Reading and discussion, Sept. 8 & 10

Sept. 8. Read Georges Cuvier, “Living and Fossil Elephants” and “The Megatherium from South America,” 1796 (Blackboard); Larson, *Evolution*, chap. 1

Georges Cuvier eventually became the premier comparative anatomist in the world. These two articles on fossil elephants and a giant fossil relative of present-day tree sloths, written at the age of 27, established his reputation. Before Cuvier, extinction was suspected by some naturalists but not taken seriously by most. After Cuvier, extinction was treated as an established fact, although some individuals, such as Thomas Jefferson, resisted accepting it. There’s more to the story. As the ending of the article on fossil elephants indicates (p. 24), Cuvier also speculated on “the existence of a world previous to ours, destroyed by some kind of catastrophe.” This view became a major focus of attention in geology, especially in Britain, in the first half of the nineteenth century. Be sure to read the introductions to the two Cuvier pieces by editor and translator Martin Rudwick. This background is treated more broadly in the first chapter of Edward Larson’s *Evolution*.

Sept. 10. We will be viewing the Stephen Jay Gould video *Darwin’s Revolution in Thought* for much of this class period. On Monday I will hand out a short selection from William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802), which includes the argument from design referred to by Gould in the video. As indicated on the syllabus, you should also begin reading Vonnegut’s *Galápagos*.

Your only required reading for this date is the brief excerpt from William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802). This reading is to go along with the video. This is a videorecording of a talk by Gould, who was the most popular writer on Darwinian evolution theory in the U.S. before his death in 2002. His field was paleontology and his particular specialty the study of fossil snails, but he wrote widely on historical themes in the life sciences. Most of his popular writings were done for a monthly column in *Natural History* magazine, the publication of the American Museum of Natural History, where he held an appointment along with his regular position on the Harvard University faculty. Many people subscribed to the magazine or bought it on newsstands just to read Gould’s columns, which he maintained in *Natural History* for thirty years without a single break, even during a period when he was seriously ill. He periodically compiled the individual selections in a series of books, beginning with *Ever Since Darwin* (1977) and ending with *I Have Landed* (2002). Of his books that were not compilations of *Natural History* essays perhaps the most popular were *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981) and *Wonderful Life* (1989). He had a running feud, sometimes friendly, sometimes bitter, with British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins over interpretations of details of Darwin’s theory. In his last years he lived in Soho part of each year and held a part-time appointment at NYU, where he lectured occasionally in the Biology Department. The video raises some intriguing questions which we will discuss in this and future classes and which relate, indirectly, to the Vonnegut book, which you should be ready to discuss on Monday, Sept. 15.