously noted by zoologists that "those who can survive do survive." The secret of the Origin of Species still lay hidden in the Origin of Variation.

Had Butler contented himself with offering these criticisms, he might conceivably have gained a hearing for them. But his mind once aroused, he was not given to stopping short. Assuming that in the presence of established facts his thinking might be of use, Butler offered in *Life and Habit* a suggestion to replace – or rather supplement – Darwin's Natural Selection. Starting from the fact that the organism is a living thing and not a machine, Butler asserted that its characteristic feature is that it has an "interest": it wants to do certain things and not to do others. The physical action of living beings is, in other words, the expression of a mental action – meaning by mind not Intellect, but consciousness, however low and limited. This was going dead against the Automaton Theory, not yet discredited. It followed that for Butler, effort, endeavor, purpose have something to do with biological evolution, and from this it was only a shorthand expression to say that living forms evolve because they want to: desires lead to efforts; successful efforts result in new powers; and new powers create new desires. As Butler saw it, the process was of course limited by the environment and the narrow powers of the creature, but it corresponded to what could be readily observed in the phenomena of growth, habit, and learning. Above all it got rid of the inexplicable mechanism by which the evolution and the life of living things was made to result from chance push-and-pulls from outside.

Besides reinstating purposes into a world that had become a vast roulette table, it also made society something else than a Coliseum where human beasts strive with one another in moral darkness. Mind, feelings, ethics, art – all these things were once more real and not the dreams of automata accompanying the physico-chemical changes called digestion, respiration, reproduction, and death. It was still possible and instructive to look at these functions in their physico-chemical aspects, but to do so did not exhaust the meanings inherent in them. Lastly, Butler's theory made the problem of religion one that could not be shirked or relegated to a superstitious past. Men live by some sort of faith, life indeed is a form of faith, and the repeating of scientific formulas is not its only

ritual. Though Butler often used scriptural language, he reinterpreted its truths according to his lights; there was nothing orthodox about his religion. It was nevertheless a consistent set of beliefs, far from the atheism which a misguided modern critic has ascribed to him, though seemingly unintelligible to both the churchmen and the scientists of his own day.

What puzzled them was that Butler seemed to be striking out on a new line instead of choosing, like everybody else, between theology and materialistic science. For one thing, he disclaimed at the outset any scientific warrant for his theory or even any originality. The hint of it, he said, lay in Lamarck, and it had been fully exploited by Erasmus Darwin. What Butler was doing was to give it another hearing at a time when a completely mechanical view of life was sweeping the field of old theologies. Butler thought them both inadequate, mechanical evolution even more so than supernatural creation, for creation was at least a fact of daily experience whereas mechanism was an abstraction born of scientific needs.

Unfortunately Butler's initial modesty was misplaced. Far from receiving thanks, he was assailed by both sides in truly professional manner as "lacking authority." Here was a man who had never worked in a laboratory or served aboard a *Beagle*, who had made fun of churches and churchgoers in *Erewhon*, and who had the effrontery to criticize, speculate, and dogmatize. It was an infringement of monopoly. It seemed to the gentle Darwin "clever and unscrupulous." It was of no use for Butler to reply that he took the very facts which the scientists supplied him with, that no one had detected him in a factual error, that his theory had never even been criticized. Official science had no time to listen – only time to invoke the Principle of Authority and write insulting reviews.

Oddly enough, a man like Spencer, who was no more a practicing scientist than Butler and at the same time a far more deductive, *a priori*, unscientific mind, was gravely attended to by the official Darwinians. And when after twenty-five years of exclusive enthusiasm for Natural Selection he made it share the throne with his earlier love, Lamarckism, no one thought it particularly "impudent" or "unscientific."

Again, G. H. Lewes, who held and promulgated a theory of life identical with Butler's, was respected and quoted, though only on matters of detail, by the professionals. The reason for this discrimination seems to have been that Spencer and Lewes both revered Darwin and set up no other idols – particularly earlier evolutionists – in his stead. Butler was too direct in his questionings of

a famous man twenty-five years his senior, and it is doubtful whether even with the aid of scientific degrees and a less readable style he would have made any impression on either orthodoxy. As it was, all parties grew more obstinate, Butler more and more peppery and irreverent, and his Darwinian opponents more and more "pleasant-like and frothing at the mouth."

The result was lifelong neglect for Butler and the postponement until the twentieth century of the pleasure and honor of rediscovery. Bateson's recognition of Butler's importance in 1909, Shaw's successful campaign to give him his due place in English thought, and the numerous biographies of him which have appeared to date, do not begin to exhaust the points of interest in his mind and personality. The many anticipations of William James and Freud, for instance, that can be found in *Life and Habit* will delight and surprise the attentive reader. And it is increasingly apparent that, without knowing it, Butler was in line with the most fruitful speculations of his age. Unconscious Memory, for example, was a suggestion very much akin to the renascent interest in genetics. Butler perceived that if he made creature-purpose the moving factor in evolution, he had to explain how these purposes accumulated. He concluded that instinct, which was inherited, was a sort of memory buried in the germ plasm; and, anticipating Weismann, he argued that life was in fact continuous and not chopped up into the fragments we call individuals.

Shortly before publishing these views, Butler found that a German professor named Hering had given expression to similar ideas at a scientific congress not long before. Butler thereupon fathered his own theory on the shoulders of the accredited degree-holder, not suspecting that Asa Gray and Joseph Leconte in the United States had also attributed instincts to inherited memory. But once again Butler had no response. He persisted, however, republishing his historical account of evolution and finally summarizing all his arguments under the crystal-clear title of "Luck or Cunning?"

Butler's criticism of Darwin is summed up in his objection that Darwin had banished mind from the universe. This does not mean, of course, that Butler's suggestions have been proved true. But neither does it mean that Butler's objections were grounded on a mere preference for the banished "Mind" as against the ever-present "Matter." Many materialists still think a sense of personal deprivation of this sort is the sole ground of any such objection. The fact is that the objection is directed at the inevitable tendency of analysis to disregard whatever elements it provisionally sets aside. Mind was but the traditional name for those experiences that were not mere movements of particles. It was

the name for those things which Huxley and Tyndall declared themselves unable to measure, account for, or lead up to by means of material analysis. Let them set mind aside as much as they wished for certain purposes of investigation, still mind must not be forgotten like an inconvenient umbrella in the cloakroom. It must reappear somewhere in the final inventory. If it came to a choice, for Butler, of making mind all matter or matter all mind, he preferred the latter as more consonant with the facts.

Lewes agreed with him, perhaps without knowing it, occupied as he was in striking out new paths in biology, equidistant from the metaphysical and the mechanical. "Materialism," says Lewes, "in attempting to deduce the mental from the physical puts into the conclusion what the very terms have excluded from the premises." His hypothesis, which would have satisfied equally Samuel Butler in 1887 and Professor J. S. Haldane forty years later, is that "the physical process is only the objective aspect of a mental process." Nor was Lewes a new convert to this conclusion. As early as 1853, in *The Physical Basis of Mind*, he had defined God as Life and echoed the Roman poet's "Life is everywhere and nowhere Death."

Both in Butler and in Lewes this conviction came from a true familiarity with more than one realm of thought. Just as Butler rediscovered Hegel's law of contradiction without reading Hegel, and carried forward Schopenhauer's notion of the will without reading Schopenhauer, so Lewes, who as a philosopher had read both, could anticipate the doctrine of Emergent Evolution and stand out in amiable dispute against his century. As a competent and well-connected scientist, Lewes could draw confirmation for his theories from many quarters. Paget on the tissues, German cell physiology and neurology, French work on medicine – all seemed to converge on the point that, though Supernaturalism was a metaphysical mistake and a stumbling block for science, materialism was untenable too, and for the same reasons. Life was not just atoms in a bag.

Unfortunately, Lewes died prematurely in 1878, and his work never won the place which it deserved; but its merit can be tested, like Butler's, by the fact that the younger generation was falling in with its tendency. It was in 1875–1876 that the young William James, saturated with German science, began to wean himself away from Spencerism and psychophysics, that Lange brought out the second edition of his polemical *History of Materialism*, and that biologists in many parts of the globe began to make those attacks on Natural Selection which led to Darwin's "tacit" recognition of their weight.