

The Church of Darwin

by Phillip E. Johnson

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A Chinese paleontologist lectures around the world saying that recent fossil finds in his country are inconsistent with the Darwinian theory of evolution. His reason: The major animal groups appear abruptly in the rocks over a relatively short time, rather than evolving gradually from a common ancestor as Darwin's theory predicts. When this conclusion upsets American scientists, he wryly comments: "In China we can criticize Darwin but not the government. In America you can criticize the government but not Darwin."

That point was illustrated last week by the media firestorm that followed the Kansas Board of Education's vote to omit macro-evolution from the list of science topics which all students are expected to master. Frantic scientists and educators warned that Kansas students would no longer be able to succeed in college or graduate school, and that the future of science itself was in danger. The New York Times called for a vigorous counteroffensive, and the lawyers prepared their lawsuits. Obviously, the cognitive elites are worried about something a lot more important to themselves than the career prospects of Kansas high school graduates.

Two Definitions

The root of the problem is that "science" has two distinct definitions in our culture. On the one hand, science refers to a method of investigation involving things like careful measurements, repeatable experiments, and especially a skeptical, open-minded attitude that insists that all claims be carefully tested. Science also has become identified with a philosophy known as materialism or scientific naturalism. This philosophy insists that nature is all there is, or at least the only thing about which we can have any knowledge. It follows that nature had to do its own creating, and that the means of creation must not have included any role for God. Students are not supposed to approach this philosophy with open-minded skepticism, but to believe it on faith.

The reason the theory of evolution is so controversial is that it is the main scientific prop for scientific naturalism. Students first learn that "evolution is a fact," and then they gradually learn more and more about what that "fact" means. It means that all living things are the product of mindless material forces such as chemical laws, natural selection, and random variation. So God is totally out of the picture, and humans (like everything else) are the accidental product of a purposeless universe. Do you wonder why a lot of people suspect that these claims go far beyond the available evidence?

All the most prominent Darwinists proclaim naturalistic philosophy when they think it safe to do so. Carl Sagan had nothing but contempt for those who deny that humans and all other species

"arose by blind physical and chemical forces over eons from slime." Richard Dawkins exults that Darwin "made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist," and Richard Lewontin has written that scientists must stick to philosophical materialism regardless of the evidence, because "we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door." Stephen Jay Gould condescendingly offers to allow religious people to express their subjective opinions about morals, provided they don't interfere with the authority of scientists to determine the "facts"—one of the facts being that God is merely a comforting myth.

There are a lot of potential dissenters. Sagan deplored the fact that "only nine percent of Americans accept the central finding of biology that human beings (and all the other species) have slowly evolved from more ancient beings with no divine intervention along the way." To keep the other 91% quiet, organizations like the National Academy of Sciences periodically issue statements about public school teaching which contain vague reassurances that "religion and science are separate realms," or that evolutionary science is consistent with unspecified "religious beliefs."

What these statements mean is that the realms are separate because science discovers facts and religion indulges fantasy. The acceptable religious beliefs they have in mind are of the naturalistic kind that do not include a supernatural creator who might interfere with evolution or try to direct it. A great many of the people who do believe in such a creator have figured this out, and in consequence the reassurances merely insult their intelligence.

So one reason the science educators panic at the first sign of public rebellion is that they fear exposure of the implicit religious content in what they are teaching. An even more compelling reason for keeping the lid on public discussion is that the official neo-Darwinian theory is having serious trouble with the evidence. This is covered over with the vague claim that all scientists agree that "evolution has occurred." Since the Darwinists sometimes define evolution merely as "change," and lump minor variation with the whole creation story as "evolution," a few trivial examples like dog-breeding or fruit fly variation allow them to claim proof for the whole system. The really important claim of the theory—that the Darwinian mechanism does away with the need to presuppose a creator—is protected by a semantic defense-in-depth.

Here's just one example of how real science is replaced by flim-flam. The standard textbook example of natural selection involves a species of finches in the Galapagos, whose beaks have been measured over many years. In 1977 a drought killed most of the finches, and the survivors had beaks slightly larger than before. The probable explanation was that larger-beaked birds had an advantage in eating the last tough seeds that remained. A few years later there was a flood, and after that the beak size went back to normal. Nothing new had appeared, and there was no directional change of any kind. Nonetheless, that is the most impressive example of natural selection at work that the Darwinists have been able to find after nearly a century and a half of searching.

To make the story look better, the National Academy of Sciences removed some facts in its 1998 booklet on "Teaching About Evolution and the Nature of Science." This version omits the flood year return-to-normal and encourages teachers to speculate that a "new species of finch" might arise in 200 years if the initial trend towards increased beak size continued indefinitely. When

our leading scientists have to resort to the sort of distortion that would land a stock promoter in jail, you know they are in trouble.

If the Academy meant to teach scientific investigation, rather than to inculcate a belief system, it would encourage students to think about why, if natural selection has been continuously active in creating, the observed examples involve very limited back-and-forth variation that doesn't seem to be going anywhere. But skepticism of that kind might spread and threaten the whole system of naturalistic belief. Why is the fossil record overall so difficult to reconcile with the steady process of gradual transformation predicted by the neo-Darwinian theory? How would the theory fare if we did not assume at the start that nature had to do its own creating, so a naturalistic creation mechanism simply has to exist regardless of the evidence? These are the kinds of questions the Darwinists don't want to encourage students to ask.

Kansas Protest

This doesn't mean that students in Kansas or elsewhere shouldn't be taught about evolution. In context, the Kansas action was a protest against enshrining a particular worldview as a scientific fact and against making "evolution" an exception to the usual American tradition that the people have a right to disagree with the experts. Take evolution away from the worldview promoters and return it to the real scientific investigators, and a chronic social conflict will become an exciting intellectual adventure.

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