

Darwin's debt to philosophy: an examination of the influence of the philosophical ideas of John FW Herschel and William Whewell on the development of Charles.

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MICHAEL RUSE

DARWIN'S DEBT TO PHILOSOPHY: AN
EXAMINATION OF THE INFLUENCE
OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS OF
JOHN F. W. HERSCHEL AND WILLIAM
WHEWELL ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF
CHARLES DARWIN'S THEORY OF
EVOLUTION

CHARLES DARWIN went up to Cambridge as an undergraduate in 1828.¹ He set off on his voyage around the world on the *Beagle* in 1831, returning in 1836. About the time of his return he became an evolutionist, and he hit upon the evolutionary mechanism for which he is most famous, natural selection brought on by the struggle for existence, in the autumn of 1838. In 1842 he wrote a short sketch of his theory, and in 1844 he expanded this into a fairly substantial essay.² At the urging of his friends, in 1856 he started to prepare for publication a massive evolutionary work incorporating his basic ideas. This (as yet unpublished) work³ was interrupted by the arrival of A. R. Wallace's essay on evolution,⁴ one in which he mirrored Darwin's ideas in an uncanny fashion, in 1858. Thereupon, Darwin dropped all else, wrote an 'abstract' of his evolutionary ideas, and this was published as the *Origin of Species* in 1859.⁵

In this paper I argue that an important factor in Charles Darwin's development of his theory of evolution through natural selection was the philosophy of science in England in the 1830s. When this factor is recognized, then new light is thrown both upon Darwin's discovery of his

¹ The direct source of information about Darwin's life is his *Autobiography* (with original omissions restored), N. Barlow (ed.) (New York: Norton, 1969).

² Both the sketch and the essay are reprinted in *Evolution by Natural Selection*, G. de Beer (ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958).

³ See R. C. Stauffer, 'On the Origin of Species: An Unpublished Version', *Science*, 130 (1959), 1449-52 for a brief discussion of this work.

⁴ 'On the Tendency of Varieties to Depart Indefinitely from the Original Type', *J. Proc. Linn. Soc., Zoology*, 3 (1859), 53, reprinted in *Evolution*, de Beer (ed.).

⁵ Charles Darwin, *Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859).

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