

The Metamorphosis Misnomer

by Chard Berndt

Typically, before biology students plod through the eight major insect orders, their textbook first samples some marvelous features of these winged creepers. These include the compound eye in many adults, scent hormones that mark territories and routes, complex social behaviors, antennae that smell or touch, and of course, the remarkable workings of insect metamorphosis. Students learn that metamorphosis is divided into two types: “complete” and “incomplete” (or “simple”). The former includes the radical four-stage progression of egg, larva, pupa, and adult, as found in butterflies. The latter includes the three-stage progression of egg, nymph, and adult (as in the grasshopper), although the nymph to adult change comes in several steps, each larger through molting but essentially the same in form. “Incomplete” metamorphosis, however, is anything but incomplete.

So where does this idea of incompleteness come from? What does the development of a grasshopper lack? The entomologist (a biologist who studies insects) would say it lacks the pupal stage. But can something lack a stage it was never intended to have? Do not all insects, in their development, also lack an egg membrane and calcium carbonate shell, or a marsupial pouch, or umbilical cord? Granted, we don’t think of these things as missing because they are unique to other kinds of creatures. And yet insects that undergo three-stage metamorphosis are of different kinds than those that experience four-stage metamorphosis. Only when one assumes that these two categories of insects are truly related does he or she need to suggest incompleteness! Evolutionary entomologists believe that by virtue of their physical similarities, all insects must have a common ancestry. As such, the developmental process with fewer dramatic changes is considered the more “primitive,” deficient one.

But perhaps the entomologist should consider why evolutionary “leftovers” are so successful today. “Incomplete” metamorphosis works splendidly. A grasshopper, cricket, or fly reaches adulthood as a complete creature. Their developmental process is a complete one because the purpose of maturity is achieved.

Furthermore, insects do not have a corner on radical transformation. Metamorphoses also occur among amphibians and, to varying degrees, in all living things. Even the rudimentary sponge, for instance, begins life as a free-swimming larva, but matures as a sessile (non-moving) adult of a different form altogether. Any developmental process that lacks a stage found in another creature could be regarded as incomplete. So one might pose the question, “What is the ideal metamorphosis?” The answer: the ideal metamorphosis is the one that God fashioned for each kind of creature, insect or otherwise.

Yet, sure enough, the dubious distinction of “incomplete” is granted not only among insects. In similar violation, the term also arises when describing flowers. An “incomplete” flower is one that lacks any of the following: stamens, pistils, sepals, or petals. Again, there is nothing incomplete about the flower, as it still possesses beauty, and can pollinate with complementary “incomplete” flowers. Within a plant kind that produces either staminate or pistillate flowers, it is likely that its flowers have formed this way since the Creation. One also finds suggestions of “incompleteness,” without the actual use of the term, when an evolutionist speaks of a monkey “lacking” the advantages of an opposable thumb.

God declared the Creation good (Gen. 1:4,10,12,18,21,25,31), and at its conclusion regarded it as finished, or complete (Gen. 2:1). Today, the creation is only incomplete on account of what has been lost (through the Fall and Flood), not because of things never gained (through evolution). Moreover, if we must note creation’s deficiencies, the mirror may be our best tool. Who of us is complete? To be sure, any man or woman in an unregenerate state suffers from the ultimate lack: a severed relationship with God. Yet even regenerated believers must undergo development. As James put it (in James 1:2-4), the testing of our faith moves us toward completion of character: perfection that Paul reminds us (in Philippians 3:12-14) is never obtained in this life. Saving faith in Jesus Christ, then, is a prerequisite for man’s completeness. Perhaps instead of accusing the creation of lacking what it doesn’t, or noting its imperfections on our account, we ought to first consider what is truly missing: Christ in humanity.

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