

# The Washington Times

## BOOK REVIEW: ‘The Evolution of Everything: How New Ideas Emerge

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From where did everything, and I mean everything, come? The answer can be found in “The Evolution of Everything: How New Ideas Emerge” by Matt Ridley. “The Evolution of Everything” is an exceptional book: exceptionally easy to read, easy to understand, easy to appreciate.

Each of the book’s 16 chapters is introduced with pertinent stanzas from “De Rerum Natura,” a lengthy, unfinished poem by ancient Roman poet and philosopher Titus Lucretius Carus. In chapter after chapter, Mr. Ridley, zoologist and science writer extraordinaire, extols and explicates the explanatory power of the concept of emergence and descent-with-modification of everything from inanimate matter. That means all sorts of things — the universe, life, culture, morality, homicide, religion, management, money, Hong Kong, the Internet — you name it and Mr. Ridley explains its origin and development in purely materialistic terms, with no theology or teleology necessary.

Although, overall an easy read, it may also be exceptionally easy to reject by fundamentalists both on the right as well as on the left. The book’s rejection by many on the fundamentalist right is easy to see — after all, it’s about the anathematic concept of evolution. Rejection by the fundamentalist left is a bit more murky.

Hesitancy by the left would be understandable with expositions provided in chapters such as Chapter 10 on the evolution of education (surprise: student success in state-sponsored programs around the world can pale dramatically against for-profit education), and Chapter 11 on the evolution of population.

In Chapter 11, surely leftists won’t applaud many of Mr. Ridley’s statements, such as this one about Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood Foundation, who in 1939, “set up the ‘Negro Project,’ intended to bring birth control to black people with the help of ministers and

doctors. The project was unabashed in its eugenic racism .” Or, regarding environmentalists’ No. 1 enemy of the environment, human population: “The population-control movement was, to an uncomfortable extent, the child of the eugenics movement.”

Mr. Ridley doubles down on annoyance of rigid leftists with a reminder that a longtime stalwart of the environmental movement, Paul Ehrlich, recommended in a book, “Ecoscience: Population, Resources, Environment” (Freeman, 1978) — written by Mr. Ehrlich with his wife Anne, and with President Obama’s current science adviser, John Holdren — that “a ‘planetary regime’ be ‘given responsibility for determining the optimum population for the world and for each region for arbitrating various countries’ shares within their regional limits.’ “

Furthermore, Mr. Ridley quotes from the likes of Jonah Goldberg in his book “Liberal Fascism,” and Andrew Coulson and James Tooley for the libertarian Cato Institute and other writers who, from a leftist viewpoint, are not correct thinkers.

In addition, frequent use of contemporary climate science as an example of top-down, inappropriate scientific practice rather than a bottom-up, more effective, emergent-friendly system will not endear Mr. Ridley to many of the science elites. To Mr. Ridley, the advancement of science is more from a “procession of fascinating mysteries to be challenged,” rather than a collection of facts for students and the populace to accept from those with a received wisdom. Predictably, Mr. Ridley includes his focused discussion of popular-science assertions about anthropogenic climate change in his chapter on the evolution of religion.

Throughout the book, Mr. Ridley demonstrates his flair for explaining tricky scientific and philosophical topics. Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins is a brilliant, popular science writer; yet, Mr. Ridley succinctly elucidates Mr. Dawkins ideas — like the selfish gene — better than Mr. Dawkins himself. And Mr. Ridley maintains a clear continuity of common concepts like “emergence” and “evolution” and of more novel notions such as “skyhook” (“an imaginary device for hanging an object [or in Mr. Ridley’s case, an argument] from the sky”) and linking top-down approaches to “creationism.”

With all the excellent writing and fine details, the revelation of the emergence and evolution of the laws of the universe was not sufficiently explicit in the book. Arguments overall seemed to be analogous to claiming macro-evolution from undeniable examples of micro-evolution as Mr. Dawkins did in his popular work “The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution.”

Others, such as physicist Victor Stenger (author of “God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows God Does Not Exist”) have contended that just because something looks designed doesn’t necessarily mean there is a designer behind it. Examples include the appearance of snowflakes and rainbows. However, the formation of snowflakes and rainbows follows laws of nature, and it is the existence of these laws that is the issue — like explaining the formation of the game of Monopoly with its game board, dice, iconic pieces and play money versus explaining the origin of the rules to the game of Monopoly. The supposition is that these laws, like everything else,

had to emerge from nothing. Monopoly wouldn't even exist without its rules, making the discovery of the origin of the rules the fundamental search. It's no good to fantasize about the rules to Monopoly after you posit the emergence and evolution of its game components from inert material. The rules you fashion may not be the ones authentic or inherent to the game.

Of the many good general texts on the subject, "The Evolution of Everything" emerges as the fittest to champion the case for the ubiquity of evolution.