

Talking Man

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[Na 't kopiëren en plakken kwam ik fouten tegen als: 'Dar win' en 'in spired'. Er kan dus nog meer onzin in staan. HB]

Tom Wolfe, one of our best novelists and essayists, is also a critic of the Darwinian theory of evolution. He thinks that the theory might explain all of nature, all observable reality—up to, but emphatically *not including*, the human being: the “beast with speech” (*Homo loquax*). In his invigorating 2006 Neh Jefferson lecture, he claimed to explain everything we need to know about that singular beast, and in his new book he explains why famous scientists have failed completely to come up with an alternative to the failed Darwinian explanation. To account for the being with speech, evolutionary theorists from Darwin to Chomsky have concocted just-so stories no more empirically credible than those of Kipling. Darwin, in fact, was a better fiction writer than Kipling, even if his story couldn’t account for the existence of fiction writers.

In Wolfe’s view, “Darwin had fallen, without realizing it, into the trap of cosmologism.” Human beings, in their “endless curiosity,” have always been obsessed with devising “an ever-elusive theory of everything, an idea or narrative that reveals everything in the world to be part of a single and suddenly clear pattern.” What the beast with speech always wants is a compelling answer to the question of his origin as a being “so different from the animals around him.” He wants to be integrated into a whole that includes himself, one that grounds and sustains personal significance. None of the other animals care about that; that’s one reason among many that there aren’t dolphin philosophers, scientists, theologians, and poets.

In pre-scientific cosmogony, “the agent of change” was seen as “alive or personal,” in some sense a creator. For Darwin, in his enlightened or secularized time, change had to be described as some impersonal process capable of being captured by science. The name Darwin gave his process was “evolution through natural selection,” and, not surprisingly if you think about it, it couldn’t really account for the being with speech. Many pre-scientific cosmogonies incorporated the being with speech by understanding the world to be created by such a being. In the scientists’ view, the prescientific error was in giving natural reality such a personal foundation; but in Wolfe’s view, that alleged error is really an error only in a world without beings with the Word. He contends that natural evolution came to an end when the beast with speech showed up and the artifact of speech allowed him to develop an ego—an “internal self,” or a deeply personal orientation.

Speech is a “superpower” whose origin no scientist can explain, one that has allowed the beast with it to control or own every other animal there is. It isn’t merely “an ingenious tool for communication,” says Wolfe; it’s a “nuclear weapon” with unlimited transformative power. The Word, as Wolfe shows us, has become flesh—and not just human flesh. Insofar as the world we experience is

an artifact of the being with speech—working all by himself, with no divine or natural guidance—we can call it artificial, as opposed to natural. And “the mother of all artifacts” is the Word itself. Any theory of natural selection—insofar as it claims to explain everything or even just the most significant things—has to scant what these artifacts really are by explaining them as mere mechanisms for adaptation and survival.

The superpower isn't merely technology, about pushing back nature in the service of comfortable self-preservation. The beast with speech gave himself the power to ask questions about the significance of particular lives, to come up with religions and gods, and to change history with words of hope, with words that can control the thoughts and behavior of millions of people. *Homo loquax* is the source of not just a kingdom of (mere) speech, but an *Imperium loquax* that displaces “the empire of nature” that used to be the source of being. Being used to be impersonal, and the theory of natural selection used to be true, when there was no one around to articulate it. But that theory doesn't explain much at all in a world that contains scientists and other intellectuals.

The world of the being with speech has no natural explanation. “It certainly wasn't scientific experimentation or observation,” Wolfe writes, “that finally convinced Darwin that man had no special place in the universe.” His theoretical view caught on because it confirmed the atheism of the “clerisy” that had replaced the “clergy” in the 19th century. Secular thinking became the only acceptable kind of thinking among the wealthy, well educated, and well connected. Atheism became the new class consciousness of gentlemen.

The hugely successful publicity campaign undertaken by Thomas Henry Huxley on behalf of Darwin's theory wasn't based in Huxley's belief in the literal truth of its cosmological tale. Darwin was useful support for the atheism that Huxley really did believe was true well before he had heard of Darwin. More generally, the widespread acceptance of Darwin's theory was part of the disenchantment of the world by an intellectual elite that had become able to disseminate its views through newspapers and magazines. From this viewpoint, while Darwin, in effect, did proclaim that God was dead, insofar as we now knew through science that each of us wasn't made in God's personal image, the theory flourished in a world already marked, as Nietzsche said, by God's absence. Now, in Nietzsche's view, the dissemination of the truth that he expressed as there being “no cardinal distinction between man and animal” would demoralize humanity. Wolfe's good word is that the allegedly deadly truth isn't really true.

Wolfe remarks that the Word of Jesus in one way and Marx in another inspired widespread hope that human progress might culminate in an egalitarian world—a world where class or status had withered away. What we really know about the beast driven by status suggests otherwise. Darwin's theory offers us no hope from science at all, when it comes to our longing for personal significance. Still, the very history of its acceptance is really about those who attempted to achieve status by trumpeting popularized science about a cosmos with no special place for any of us. The ironic hope offered by Darwin's theory is the status that would be achieved by those who proclaim its atheistic truth; it's an atheistic weapon to deprive religious believers of the

status they used to enjoy.

Wolfe reminds us that the theory of evolution as natural selection was first articulated by Alfred Russel Wallace. His version of it didn't prevail because it was generated by an "outsider" without connections. Nonetheless, it appears that Wallace's relentless curiosity was purer than Darwin's. He wrote an unjustly neglected reflection titled "The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man." Among Wallace's truthful conclusions: The brain is "man's specially developed organ," one that is far less about survival than about conquest, and so it can't be explained by a theory that makes the being with speech a mere part of some impersonal process. That inexplicable power has been both good and bad for man, a being better and worse than the other animals. It's the source of our "highest and most refined abilities," but also the source of misery, self-destructiveness, and cruelty not characteristic of the other animals.

Wallace's candid confession of his failure was a prelude to his falling prey to various forms of superstition. Wolfe says Wallace was driven crazy by his inability to account for the power of the Word. Darwin, by contrast, comforted himself and saved his "we're nothing special" theory by developing lame stories about the origin of religion and about conscience in the experiences of dogs. Evolutionary psychologists have been spinning such tales about empathy and all that ever since. And, of course, no novelist or moral or political leader of any consequence has taken them seriously. Wolfe goes on to display the debunking of the theories of Steven Pinker and Noam Chomsky that we're in any sense hardwired—or have some instinct—for a particular kind of language, that language is more natural than artificial.

Whether Wolfe writes as a novelist, a journalist, or a critic of science and scientists, he always seems to be engaged in the project of explaining as much as possible by the spirited quest for significance in a hostile environment. More than *The Kingdom of Speech* by itself would suggest, his quest is to develop the science that corresponds to his southern Stoicism, his defense of the inward life of the man or woman who has genuine self-control.

In his novel *A Man in Full* (1998), for example, a prisoner completely on his own in a maximum-security prison knows how to act all alone in a desperate situation because he has accidentally come upon the writings of the Stoic philosopher-slave Epictetus. And in the novel *I Am Charlotte Simmons* (2004), a star basketball player is turned around by taking a course on a very Stoic version of Aristotle, regaining his powerful self-confidence on the court and treating ladies like persons worthy of respect and admiration. In both cases, what we see is genuinely liberal education in action. *Even in The Kingdom of Speech*, we admire the outsider scientists who choose the truth over status. Part of being a beast with speech is being able to distinguish between those who live in the truth and those who inauthentically choose control for its own sake or who merely live in the eyes of others. The being with speech, as a man in full, is master of his own domain—and by really ruling himself is able to rule others.

One shortcoming of Wolfe the scientist and Wolfe the novelist is that he downplays, quite unrealistically, how much beasts with speech remain guided by natural social instinct that morphs, with self-consciousness or ego, into relational love. Wolfe, perhaps deliberately, doesn't do justice to the truth that

it's not just pride, but love, that makes life worth living. Speech, dependent as it is on the natural equipment of our distinctive brains, might still be understood as an ambiguously natural phenomenon: It might be not only for power in the service of the person, but for the polymorphous flourishing of relational eros. Understanding speech as too "unnatural" makes each of us too lonely in a cosmos indifferent to our particular existences, a cosmos that, in fact, resists our best efforts at conquest and control, a resistance that we find in other beings with speech—whom we can't help but love because they elude our control.

So a better criticism of the failed efforts of our scientists to include human beings in the theory of evolution is actually given by another southern novelist, Walker Percy, who went beyond Stoic pride in the direction of Christian love. Why did Wallace go crazy? He experienced himself as a dazed and confused leftover in the world he otherwise so well described. And he didn't have access to an account of nature that had room for beings like himself and that genuinely connected him with beings like himself. It had no room, in other words, for love. Sure, Wallace was concerned to some extent about his status, but the bigger issue is that he was lonely, or alienated, or lost. What we need, Percy suggests, is a scientific theory of nature that puts back together European existentialism, spirited Stoic rationalism, Anglo-American empiricism, and Christian love. What we need is not another impersonal cosmogony but a scientific account of why the being who wonders inevitably wanders—why each of us by nature is "lost in the cosmos." In an age of unbelief, that's the way out of our dogmatic atheism and toward being as at home as we can be with our homelessness.

Wolfe and Percy agree, for plenty of good reasons, that the theory of evolution doesn't say all that much about who we are as beings with language. It fails as an adequate scientific description of being human. And both of these writers gave, in their Jefferson Lectures, wonderfully deep and invigorating alternative scientific views of who we are. Google those Jefferson Lectures—and then read Wolfe's *The Kingdom of Speech* and Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos* for very persuasive efforts to rigorously explain what we really do experience about who we are.

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