
Buffon and Darwin after Hodge: the case for extremism

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Abstract

It is a commonplace of intellectual life that admirers often take good ideas further than their originators approve or appreciate. In this talk I shall reflect on two ways in which my own work represents just such an apparently unwelcome – but, in my view, nevertheless appropriate, and ultimately irresistible – taking to extremes of themes introduced in Jon Hodge’s challenging and enlightening writings. The first concerns Buffon as a “historical thinker”. In Hodge’s view, the question of Buffon’s historicism must not be decided anachronistically. I agree, but, in my “ultra-Hodgean” fashion, have come to disagree with Hodge himself about what conclusion to draw. For Hodge, only Victorian prejudice can lead someone to classify Buffon’s writings as non-historical. But for me, Buffonian history has to be seen as part of the tradition of natural history, from the Greeks onward – a tradition emphasizing, not a certain stance on time, but an effectively timeless stance on empirical knowledge. The second set of issues concerns Darwin, in particular the argumentative structure of the *Origin of Species*. Here I have argued that, while Hodge’s assimilation of the *Origin*’s structure to the three stages of a good “vera causa” argument is persuasive as far it goes, it leaves some chapters – notably the chapter on variation (ch. 5) – less well accounted for. Here are puzzles that emerge most forcefully, not for Hodge, but for the ultra-Hodgean.

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