

References

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14. Stephen Jay Gould, *Ever Since Darwin*, pp. 218, 223. Again, to prevent misunderstanding, Gould is merely citing—not approving—this idea.
15. Stephen Jay Gould, "Dr. Down's Syndrome," p. 144.

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...If you call out for Insight...

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You will understand the fear of the LORD and find the knowledge of God.
Based on Proverbs 2:3-5

The Heritage of the Recapitulation Theory

by Henry Morris, Ph.D.*

Ideas have consequences, and false ideas sometimes generate bitter consequences. One of the premier examples of this principle is the infamous "recapitulation theory," developed by such philosophers as Goette and Robert Chambers, and then popularized in Darwin's day by Ernst Haeckel, the German atheist. Called by Haeckel the "biogenetic law, this idea was spread widely by his euphonious slogan, "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny," meaning that embryonic growth of the fetus in the womb rapidly recapitulates the entire evolutionary history of the species. This bizarre notion has been cited by evolutionists for over a hundred years as one of the main "proofs" of evolution. Darwin, himself, made great use of it in his *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man*.

Nevertheless, it is completely false, and most competent evolutionists today know this. Two leading neo-Darwinists have admitted:

"Haeckel misstated the evolutionary principle involved. It is now firmly established that ontogeny does not repeat phylogeny."¹ More recently, Dr. Keith Thompson, Professor of Biology at Yale, said:

"Surely the biogenetic law is as dead as a doornail. It was finally exercised from biology textbooks in the fifties. As a topic of serious theoretical inquiry, it was extinct in the twenties."²

In spite of its specious character, this notion captivated the minds of evolutionists, and is still believed by millions of their followers even today. Four of the very important, but very bitter fruits produced by the corrupt tree of recapitulationism are discussed briefly below:

(1) The Standard Geologic Column. The fossil record has long been considered the definitive evidence of evolution, with simple life forms preserved in ancient rocks and complex forms in younger rocks. The dating of the rocks, however, is based on the fossils they contain—not on their vertical position in the sedimentary sequences. Leading evolutionists acknowledge this to be circular reasoning.

"The charge that the construction of the geologic column involves circularity has a certain amount of validity."³

"And this poses something of a problem: If we date the rocks by their fossils, how can we then turn around and talk about patterns of evolutionary change through time in the fossil record?"⁴

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Thus this key "proof" of evolution is based on the assumption of evolution. In fact, pre-Darwinian theistic evolutionists and progressive creationists had already worked out the desired order of the fossils before any significant number of them had even been discovered, so that it was essentially ready-made as an evidence for evolution when Darwin proposed his theory. They had assumed that there was an innate principle operating in the cosmos and in living organisms that impelled them to proceed upward in complexity, and that this evolutionary order must be the same everywhere—in embryology, morphology, paleontology, and even psychology. It was natural, therefore, to use embryological studies as a basis for assigning order to the fossils.

"In Down's day, the theory of recapitulation embodied a biologist's best guide for the organization of life into sequences of higher and lower forms."⁵

"Another major factor keeping some sort of recapitulation alive was the need of comparative morphologists and especially paleontologists for a solid theoretical foundation for homology. They had long since come to rely on comparative ontogenetic information as a base."⁶ Although a number of other factors contributed significantly to the development of the standard stratigraphical column, (e.g., the rock sequences in Western Europe), embryological studies were perhaps most important of all. This standard geological column is found only in textbooks, and all the supposed transitional forms are still missing in the rocks themselves.

(2) Freudian Psychoanalysis. Another deadly fruit of the recapitulation idea was the psychological system developed by Sigmund Freud. Although much of his system is now rejected by modern psychologists and psychiatrists, there is no question that all have been profoundly influenced by Darwinism and the whole concept of man's animal ancestry. Recent discovery of a hitherto unpublished manuscript of Freud reveals how strongly he relied on recapitulationism.

"In a 1915 paper, Freud demonstrates his preoccupation with evolution. Immersed in the theories of Darwin, and of Lamarck, who believed acquired traits could be inherited, Freud concluded that mental disorders were the vestiges of behavior that had been appropriate in earlier stages of evolution."⁷

"The evolutionary idea that Freud relied on most heavily in the manuscript is the maxim that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,' that is, that the development of the individual recapitulates the evolution of the entire species."⁸

All the anti-Christian impact of Freud's atheistic psychological system, leading even to the modern sexual revolution, so-called, can thus be traced largely back to this recapitulation notion.

(3) Modern Racism. Feelings of tribalism, nationalism, and racism have existed ever since Babel, but racism did not reach its most intense and virulent level until it received a pseudo-scientific sanction from Darwinism. This new form of evolutionism, popularized in western Europe and America during the 19th century, with its emphasis on "survival of the fittest," lent itself naturally to the idea of competition between races, with the more highly evolved races eliminating the "savage races," as Darwin called them,⁹ in the "struggle for existence."

Social Darwinism, with its imperialist and racist emphases, became exceedingly strong in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and, even though it went into partial eclipse after World War II, its tragic aftereffects are with us still. Racism reached its zenith under Hitler in Nazi Germany, and the "biogenetic law" of Ernst Haeckel was largely responsible.

"Recapitulation was Haeckel's favorite argument ... Haeckel and his colleagues also invoked recapitulation to affirm the racial superiority of northern European whites, ... Herbert Spencer wrote that 'the intellectual traits of the uncivilized ... are traits recurring in the children of the civilized.' Carl Vogt said it more strongly in 1864: 'The grown up Negro partakes, as regards his intellectual faculties, of the nature of the child....'¹⁰ "(Haeckel) became one of Germany's major ideologists for racism, nationalism, and imperialism."¹⁰

"In essence, Haeckel and his fellow social Darwinists advanced the ideas that were to become the core assumptions of national socialism."¹² Lest anyone misunderstand, although all the above authorities (as well as all those quoted previously in this paper) are evolutionists, they do not believe in either recapitulationism or racism. The quotations are necessarily brief, but they do not misrepresent their authors. Much more documentation to the same effect could be provided if space permitted.

(4) The Plague of Abortionism. The most recent application of the recapitulation theory has been as a pseudo-scientific justification for the terrible holocaust of abortionism which has been sweeping the world in recent years. Although there may be many personal reasons why women have abortions and doctors perform them, the only scientific or religious justification that can be given for it is that the fetus is not yet really a human being. If the embryo is truly human, with human life and an eternal soul, then abortion is obviously cruel, premeditated murder. Therefore, abortionists must deny that the fetus is human.

But the only quasi-scientific rationale for such a pronouncement must be based on recapitulationism. As a widely syndicated columnist says, referring to an article by evolutionary feminist Ellen Goodman:

"I think that what she imagines is that the human embryo undergoes something like the whole process of evolution, as in the old adage that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny'. The adage has been discredited, of course, but this does not mean it has lost its power over the imagination of many modern people. They still suppose that the human fetus is in the early stages of development a 'lower' form of life, and this is probably what they mean when they say it isn't 'fully human'.¹³

This type of reasoning, of course, is specious, at best, and so is that which justifies racism, or Freudianism, or even the standard evolutionary interpretation of the fossil record. As we have shown, all these concepts have been largely based on the discredited quasi-scientific notion of the 19th century that "ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny." There are still other erroneous and harmful ideas that have sprouted from recapitulationism, which space limitations preclude discussing here. For example, much of modern criminology has developed out of this same recapitulationist concept.

"A whole school of 'criminal anthropology' ... branded white wrongdoers as genetically retarded Born criminals are not simply deranged or diseased; they are, literally throwbacks to a previous evolutionary stage."¹⁴

Even Stephen Jay Gould himself, probably the most influential and articulate evolutionist spokesman of the current decade, has said, concerning the recapitulation theory: *"(Both the theory and 'ladder approach' to classification which it encouraged are, or should be, defunct today)."¹⁵*

Creationists agree, but all Christians should also be concerned with the tragic heritage it has left in its wake. These concepts are also false, as well as perniciously harmful in human society.