



REVIEW: Ian Hesketh, *Of Apes and Ancestors: Evolution, Christianity, and the Oxford Debate*

Author(s): Sebastian Assenza

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EDITORIAL OFFICES

Institute for the History and Philosophy of Science and Technology
Room 316 Victoria College, 91 Charles Street West
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1K7
hapsat.society@utoronto.ca

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REVIEWS

Ian Hesketh. *Of Apes and Ancestors: Evolution, Christianity, and the Oxford Debate*. 144 pp. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009.*

Sebastian Assenza[†]

In *Of Apes and Ancestors*, Ian Hesketh attempts to de-mythologize the famous Oxford debate between Samuel Wilberforce, the bishop of Oxford, and Charles Darwin's friends, Thomas Huxley and Joseph Hooker. Hooker and Huxley clashed publicly with Wilberforce at a meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS) in June of 1860. At issue was the scientific content and general implication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Hesketh argues that this event is best understood as a minor episode in a complex web of personal and professional rivalries between two generations of naturalists. He further argues that Huxley aggressively reinterpreted the actual events of the debate for years afterwards, turning them into a "Galileo moment" for the nineteenth century, a moment in which science bravely stood up to religious authority and refused to back down. While his treatment of the debate and its context is well supported, the connection Hesketh draws between Huxley's narrative and modern historiography is somewhat tenuous.

Of Apes and Ancestors is roughly divided into three sections. The first section is concerned with exploring the relationships between the participants in the debate, their possible motivations, and the stakes each had in the dispute's outcome. It is here that Hesketh lays the groundwork for his argument that the debate owed more to personal rivalries than some overarching ideological struggle. In developing his argument, Hesketh makes extensive use of both private letters and diaries, and public accounts such as newspaper articles and published reviews. This wealth of primary material leads him to persuasive biographical insights concerning his historical actors. For example, Hesketh uses Wilberforce's diaries to argue that the bishop viewed Darwin's book as another in a long line of controversies within the Anglican Church, theological debates with which he had been engaged for most of his life.

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[†] Sebastian Assenza is an MA student at IHPST at the University of Toronto. He studies the history of evolutionary biology.

To Wilberforce, Darwin was not a godless heretic, but his depiction of God as a distant figure echoed previous perversions of Anglican thought that could not be countenanced.

Most significantly for the Oxford debate, Hesketh outlines the onetime friendship between Thomas Huxley and famed naturalist Richard Owen that ultimately led to competition and antagonism. Seeing a piece of himself in Huxley, Owen wrote numerous letters of recommendation for the young naturalist, helping to get his career off the ground. However, their relationship eventually soured. Owen had always been overly reliant on his wealthy patrons for his livelihood, a tendency that Huxley found both distasteful and cowardly. Their friendly rapport finally ended when Owen wrote an anonymous critique of *Origin of Species* in which he savagely attacked Darwin's scientific credentials—despite having previously praised him in person—along with casting doubt on Huxley's own work. Hesketh reveals that Owen's motivation for this assault was a letter he received expressing his patrons' disfavor of Darwin's transmutationist beliefs. Afterwards, Huxley threw himself into public competition with Owen and his "species archetype" theory which was widely held among the older generation of naturalists. Thus, rather than a conflict between science and religion, as Huxley would later claim, Hesketh positions the Oxford debate as a dispute between professional rivals of two different generations that had become biting personal.

The second part of the book recounts the actual events of the fateful BAAS meeting of June 30, 1860. After sitting through a number of tedious lectures, Wilberforce rose and delivered a scathing criticism of Darwin and his book, impugning its scientific merit and describing it as a flawed work of philosophy. He then famously asked whether Huxley himself traced his relation to apes through his grandmother or grandfather. In his response, Huxley claimed that he would rather be an ape than a man who obscures truth behind ideology. After studying letters written by attendees of the BAAS meeting, Hesketh argues that Wilberforce's comment was actually the continuation of an argument between Huxley and Owen that occurred earlier in the week. Indeed, Hesketh points out that Wilberforce seemed, to some observers, not to have read *Origin of Species*. Furthermore, Hesketh claims that Darwin's defenders later asserted that Wilberforce was coached on what to say by Richard Owen. This evidence lends credence to Hesketh's contention that professional and personal rivalries were at the heart of the debate.

The final section traces the manner in which the Oxford debate has subsequently been interpreted by historians. Newspaper reports and private letters reveal a startling lack of consensus concerning the victor of the debate, as well as its actual significance. Thomas Huxley,

however, had no such reservations. Beginning with his letters, and later in his published articles and memoirs, Huxley presented the debate as a momentous occasion in which scientists refused to submit to conservative religious dogma. Huxley is shown to have actively discredited any conflicting accounts, attempting to control the public perception of the debate for years afterwards. Hesketh claims, somewhat speculatively, that Huxley's version of events served both his personal crusade to "[dismantle] the previous compromise between science and religion," and the "professionalizing agenda" of the new generation of naturalists to which both Huxley and Hooker belonged (pp. 99 and 107).

Hesketh does an excellent job of positioning the events of June 1860 within a broader web of personal disputes and professional debates. His portrayals of historical actors such as Huxley and Wilberforce are lively and engaging as well as meticulously researched. By revealing the intimate relationships between the men involved in the debate, Hesketh is able to strip away much of the scientific rhetoric that has accrued over the years. He then presents his case independently of the wider narrative of an artificially constructed struggle between Victorian naturalists and religious authorities. Indeed, it now appears that the debate was more an episode in Huxley and Owen's friendship-turned-rivalry than it was Wilberforce's premeditated attack on Darwin. Hesketh succeeds at de-mythologizing the Oxford debate by providing both a causal reconstruction of events that led to the debate and plausible motivations and incentives for all the major figures.

Unfortunately, Hesketh's account of how Huxley's narrative became the accepted version of events leaves something to be desired. Hesketh suggests that Darwinists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries used Huxley's reinterpreted narrative of the Oxford debate in support of a binary portrayal of science and religion that would speed the secularization of their field. While his claim is attractive, Hesketh provides merely a bare-bones sketch of this later development, in contrast with his well-articulated and comprehensive argument concerning the actual significance of the events of the BAAS meeting in 1860. The wealth of primary evidence utilized earlier is strikingly absent from this section, as is the nuanced depiction of historical actors with multifaceted desires and motivations. Without the detailed support and analysis found in earlier chapters, Hesketh fails to convince the reader of anything but the vaguest outlines of this secondary argument.

Of Apes and Ancestors provides a convincing re-appraisal of the 1860 Oxford debate, revealing the web of personal and private conflicts that lay behind the very public argument between Samuel Wilberforce and Darwin's supporters, Hooker and Huxley. Rather than a "Galileo moment"

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for the nineteenth century, Hesketh depicts it as a minor debate between two generations of naturalists that was blown out of proportion by later accounts. In particular, Thomas Huxley's attempts to control the public perception of the debate reconstructed it as a moment of conflict between science and religion, rather than a professional or intergenerational spat. While the book suffers from a cursory argument linking Huxley's account to the now accepted narrative, it provides an intriguing look at the external factors behind one of Darwinism's most celebrated events.

SEBASTIAN ASSENZA
IHPST, University of Toronto
91 Charles Street West
Toronto, Ontario M5S 1K7
seb.assenza@utoronto.ca