

The Cuvier-Geoffroy de Saint Hilaire Controversy

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Summary

In the spring of 1830, a memorable debate took place in Paris between two scientists – colleagues and friends – on the question of which principles organize the living. It seemed to be a rather dry topic, yet crowds flocked to the public sessions of the Academy of Sciences, the newspapers pounced on it. It was intensely pursued across borders by Europe's intellectuals, including Goethe, who clearly sided with Geoffroy de Saint Hilaire over Cuvier. In Goethe's opinion, the future of science would depend on the outcome of this debate. The article pursues to understand this strong statement.

Zusammenfassung

Im Frühling 1830 fand in Paris eine denkwürdige Debatte zwischen zwei Wissenschaftlern, Kollegen und Freunden über die Frage statt, nach welchen Prinzipien das Lebendige organisiert sei. Es schien ein eher trockenes Thema zu sein, dennoch strömten Menschenmengen zu den öffentlichen Sitzungen der Wissenschafts-Akademie und die Zeitungen stürzten sich auf das Thema. Grenzüberschreitend wurde die Debatte von den Intellektuellen Europas intensiv verfolgt, darunter auch von Goethe, der klar gegen Cuvier für Geoffroy de Saint Hilaire Partei ergriff. Seiner Meinung nach würde die Zukunft der Wissenschaft vom Ausgang dieser Debatte abhängen. Dieser Artikel geht der Frage nach, wie dieses starke Postulat verstanden werden kann.

Introduction

On August 2, 1830, Eckermann, who had just learned of the shattered July Revolution in France, visited Goethe as he did on most days. Goethe welcomed him with these words:

*“Well, what do you think of this great event? The volcano is erupting; everything is on fire, and it is no longer a closed-door affair!
– It's a terrible story. But given the circumstances and such a government, what else could we expect, except that we would eventually drive out the current royal family.
– It seems to me that we do not understand each other, my dear friend. I'm not talking about these people: for me, it's about something else. I am talking about the quarrel that has just broken out publicly at the Academy between Cuvier and Geoffroy de Saint Hilaire and which is of great importance for science.”*

(Eckermann 1850)

Eckermann writes: “For me, Goethe’s statement was so unexpected that I was amazed. For a few minutes I was completely unable to think.” And he continues in citing Goethe:

“This is of the utmost importance and you cannot imagine how I felt when I heard the news of the July 19¹ session. We now have in Geoffroy de Saint Hilaire a powerful ally for the future. But I also see by this that the French scientific world has taken a large part in the event because, despite the terrible political upheavals, the session on 19 July was crowded. However, the great advantage is that the synthetic method introduced in France by Geoffroy can no longer be considered as non-option. Thanks to free discussions at the Academy, in the presence of many listeners, the issue is now made public: it will no longer be relegated to secret committees and dealt with behind closed doors. From now on, in the natural sciences, it is the spirit that will dominate and be master of the material. We will take a look at the great laws of Creation and in God’s mysterious laboratory! What would all relations with nature be if, by the analytical method, we were dealing only with isolated parts of matter and did not feel the breath of the Spirit who prescribes his direction to each of its parts and represses or sanctions any deviation by an immanent law?[...] This event is of incredible value for me and it is with good reason that I rightly acclaim the victory, finally general, of a cause to which I have devoted my life [...]”
(Eckermann 1850)

Frédéric Soret, the translator of Goethe’s scientific writings into French, is amazed by Goethe’s interest in this story:

“For the past two weeks, he has only had Cuvier and Geoffroy de Saint Hilaire on his mind. I had to force myself to listen to what he was saying, so little interest seemed to me these details that seemed so far removed from the big questions that usually agitated him.”
(Soret 1795–1865)

1 After having taken place orally till April 1830 between the two protagonists, the debate continued, on the one hand through their publications, and on the other hand among the members of the academy, in public. Geoffroy’s theses were approved, although Cuvier was later honoured.