

Evolution and  
philosophy: a good  
tautology is hard to  
find



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In the article “ Evolution and Philosophy: A Good Tautology is Hard to Find” found in the website “ <http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/evolphil/tautology.html>”, Wilkin presents the argument that the principle of natural selection is a tautology or the argument for the principle is circular. By ‘ circular’, what is being referred to is the idea that the premises of the argument merely point to one another with each premise merely providing synonymous phrases or terms for each of the premise. Hence, it appears that a tautology presents a false line of reasoning since no true and definite conclusion can be established.

In the case of the principle of natural selection, if indeed the argument is a tautology then there corresponds the appalling presumption that natural selection may not thoroughly provide us with either a sufficient or a convincing basis for believing that evolution took place. The tautology problem for the principle of natural selection can be roughly summarized in the argument ‘ natural selection is the survival of the fittest while the fittest organisms are those able to survive, which results to the argument that evolution through natural selection is basically a circular definition’.

The perception of this tautology arises from the belief that natural selection is the process wherein, under certain harsh and seemingly intolerable conditions, organisms such as animals from the basic to the most complex ones are brought to the test of survival. With minimal room to flourish and competition well above the capacities of some, it is presumed that the process of natural selection endows the toughest with a higher chance of surviving the odds and continuing its existence. If this is indeed the case,

then there is strong reason for one to believe that the weak will be having a slim chance of being 'naturally selected'.

Hence, there arises the corresponding presumption that the fittest organisms are those which are able to survive. In essence, however, the latter statement appears to simply reiterate the first premise that 'natural selection is the survival of the fittest' by stating the parallel argument that the survivors in the competitive world are the fittest. On the other hand, the concept of differential reproduction intends to solve the tautology problem by suggesting the idea that the organisms under the same species struggle with each other in order to have a mate.

This process espouses the presumption that those who are able to triumph in the reproductive competition are able to produce offspring. More importantly, the organisms which are able to live much longer are expected to produce more offspring in contrast to organisms which live a relatively shorter lifespan. In essence, the process of differential reproduction suggests the idea that the organisms able to survive the reproductive competition are the organisms which are more fit than the rest.

Over a stretch of time, these 'fittest' organisms are able to outnumber the weaker species after having the better chance of reproducing and surviving. With this in mind, it can be argued that natural selection is not necessarily a tautology because it does not strictly refer to the sense wherein the numerous species are simply competing in terms of resources, and that the more fit the species are the more likely they are able to survive. It is equally

important to note that natural selection also espouses the idea of differential reproduction apart from mere competition for resources.

On the other hand, it is also equally important to consider as to whether differential reproduction can resolve the problem of speciation. For the most part, speciation is the process of evolution whereby an organism of new biological species is produced. The problem of speciation can be understood in terms of the confusion arising from the case as to when a species is a new species, or whether the 'species' is merely a variation of a species rather than a 'new' species.

In general, the central problem rests on the contention of whether or not a species is new. Because the principle of natural selection believes that organisms may have evolved, it does not refute the belief in Creationism or Intelligent Design. Quite on the contrary, it can be assumed that by having the idea of evolution through natural selection, one that 'selects' is presumed. That is, natural selection will not be as it is if the 'selection process' is not caused by something. This something can be taken to mean as a 'selector'.

In the religious sense, this 'selector' can be the Creator such that the evolving organisms are ultimately 'created'. With regard to differential reproduction, it can be maintained that the new species may have been the result of the struggle to mate among species. With the weaker species struggling to survive, the stronger and fitter species will tend to dominate and as such there is the presumption that there will come a time that the

survivors or offspring of the differential reproduction process are far more fit than their predecessors.

The differential reproduction process over a stretch of time is presumed to let the stronger species evolve, armed with better coping mechanisms. Hence, there becomes the explanation for the problem of the development of new species. In any case, Wilkins provides us with another way at looking into the popular theory of natural selection. Granted that numerous studies have already been conducted either to debunk or affirm the theory, the principle of natural selection, with its proponents and critics, cannot be denied as one of the most influential theories in the scientific community in our times.

The sweeping popularity of the principle of natural selection, being one of the many theories widely taught in classrooms from all over the world, makes it one of the widely held principles by the ordinary individual. Wilkins' attempt to present the refutation against the principle through an argument of tautology may perhaps bewilder the common man. A simple explanation may be needed.