

Darwin Revisited

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Frank Parkinson

In the interest of truth, the neo-Darwinist thesis put forward by Malcolm Edmunds in "Natural Selection or Intelligent Design" (Jan 20) should be set against the post-Darwinist position. That neo-Darwinism is now referred to in mainstream biology as the "Central Dogma" suggests elements of faith and authoritarianism that should concern any genuine truth-seeker.

The Central Dogma demands belief not only in the evolutionary mechanisms of genetic mutation and natural selection - the vital role of which is beyond doubt - but in their ultimate ability to answer all questions about how evolution has come about. Based on this unquestioning belief, neo-Darwinism is now in danger of becoming a kind of postmodern religion where, alas, appeal to authority overrules open debate. It can, indeed, be said to have its own mythology which is perpetuated uncritically, as in other religions, and part of its mythology is the case of the peppered moth, cited in Malcolm's article. This is to be found in virtually every text book on biological evolution, despite the fact that the original research by Bernard Kettlewell on which it depends has been found to be deeply flawed, and the photographic evidence rigged. The Web encyclopaedia *Wikipedia* quotes Robert Matthews (a respected scientific editor and self-declared atheist) thus, "Evolutionary experts are quietly admitting that one of their most cherished examples of Darwin's theory, the rise and fall of the peppered moth, is based on a series of scientific blunders" and an experiment that was "designed to come up with the 'right' answer." Further detail is not appropriate here and is easily available on the Internet.

More importantly, for both science and religion, is awareness of the basic acts of faith on which the neo-Darwinist and post-Darwinist positions build, for no constructive dialogue can take place until these have been brought into the light and examined. The post-Darwinist belief is that intelligence cannot ultimately have evolved from non-intelligence and to call it an "emergence" is not to explain but merely to give a name to the problem. Belief that there is an intelligence behind biological evolution does not pre-judge any theory about the kind of processes at work. By contrast, neo-Darwinism insists that any evidence for design in nature is merely "apparent evidence", and thus prejudged as worthless. This is a cause for shame in genuine science, and cannot be justified by the fact that many evolutionary processes that may seem at first almost magical can be explained, on closer inspection, in mechanical and chemical terms. Heliotropism, the flower's "instinctive" turning towards the sun, may be taken as one such example. Biological science, like everything else, evolves, and in its present state is unable to answer two absolutely key questions: how life and consciousness arose from inorganic matter, and how DNA appeared from simple molecules as the coded pattern for life forms. In a word, the gene has been shown to be the

blueprint for living organisms, but where is the blueprint for the gene to be found? As regards the first question, the emergence of life, Darwin barely touched upon it: his genius and his gift to us lies in his ground-breaking work *The Origin of Species*. As regards the second, it should be emphasized that he wrote long before we knew of the existence of the gene, indeed before there was even a science of microbiology, so he could not have speculated on how and when the DNA spiral appeared in the flow of evolution.

Anyone who wishes to go deeper into the debate between neo-Darwinism and post-Darwinism will soon find themselves caught between scientific and religious fundamentalism, suspected by both sides and always at risk of being dismissed as either a religious redneck or spiritually tone deaf. This issue is so emotionally charged that an appeal for calm discussion and assessment of all the evidence is invariably drowned out in the noise of disputants whose minds seem to be incapable of meeting. The reason for this unhappy state of affairs is that the misunderstanding goes deeper than either science or religion; it concerns metascience, that is, the body of philosophical principles that underlie all the sciences and theology too. Unfortunately, few professionals in either camp are familiar with these.

Two vital principles must be upheld in the debate: firstly, if we don't know, we must say we don't know and, secondly, we must have the courage to let a beautiful theory be slain by an ugly fact, a phrase coined by the great evolutionist, T. H. Huxley. Therein lies the nobility of the scientist's quest for truth, to which religion, alas, rarely aspires. Darwin himself was a shining example of integrity in this regard, for despite all that he had invested in the theory that bears his name, he said, "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down."

Above all, we must have confidence that truth will prevail not through violent argumentation but through the persuasion of honesty, command of the facts and willingness to listen, for this issue is of the most profound importance for the future of both science and religion, and ultimately for individual spiritual development.

It is of vital importance for the Religious Society of Friends, since if there is no real transcendent power in contact with its creation, Quaker belief in "that of God within" changes subtly but critically into "the God which I have created within myself", and is thus at risk of morphing into a refined form of egoism. Also, the meeting for worship, which has been at the heart of Quakerism from the very beginning, will become something quite different, for if God is only what each of us creates in our hearts, and when emotions are favourable, there is no corporate worship in any meaningful sense involved in the silent meeting. Nor can there be seeking in the silence for a relationship with our creating source, in confidence that it will ultimately transform us. This was the revolutionary innovation of Quakerism, and if it goes, deliberately or by neglect, the Society will become a dry well.