

# St. Augustine on Evolution

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I was recently giving a talk to a Catholic Young Adult group about evolution and Catholic teaching, and one of the points I made was that St. Augustine believed in a form of theistic evolution (i.e., God-guided evolution) way back in 415 A.D. For the record, Darwinian evolution wasn't proposed until 1859 A.D.

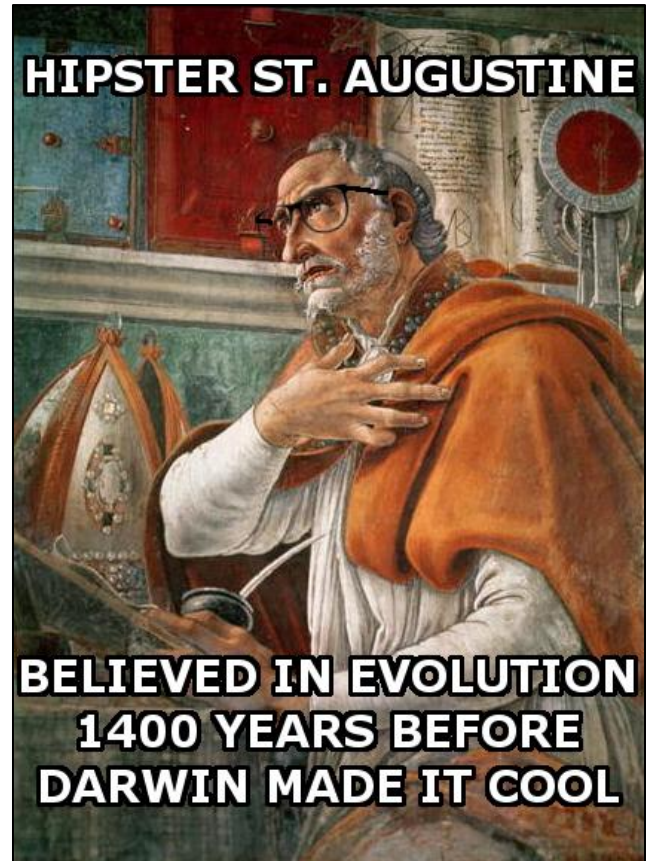
Anyway, the book where he talks about that is Book V of his work, *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis* (Latin: *De Genesi Ad Litteram*), and since that isn't available for free online (not yet anyway) I thought I'd share a few quotes that illustrate the point. If you're looking for quotes from St. Augustine about evolution, these are them.

Specifically, we're talking about Book V Chapter 7 Paragraph 20, where he lays out what his topic is: "the production of things in the course of time following the creation of the world." And the first point he makes is this: "The [Book of Genesis] appropriately begins with [water,] from which all kinds of animals, plants, and trees are born [and] develop in time...each according to its nature." This is interesting because what he's going to try to show is that every type of animal, plant, and tree was generated from water and earth and gradually

developed into their present forms. In the same paragraph he also speaks of "primordial seeds, whence all flesh and all vegetation are brought forth." The reference to "seeds" is an analogy that he'll get into a bit later: he compares the origin of species to the bringing forth of trees, which start out as a seed and then grow out of the earth into their mature form.

Moving on, a couple of paragraphs later he gets to the heart of it: "The things [that God] had potentially created...[came] forth in the course of time on different days according to their different kinds...[and] the rest of the earth [was] filled with its various kinds of creatures, [which] produc[ed] their appropriate forms in due time." (Chapter 7 Paragraph 22) That is evolutionary thinking. God didn't create all species of animals all at once, according to St. Augustine; He created them in a potential kind of way, so that they would develop later, "producing their appropriate forms in due time."

But he has more to say about that: "It is obvious that in accordance with those kinds of creatures which He first made, God makes many new things which He did not make then." (New



species from an old genus.) “It is thus that God unfolds the generations which He laid up in creation when first he founded it.” (Chapter 20 Paragraph 41) After that he explains this by means of the tree analogy I mentioned earlier.

“Th[e] tree surely did not spring forth suddenly in [a mature] size and form, but rather went through a process of growth with which we are familiar. ...[It] took its shape as it [gradually] developed with all its parts. ... One [form of tree] comes from the other [form of tree], therefore, in succession, but both come from earth and not earth from them. Earth, then, is prior and is their source. The same is true of animals.” (Chapter 23 Paragraph 44) That’s an awesome set of quotes right there: because he says the same thing is true of animals, it follows that he thinks animals “did not spring forth suddenly in a mature size and form” but gradually “went through a process of growth” through which they “took their shape” and “developed all their parts.” That’s not just true of individual animals growing from an immature state to a mature state; he’s talking about animal kinds -- the Latin word is genus. Animal kinds (canines, felines, etc.) gradually came to look like what they do today.

St. Augustine continues with the seed analogy in Chapter 23 Paragraph 45: “In the [tree], then, there [is] invisibly present [in its seed] all that [will] develop into the tree. And in this same way we must picture the world [when it was created]... This includes not only heaven with the sun, moon, and stars...but it includes also the beings which water and earth produced in potency and in their causes before they came forth in the course of time.” And finally: “The works which God produces even now as the ages unfold have their beginning in [the original creation].” (Chapter 23 Paragraph 46)

St. Augustine’s view was not the same as Charles Darwin’s, but it was a form of theistic evolution nonetheless. He thought that animals gradually assumed their present form, and were originally in the ground as a “potential” form of animal that did not exist yet, but he does make an important clarification: “But we cannot believe that He establishes a new kind, since He finished all His works on the sixth day.” “If we should suppose that God now makes a creature without having implanted its kind (genus) in His original creation, we should flatly contradict Sacred Scripture, which says that on the sixth day God finished all His works.” (Chapter 20 Paragraph 41) This shows one way in which St. Augustine’s view was different from Darwin’s. He apparently thought that a new species could evolve from a genus that already exists, but didn’t think a whole new genus could develop as a whole.

His view is summed up neatly in Book V Chapter 23 Paragraph 44: “[God] created all [creatures] together...whose visible forms He produces through the ages, working even until now.” What we should conclude is that St. Augustine was quite ahead of his time and made steps toward the ideas that evolutionary biologists are discovering today, and his interpretation of Genesis already forms a kind of theistic (or God-guided) evolution, though it’s not quite the same as what Darwin thought up a thousand years later.

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I used the translation of *De Genesi Ad Litteram* that was published by Paulist Press in 1982 and is partly available as a Google Book Preview at <http://books.google.com/books?id=s0kIqD0nCcC>