Lectures on "Philosophical Propaedeutics"

from the Academic Year 1860–61

Excerpt: pp. 326–328

(on the origin of species and Darwin's theory)

Translation and note by H. Halvorson (2026)

R. Nielsen

Gyldendalske Boghandling (F. Hegel), Copenhagen, 1862

Note on Context

Rasmus Nielsen (1809–1884) held the chair in philosophy at the University of Copenhagen from 1850 until his death, and these lectures from the academic year 1860–61 represent his most systematic attempt to define the relationship between philosophy and the natural sciences. He knew Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) through H. G. Bronn's German translation (*Ueber die Entstehung der Arten im Thier- und Pflanzenreich*, Stuttgart 1860), which appeared just one year after the English original and nearly a decade before J. P. Jacobsen's Danish translation (1871–72). The passage translated here is, to our knowledge, the earliest substantive philosophical engagement with Darwin in the Danish tradition.

The excerpt falls at the end of the longest section of the book, §II.C, "The Relation of Philosophy to Physiology: The Problem of Life." To understand what Nielsen is doing with Darwin, one needs to know where he is in the argument.

The problem of organic types. Nielsen's central concern throughout §II.C is to establish that organic types — species, genera, families — have genuine reality, against two opposite errors. The first error is crude empiricism, represented by the botanist Matthias Schleiden: only individuals exist; species and genera are mental abstractions we project onto nature. The second error is dogmatic Naturphilosophie: the type exists as a free-standing metaphysical entity (an *Urwesen*, a primordial being) that imposes form on matter from outside. Nielsen's alternative, developed at length in the preceding

pages, is that organic types have *dialectical* reality. The species-idea (*Artsidee*) is not an abstraction from individuals but their causal ground — more concrete, not less, than any individual, because it is the richer principle in which all individual differences are pre-formed and, after their development, remembered.

The law of concretion. This culminates in what Nielsen calls *Concretionsloven*, the law of concretion: genus is more concrete than species, family more concrete than genus, and so on up to the ground-idea of the kingdom (*Rigets Grundidee*). Crucially, however, this hierarchy cannot be derived a priori. There is no philosophical law determining how many species must belong to each genus, or which genera form a family. Philosophical cognition moves upward from empirical facts to concrete ideas, not downward from abstract principles to facts. This anti-deductivist commitment means that for Nielsen, biology genuinely constrains philosophy — he is not doing speculative Naturphilosophie in the Schelling–Oken mold.

Darwin's entry. It is at this point — with the positive argument complete — that Nielsen introduces Darwin, and the move is philosophically precise. He does not reject Darwin's empirical findings; on the contrary, he thinks the observed interaction between organic type and environmental conditions is exactly what his own dialectical theory predicts. What he resists is a particular *interpretation* of Darwin: the reading that external conditions *constitute* organic types, that environment is all the way down. Such a reading would make the type a mere resultant of circumstances, which for Nielsen dissolves the very concept of life — life without an ideal causal principle is not life but chemistry.

The conditional framing of his objection ("if... the attempts... are to be understood as meaning that it is actually the circumstances and external conditions that determine the organic types") is therefore deliberate. Nielsen leaves open whether Darwin himself holds this view. His target is a philosophical conclusion that might be drawn from Darwin, not Darwin's science as such.

Bronn's *Schlußwort*. The long note that follows in the original — so extensive that it fills an entire printed page — quotes from H. G. Bronn's critical afterword to his German translation. Bronn was a distinguished paleontologist who accepted common descent but was skeptical of natural selection as a complete explanation. His objection — that natural selection cannot explain *why* environmental pressure produces oval rather than lanceolate leaves, or five rather than four stamens — is, from Nielsen's perspective, the right objection, though made for the wrong reasons. Bronn is pointing to the absence of any intelligible connection between the external condition and the specific organic result. For Nielsen, what is missing is precisely the ideal causal principle, the paradigm:

without it, the specificity of organic form remains unintelligible, a brute fact. Natural selection can select among variations, but it cannot explain the determinate character of those variations, and that explanatory gap is where Nielsen's philosophy of the organism is meant to fit.

The turn to p. 328. After the Darwin interlude, Nielsen pivots to a parallel critique of the opposite error. The passage on pp. 327–328 attacks both Kantian critical philosophy (which makes the Idea a merely subjective, regulative principle) and dogmatic positivism (which hypostatizes it into a free-standing primordial being). Darwin's error, on the "lawless" reading, belongs to the positivist side: dissolving type into external conditions, making the observable phenotype the only reality. The Naturphilosoph's error is the mirror image: fixing type as a dogmatic immediate, unmediated by the critical reflection that alone gives it scientific significance. Nielsen's dialectical Idealism — shaped, he believed, by Kierkegaard's critique of system-building — is meant to hold both sides in tension without collapsing into either.

Significance. This passage shows that engagement with Darwin was already philosophically serious in Copenhagen in the early 1860s, more than a decade before the Brandes generation made Darwin a cultural-political weapon. For Nielsen, Darwin poses not a crisis of faith but a philosophical problem about the intelligibility of life — a problem that requires more careful thinking about causality, not the abandonment of teleology. His position anticipates, in some respects, later neo-Kantian and vitalist responses to Darwinism (Driesch, Bergson), though Nielsen's framework is more directly Hegelian. It is also worth noting that Nielsen's student Harald Høffding would work through many of the same questions in "Filosofien og Darwinismen" (1874), the primary reading for this week — but from a much more empiricist and epistemologically cautious vantage point.

Translation

[P. 326, continued from p. 325:]

through all its species to the family, etc., can be determined dialectically by the law of concretion; on the other hand, there is no law of development by which it could be determined a priori how many and which species must necessarily belong to each genus, or how many and which genera originally belong to each family: philosophical cognition does not proceed through abstract Ideas to actual facts, but conversely through actual facts to the concrete Ideas. (Cf. *Phil. Prop.*, pp. 158–178.)

If the attempts that have been made in recent times to explain the origin of species from varieties that have become constant over time are to be understood as meaning that it is actually the circumstances and the external conditions that determine the organic types, then such a lawless and Idea-negating conception of vital activity will naturally meet with objection in philosophy. But it ought not to be forgotten in this connection that the reality of Ideas is infinitely dialectical, and that a dialectical reality does not admit of being hypostatized in dogmatic positive immediacy. If it is really the case that organic selfhood originally presupposes elementary otherness, then it follows directly from this that the development of life must also bring with it a manifold interaction of the typical and the elementary. Varieties, abortions, displacements, and other abnormalities show clearly enough what influence the elementary conditions must have on the execution of the paradigm. [*]

[*] Note (pp. 326–327 in the original): For the investigations pertaining to this matter, we refer to Charles Darwin, On the Origin of Species in the Animal and Plant Kingdom, *translated from the English and annotated by Dr. H. G. Bronn (Stuttgart, 1860). The following is quoted from the "Concluding Remarks of the Translator," pp. 508–9:*

> *"These are the conditions of existence to which organisms must adapt themselves, and which play such a large role in this book. They are partly organic and partly inorganic, and the former are, in Darwin's view, far the most numerous and important, and for that reason also in themselves most capable of giving rise to the most varied consequences. But these very organic principles have in turn the great advantage for Darwin that, since he appeals to their variety and to the struggle for existence in general, he is relieved of the necessity of accounting for their mode of operation in detail and of showing what specific consequences this or that specific organic condition exerts on the structure and development of the organisms subject to its influence, either in general or individually. Mr. Darwin appeals on every page to the fact that only those variations have any prospect of survival that are beneficial to the individual and thus to the future species; and theoretically one must concede that, if natural selection exists, the matter cannot behave otherwise. But we must confess that in almost all of our varieties said to have arisen from inner causes we cannot find at all wherein the benefit of their modification consists.… Why does one plant species acquire, in this struggle for existence, oval instead of lanceolate leaves, and another lanceolate instead of oval? Why does one have an umbel-like and another a paniculate inflorescence? Why does one have five and another four stamens,*

> *one a closed and another a wide-open flower? Of what use to one is this, and to the other the opposite? Why do the organic conditions bring about this? By what means do they set about it, and how must they be constituted to be capable of doing so? And how can the one species thereby become superior to the other? We confess that we cannot discern any connection between these phenomena, and Mr. Darwin would answer us that it might possibly happen in one way or another. We confess further that we have looked in vain for positive proofs or even supporting evidence in this regard, with the exception perhaps of some special cases of a peculiar kind; for we are far from wishing to deny all such influence altogether."*

[P. 327: The body text begins at the top of the page with three lines immediately following the end of the note:]

"The Critique of Pure Reason" transforms the Idea into a subjectively unconditioned entity; dogmatic positivism hypostatizes the Idea into a primordial being subsisting in itself. Such a positive

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primordial being is, to be sure, declared to be an inward, imageless, and invisible being, but becomes, precisely when its positivity is fixed, through its dogmatic immediacy an outward, pictorial, and perceptible being. Deep Intuition, the immediate Intuition of Ideas, is in general a mystical-dogmatic intuition of a Negative-Positive, an Imageless-Pictorial; the Depth is recognized above all by the fact that the one who intuits does not notice the contradiction. If the immediate Intuition of Ideas is to acquire scientific significance, this can only come about through Critique not merely pointing out but also thoroughly reflecting the contradiction that breaks through from all sides. The contradiction is that the Immediate in Nature is so reflected; the contradiction is that what is thus Reflected is so immediate. Just as exact infinitesimal analysis is not finished with the insight that every finite magnitude is conceived as an integral of infinitely small magnitudes, just so little is the dialectical analysis of Ideas concluded with the insight that the Immediate reflects itself in the Reflected; for the articulating intermediate determinations that develop from this are innumerable.

The realm of Ideas is, in relation to the external plant-world grounded therein, a system of reflection-existences, content-rich existence-memories; the reflection of Ideas in the reflected immediacy of individual forms is, like the clarity of light, a transfigured immediacy. In this clarity the individual existences are seen, through their individual

Ideas, reflected in the Idea of the species; the Ideas of species, with their individual Ideas, reflected in the Idea of the genus; the Ideas of genera, with their Ideas of species, in that of the family; through the family's in the order's; through the order's in the class's; through the class's in the series'; through the series' concrete, content-rich Idea in the Idea that grounds the kingdom, in the Depth.

β) **Animal Life.**

As organic Nature, the Idea is Life, and living Existence, essentially viewed, an Idea-Existence; but Idea-Existence

[Continued on p. 329, not included here.]