

Title: The idea of organic “progress” and evolutionary theory: an epistemological perspective

Abstract

The notion of “progress” can be defined as a directional change towards the better, implying a descriptive and an axiological element. “Organic progress” is the idea that, in the history of life, there has been a change towards organic forms which are “better” than the ancient forms. Several scholars have showed that this idea can be found in Charles Darwin’s thought and continues to provoke debate today. This paper aims to disentangle conceptual questions about the notion of organic progress. Can we identify a precise notion of progress that would be implied by evolutionary theory? To answer this, it is necessary to make explicit how this notion is related to two concepts: adaptation and function. Following the reasoning of Darwin, Richard Dawkins and George G. Simpson, I clarify the concept of functional improvement of organic traits. I argue that there is an analogy between organic traits and technological objects, explicit in the notion of “arms race” proposed by Dawkins. Analyzing this analogy, I propose a distinction between two levels of axiology, often neglected both in organic and technological domain. I then suggest the hypothesis that the technological analogy may influence the significance that evolutionary biologists attribute to functional improvement.

Keywords

Organic progress
Evolutionary biology
Adaptation
Function
Arms race
Technological progress