

Are "Scientific Creationists" Right About Darwin Being Wrong?

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Some competent paleontologists question the role of natural selection in evolution, but they do not question evolution itself.

Most of "scientific creationism" is simply an attack on the findings of various branches of science. Acknowledging that creationist tenets are impossible to prove, Henry Morris, Director of the Institute for Creation Research, reasons that, since evolution and creation are strict alternatives, to debunk one is to show the truth of the other. This ploy, of course, is fatuous, as there are many different explanations for the origin and diversity of life—including one for nearly all known religions and several outmoded ideas in science. In its insistence on a naturalistic explanation, evolution is *ipso facto* science, while the presence of a supernatural Creator in "scientific creationism" is religion pure and simple. And science and religion are *not* alternatives, but rather different aspects of human experience.

But the creationist ruse (that to impugn science is to glorify the "creation model") has taken an ironic twist. As a practising evolutionary biologist I have been squirming in my seat for several years now as I read that my colleagues and I no longer "believe" in evolution. All we really have done is to question some parts of evolutionary theory—*how* life evolves, not *has* life evolved. But creationists see it differently. They argue that Darwin said evolution is slow, steady progressive change directed by natural selection, and now, some paleontologists are saying that they see no evidence for such gradual modification of species in the fossil record. Their conclusion: some paleontologists have abandoned evolution!

Nonsense. Creationists aren't stupid, and I am certain that they must know that arguments in science about how life evolves have nothing to do with the question of whether life has, in fact, evolved. Yet this is what they want you to believe: that a

dispute about evolutionary processes constitutes a retreat from the very idea that evolution has occurred. The truth is that there is no competing, naturalistic explanation for the pattern of progressive similarity that interconnects all of life other than evolution—the simple proposition that all organisms are related, descended from a single common ancestor. All organisms possess some traits in common. There is a biochemical unity that underlies all life and includes such important bio-molecules as RNA. As life diversified, new traits appeared and were passed along to later descendants in separate lineages. Roses resemble violets more than bats because the rose and violet lineages share a more recent common ancestor with each other than either does with bats. Plants and animals diverged some two billion years ago, but they did share a common ancestor, as witness the essential similarity of their cellular anatomy—roses, violets, and bats are all eucaryotes.

But *how* have these new traits appeared and *how* have these lineages diverged? If there seems to be no naturalistic explanation other than evolution to account for the interconnectedness of all life, is the problem solved? No, indeed. It is the job of science to seek truth, but the rules are clear. Scientists discard all but the least objectionable of the "hows" and "whys." We can tell, eventually, when we are wrong, but there are no sure criteria to tell us when we are right.

And right now we are arguing vociferously about some long-cherished notions of how life has evolved. For 50 years we have agreed (and taught our students) that it all boils down to natural selection, or "differential reproductive success" favoring the hardiest, the best able to cope. Given sufficient time, such a patient winnowing process leads to perfection of adaptation, and, more important, enables a population to keep pace with changing times. Some biologists nowadays, exasperated with the difficulty of testing hypotheses involving natural selection in nature, would like to abandon the idea completely. Others, like myself, merely wonder if the evolutionary process might really be a bit more complex: species seem to change but little once they appear, and may remain virtually the same for millions of years. Such stasis challenges the assumption that change is inevitable given enough time. Perhaps the diversification of life involves more random factors, or also involves selection between entire species and not just among individuals, as pure natural selection would have it. Or perhaps the evolutionary process consists of something else we haven't come up with yet. Perhaps.

It is this "perhaps" that exhilarates evolutionists these days, and infuriates those who demand final answers and the 24 carat truth. Scientists themselves are frequently guilty of thinking that theirs is some sort of final truth, some cosmic insight—instead of a progress report of our as yet faulty collective insight into the cosmos. Creationists have made hay out of evolutionary biology's momentary flurry of excitement and confusion. But to admit you do not know all the answers, as scientists must, and to realize that the answers are there if we humans will only look for them (and not just take it on faith from our elders as creationists wish us to) is about the most important lesson about science a kid could learn in the classroom. ■

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