

Rhetorical Analysis

“The Origin of Species, 6th Edition, ”By Charles Darwin

AN HISTORICAL SKETCH OF THE PROGRESS OF
OPINION ON THE ORIGIN OF SPECIES,
PREVIOUSLY TO THE PUBLICATION OF THE
FIRST EDITION OF THIS WORK

I will here give a brief sketch of the progress of opinion on the Origin of Species. Until recently the great majority of naturalists believed that species were immutable productions, and had been separately created. This view has been ably maintained by many authors. Some few naturalists, on the other hand, have believed that species undergo modification, and that the existing forms of life are the descendants by true generation of pre existing forms. Passing over allusions to the subject in the classical writers (Aristotle, in his "Physicæ Auscultationes" (lib.2, cap.8, s.2), after remarking that rain does not fall in order to make the corn grow, any more than it falls to spoil the farmer's corn when threshed out of doors, applies the same argument to organisation; and adds (as translated by Mr. Clair Grece, who first pointed out the passage to me), "So what hinders the different parts (of the body) from having this merely accidental relation in nature? as the teeth, for example, grow by necessity, the front ones sharp, adapted for dividing, and the grinders flat, and serviceable for masticating the food; since they were not made for the sake of this, but it was the result of accident. And in like manner as to other parts in which there appears to exist an adaptation to an end. Wheresoever, therefore, all things together (that is all the parts of one whole) happened like as if they were made for the sake of something, these were preserved, having been appropriately constituted by an internal spontaneity; and whatsoever things were not thus constituted, perished and still perish." We here see the principle of natural selection shadowed forth, but how little Aristotle fully comprehended the principle, is shown by his remarks on the formation of the teeth.), the first author who in modern times has treated it in a scientific spirit was Buffon. But as his opinions fluctuated greatly at different periods, and as he does not enter on the causes or means of the transformation of species, I need not here enter on details.

The title lets us know that there were opinions about the origin of the species before he wrote the first edition.

OK. So here Darwin is summing up what other people have said about his topic. By saying that the “great majority” think one thing, he’s suggesting that his view is exceptional

In this passage he acknowledges that there are a “few” people who agree with him. If it means he is not, strictly speaking, the first to embrace this view, it does place him among an exclusive group.

I thought he was going to pass over the classical allusions, but then he quotes Aristotle at length (and gives credit to the translator). He still hasn’t said what his view is though, just what other people have thought.

This one sentence dismisses Buffon as irrelevant due to his inconsistency and an avoidance of causes. Darwin is explicit that he is NOT going to talk about his work in detail.

OK. Buffon is the first person who gets named as someone who has treated the topic in “modern times” and in a “scientific spirit.” He must be the most important of the “few naturalists” referred to above