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# C. E. Ayres's Reliance on T. H. Huxley:

## *Did Darwin's Bulldog Bite?*

By LAMAR B. JONES\*

ABSTRACT. In David Seckler's *Thorstein Veblen and the Institutionalists*, the proposition is advanced that "Ayres out-Veblens *Veblen* and out Deweys *Dewey*". This commonly held view of the intellectual orientation of the prominent American institutional economist, Clarence Edwin Ayres, places him as an intellectual descendent of philosopher John Dewey's *pragmatism*, and economist Thorstein B. Veblen's *institutionalist economics*. Certainly such an outlook is not incorrect, but it is also not adequate if one is to achieve an understanding of Ayres. A careful check of the indexes of Ayres's major works shows that his references preponderantly go not to Dewey and to Veblen, but to Adam Smith and Charles Darwin. Moreover, it is to the latter that Ayres turned in his effort to overturn the former. However, Ayres in interpreting Darwin relied not upon Dewey and Veblen, but rather upon Thomas Henry *Huxley*, the British physician turned scientist, who because of his outspoken advocacy of Darwin's evolutionary biology became known as "Darwin's bulldog."

### I

#### **Huxley and Huxley**

THE INFLUENCE OF HUXLEY upon Ayres is the heart of this essay. The intent is to show that in his writings Ayres really "stood" upon a three legged stool in terms of formulation of his analytic base. Dewey and Veblen each represent legs, and ones that are well acknowledged, but Huxley was the third leg, and his influence upon Ayres is poorly understood and ignored. Why? One question deserves another? Why was *Huxley* among all the books Ayres wrote, his favorite? Breit and Culbertson poignantly describe how Ayres, elderly and with failing eyesight, had his wife read *Huxley* to him (Breit and Culbertson, 9). Solace was not obtained through Veblen or Dewey, but through *Huxley*. Breit and Culbertson do not expound upon Huxley's influence beyond issuing the tantalizing statement that Huxley is directly related to the theoretical structure Ayres tried to construct for institutional economics, (8). While Breit and Culbertson were sympathetic to Ayres, as a person and as a scholar, the probing inquiry concerning Huxley comes from the pen of the ever perceptive Gordon Tullock, who was not sympathetic to Ayres's writings. Tullock argues that Huxley was what Ayres wanted

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to be, in the sense that Ayres had great admiration for Huxley as an individual and as a challenger of an old order (Tullock, 135).

Huxley initially appears in Ayres's first book on science, published in 1927 as *Science: The False Messiah*.<sup>1</sup> This work, while fundamentally an attack on scientists, is indicative of Ayres's emerging relationship with the writings of Huxley. One can sense, in the passages in which Ayres references Huxley, a great deal of Ayres himself. For example, Ayres writes that "Natural knowledge and religious authority were direct contraries in the mind of Huxley." Certainly this was also the view Ayres held. For Huxley, Ayres writes, ". . . scepticism was a scientific duty." Moreover, Ayres quotes Huxley's argument that "It cannot be otherwise, for every great advancement in natural knowledge has involved the absolute rejection of authority, the cherishing of the keenest scepticism and the annihilation of the spirit of blind faith." Ayres was, of course, working toward his own rejection of the prevailing authority in economics, and, like Huxley he recognized his own impending isolation from the mainstream which would inevitably follow. The ". . . more sceptical a man becomes," Ayres wrote, "the more isolated he seems to be." As a generalization, he argued that "susceptibility to doubts is produced in men by some sort of social isolation. They feel cut off from their civilization. *Consequently they can venture not to believe in it* (emphasis added)." Ayres did recognize that Huxley "does not now appear to have been an isolated man," but comments that "we have many evidences in his own hand that he did feel cut off from his generation, particularly in his youth." Obviously Ayres could readily identify with that these perceptions in and about Huxley. When Ayres observed that "Scientists, after reaching the age of discretion may have some doubts about the legendary sanctities," since "Most men do who are intelligent enough to amount to very much in any profession," he was writing about himself as well as about Huxley (Ayres 1972, 187–189).

In *Huxley*, Ayres's second book about science, a brilliant young scientist—Thomas Henry Huxley—is portrayed racing forward to carry Darwin's message concerning man.<sup>2</sup> Huxley, for Ayres, represented the triumph of a new paradigm in science, one that was fully applicable to economics. The "new man" was here, one free from the ideas that he was a fallen angel, recognizing fully that he was a part of nature, a species among other species. Adam Smith's views about man were now, for Ayres, no longer valid. Moreover the behavioral postulates about man assumed in both classical and neoclassical economic theory were now false, for they rested on the discredited structure of pre-Darwinian science.

Tullock, in comparing Ayres's two works on science, found that "The attitude of mind and general approach to society is the same in both." In the older work, Ayres attacks an entrenched establishment, while in *Huxley* he ". . . celebrates the overthrow of another entrenched establishment and the great accomplish-

ments of one of the warriors who achieved that overthrow." Tullock finds that Ayres apparently identifies himself with Huxley and ". . . would like to feel (although he realizes the evidence is against him) that his attack upon economic orthodoxy was as successful as Huxley's attack on pre-Darwinian science" (Tullock, 135).

Ayres's own words make it difficult to disagree with Tullock's observations. In *Huxley*, Ayres wrote that upon the occasion of Huxley's receipt of the Darwin medal, in 1894, ("his final growl as Darwin's bull dog,") Huxley expressed his own view that Darwin's views constituted ". . . an epoch in the intellectual history of the human race. They will modify the whole system of our thought and opinion, our most intimate convictions." For Ayres it was "characteristic of Huxley that he took no credit for this intellectual revolution." Ayres thought he should, for in his view it was Huxley who made the intellectual revolution, ". . . for which *The Origin of Species* was the symbol and the scripture" (Ayres 1932, 94–95). Strong words, these, but Ayres could be, as Dorfman observed, polemical and sometimes inflammatory (Dorfman, 129). Mirowski, more recently, comments on Ayres's penchant for issuing *obiter dicta* (Mirowski, 129).

If Ayres could seem more than just a little pugilistic at times, so could Huxley, who has been depicted as "bellicose, brash, and a good hater . . ." (Desmond and Morris, 432). Certainly both men never minded a bit of "parson bashing" when they felt it was needed. Huxley detested Roman Catholicism because of its penchant for the supernatural, while Ayres could become quite annoyed with fundamentalist Protestant dogmatists. Both men despised intellectual tyranny and authoritarianism in any form. In all this, and in so many other ways, Huxley and Ayres at times seem almost one personality. In spite of fulminations against existing orders of science and, for Ayres, economics, neither moved outside the political mainstream of their day. Each avoided embracing socialism, each accepted, pragmatically, the institution of private property, and each had little use for laissez faire economics. Both men were materialists; both were drawn to the engineering mind and the consequent technologies that would flow from it, and both men were excellent writers. G. K. Chesterton referred to Huxley as a "journalist-scientist" who had a ". . . live taste and talent for the English tongue . . ." (Chesterton, 127). Tullock notes that Ayres was an excellent writer and ". . . a brilliant social critic" [Tullock, 127].

Tullock, recognizing Ayres's and Huxley's similarities, focuses on their common mastery of controversial technique, the fact that neither invented the system they proselytized for, and that each had the special talents needed for advancing his position. However, Tullock argues that Ayres failed in his efforts, while Huxley succeeded in his, an outcome caused by the quality of the respective ideas each sought to promulgate (Tullock 1976, 135–6). This is, however, somewhat of an errant view, for in truth both men failed, and for essentially the same

reasons. Ayres, arguably, never really grasped the true significance of Darwinism, while Huxley, arguably, never really believed in it.

## II

### Ayres and Evolutionary Biology

AYRES'S MISUNDERSTANDING is evident in passages he developed in *Huxley*. For example, he wrote that "all of Darwin's particular views have gone down wind: variation, survival of the fittest, natural selection, and all the rest. Darwin is nearly, if not quite as outmoded today as Lamarck." While this is simply nonsense; Ayres was driven by a motive which led him to see Darwin in a different way, specifically: "*The Origin of Species* introduced a mode of thinking that in the end was bound to transform the logic of knowledge, and hence the treatment of morals, politics, and religion" (Ayres 1932, 95–6). Ayres is, in a sense, correct in the latter view, for the Darwinian message does offer the potential for such perspectives to occur, though as yet this has not been so, or at least not dominantly so. Ayres's attraction for Darwin rested on the fact that "*The Origin of Species* challenged Genesis, that is to say, the cultural foundation of Christendom." There is, he writes, "a world of difference between the morals, politics, and religion of God's chosen people and a species of super-apes." Very importantly, Ayres thought this message ". . . was Huxley's issue, not Darwin's." Moreover, he believed that it was Huxley's book *Man's Place in Nature*, that was the true vehicle of the Darwinian message. Ayres writes that "*The Origin of Species* is a 'quaint, out-moded classic'" (1932, 96).

Ayres's stridency, verifying Dorfman's and Mirowski's views about his writings, reached a new high when he argued that ". . . if evolution were to be defined as a contemporary force in modern life, the expression of that idea, so defined in modern terms, would be found not in the massive treatises of Charles Darwin, but in the essays of Thomas Henry Huxley" (Ayres 1932, 97). As astounding as this may seem to present readers' even more so is Ayres's statement that "Darwin did not perceive what we now consider the inevitable corollaries of human evolution. Huxley did so" (240). What an extraordinary misreading for Ayres! Darwin keenly knew the content of his work, and he literally used Huxley to promulgate it. Certainly Huxley was hardly the new man Ayres thought him to be.

In the Huxley lecture for the year 1905, Edward Bagnell Poulton, a prominent natural scientist, chose as his theme the fact that his subject's attitude toward the theory he professed to support—Darwinian natural selection—was rather unusual. In Poulton's words:

The attitude of Huxley towards Natural Selection, was remarkable and unusual. Although no one strove so nobly and against such odds in its defence from unfair attack, although no

one ever fought the battle of science with more complete success, Huxley was at no time a convinced believer in the theory he protected (Poulton, 193).

Poulton goes on to argue that Huxley never did fully commit himself to natural selection. "Huxley's research and mind set," according to Poulton, "never were of a kind to be receptive to Natural Selection." For Poulton "Huxley's experience was not that of the naturalist, the confidence in natural selection was not for him" (202). Unfortunately, for Ayres, natural selection is the absolute bedrock of evolutionary biology.

### III

#### Huxley and Ayresian Economics

HOW COULD AYRES SO SERIOUSLY MISREAD HUXLEY? He literally built his analysis on Huxley, rather than Darwin per se, but Huxley was not what Ayres thought. There seem to be several possibilities. First, it may be that Ayres recognized the mechanistic instincts in Huxley, who wrote that "I am not sure that I have not all along been a sort of mechanical engineer in *partibus infidelium*" (T. H. Huxley, 1872, 10). Huxley's son Leonard once observed about his father that "Paleontology was his business, and he became a Master in it" (L. Huxley, 25). It may be that Ayres drew closer to Huxley because he saw and admired the mechanistic side. Ayres, in *Science: The False Messiah* wrote that "Modern science springs from just one source: that is, from instruments of precision. That is, from machines" (Ayres 1973, 47). Tullock noted how attached Ayres was to mechanical progress and how he was a believer in science as something to be applied (Tullock 135,140). Huxley's mechanical approach suited his own interest in morphology (the study of specie structure and form) but morphology was unaccepting of the randomness of divergence, of natural selection in evolutionary biology. Morphology depended upon orderly structure, and thus Huxley, in his work, could only be led to a pseudo-Darwinian perspective. Indeed, some morphologists had an openly anti-Darwinian outlook. But if this view is valid, then Huxley could not have served Ayres in the way Ayres thought.

Another possibility for Ayres's attraction to the Huxleyian perspective may come from the rebellious nature both men had. As was true of Huxley, Ayres constantly rebelled, and his attacks on orthodox economics closely resemble those Huxley so persistently employed in his attempts to draw British science to his view. When Ayres quoted from Huxley's address as president of The British Association the remark ". . . the great tragedy of science—the slaying of a beautiful hypothesis by an ugly fact" he set the tone for his own attack on orthodox economics (Ayres 1932, 85). Ayres's context identifies something in his outlook that di Gregorio spotted in Huxley's:

I am struck by how much of his life and work was marked by a rebelliousness which may be described as "adolescent" in nature. By this I do not mean to disparage Huxley—or

adolescents. I mean a constant conflict against existing centres of power and influence in order to establish a personal identity, which at the same time feels uneasy or insecure at the vacuum of authority which the conflict itself tends to produce, and which therefore seeks the foundation of its own general "new order" (di Gregorio, 193).

Ayres and Huxley both thrived on controversial writing. Until their later years each wrote splendid prose. However, as Ashforth recognized about Huxley, "Controversial writing is inevitably concerned with the pursuit of victory rather than truth, and most seasoned warriors concede that might and right do not necessarily go together" (Ashforth, 122). Certainly the same view fits Ayres's writings, especially in the first half of his life. However, at no time is it appropriate to infer that Ayres was untruthful or purposefully misleading in his writings. The point is that extremes between position were drawn for purposes of comparison which might have, instead, been more judiciously made. His writings about Darwin are a case in point, as is, for example, the statement that ". . . capitalism is itself collapsing . . ." which he wrote in his most important work, *The Theory of Economic Progress* (Ayres 1962, 280).

For both Ayres and Huxley it may well be that the ultimate judgment of their work lies in a statement Paradis wrote about Huxley: "Unable to achieve a formal philosophical system equal to his vision—Huxley chose what to him was the only worthwhile alternative: the rhetorical affirmation of a complex vision, which he was unable theoretically to define" (Paradis, 177). Ayres tried to rely on that very same "complex vision" but it let him down. Not surprising, his own efforts to theoretically define were opaque and inconclusive. The really odd twist in all of the Ayres-Huxley matter is that what Huxley really achieved was a "Non-Darwinian Revolution," a revolution which "rejected certain key aspects of creationism, but which was non-Darwinian because it succeeded in preserving and modernizing the old teleological view of things" (Bowler, 5). No wonder that Ayres had to acknowledge that "Classical price theory has managed to absorb the opposition" (Ayres 1962, 11). Ayres's institutional economics has not been able to derail the prevailing paradigm in economics because his analysis is rooted in an inability to offset what natural selection itself may have created—the very rules of the game of life, which the classical economists simply recognized and codified.

#### IV

#### **The Outcome**

Where does all this leave Ayres's attempt to build his form of institutionalism on the new science of man, that flowing from Huxley and Huxleyism—the realization of anthropoid descent? That answer has to be that Ayres fell short, for clear understandable reasons. Ayres was certainly correct in his perception

that the pre-evolutionary and evolutionary conceptions of nature are, as scientific doctrines, incompatible, but what he failed to comprehend was that for mankind generally the pre-evolutionary viewpoint is arguably more attractive than the newer outlook. As Greenwood indicates, the reason for this is simply that the “pre- and non-evolutionary views offer a clear relationship between nature and the determination of political/moral conduct. Evolutionism, properly understood, not only explicitly rejects such a relationship but undercuts the vision of nature on which it stands” (Greenwood 1984, 23). Why should people abandon what long years of experience have by and large beneficially yielded to them? As Morris Silver writes in his provocative work *Foundations of Economic Justice*, “Consideration of archaeological and historical evidence suggests . . . that Adam Smith knew whereof he spoke when he noted in mankind a certain ‘propensity to trade, barter, and exchange one thing for another’” (Silver, 170). Huxley could not abandon this perspective, nor could Ayres overcome it. And for good reason, for as Greenwood observed: “There seems to be a characteristically Western way of assimilating information about nature into political/moral views about culture, a way as yet little modified by the development of evolutionary theory” (Greenwood 1984, 22).

The reason why institutional economics never has derailed the prevailing paradigm in economics is rooted in its inability to offset what natural selection itself may have created; the very rules of the game of life, which the classical economists simply recognized and codified. For example, Silver, relying on Alchian and Allen, writes that “Biological considerations may well underlie the peculiar ‘rules of the free enterprise game’ in which roughly speaking it is illegal of anyone to use goods in ways that have undesired physical effects on other people’s goods” (Silver, 116). Furthermore, in Silver’s view: “It is not unreasonable to postulate an evolutionary origin for the innate moral feelings surrounding productive activity” (—, 171). But of course these feelings long pre-date modern evolutionary biology.

Ayres simply failed to come to effective grips with Darwin’s work. He never really understood the extraordinary individualistic outcome evolutionary biology postulated. And his reliance upon Huxley only served to mislead him even more.

## V

### Conclusion

AYRES’S RELIANCE on the writings of Thomas Henry Huxley form an essential and widely ignored part of his theoretical structure, and, perhaps, even more they form an important part of Ayres’s view of himself. Huxley’s own life, his style and approach to his work, seem to be embodied to a significant degree in Ayres’s



own life and work. Positively, both men were charismatic and appealing thinkers. Both wanted a better life for all people. Both rejected totalitarian doctrines, arguing for democracy and freedom. Both strived, to borrow a phrase from di Gregorio, to reach through to the elementalism of a great, restless drama. For this quest, they deserve admiration and respect. For Ayres particularly, it may be that his work is of greater interest for what it attempted than for what it achieved. Rightfully his is the scholarly glory that comes from sincerity of purpose, high minded ideals, and a real desire to seek a better explanation of economic forces and an effective analytical framework for understanding the economy.

### Notes

1. Ayres's first two books, *Science: The False Messiah*, and *Holier Than Thou The Way of the Righteous*, are not indexed. A chronological bibliography of Ayres's writings is in: Breit, William and Culbertson, William Patton, eds. *Science and Ceremony The Institutional economics of C. E. Ayres*, 191–201.
2. A complete listing of the written works of T. H. Huxley is in Huxley, Leonard, *Life and Letters of Thomas Henry Huxley, Vol. II*, New York: D. Appleton 1901, 480–503.

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