

The Evolution Controversy: Why it isn't over

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I would like to comment on Graham Mark's recent guest editorial in which he takes issue with Prof. Phillip Johnson's critique of the theory of evolution. There seem to be a number of places where Graham's case is a bit thin. On the issue of the fundamental mechanism responsible for the appearance of new anatomical structures, Graham claims that "plentiful evidence for [the required] variation comes from a variety of observations." He proceeds to list examples of the phenomenon of insecticide resistance in many species of insects, the shift in the relative numbers of black and white peppered moths in response to industrial pollution, and the success of artificial breeding experiments.

While these examples demonstrate selection pressure can and does serve to shift gene frequencies in a population, that emphatically is not the point in question, as Johnson attempted to make clear. The real question, as Johnson emphasized, is what process or mechanism is it that generates truly new functions and structures not already within the genetic makeup of the species population? The controversy then is not about microevolution but rather about macroevolution. It is about how one gets feathers from scales and a bat from a mouse. Classical Darwinism, as well as neo-Darwinism, maintains macroevolution is nothing more than extrapolated microevolution. But this extrapolation is precisely where appeals to observation stop and hand waving begins. The extrapolation in reality is nothing more than a gigantic leap of faith.

This problem of the mechanism becomes clearer when we recognize that living organisms are realizations of coded language structures. All the detailed chemical and structural complexity associated with the metabolism, repair, specialized function, and reproduction of each living cell is a realization of the coded algorithms stored in its DNA. An inescapable issue, therefore, is how do such extremely large language structures arise? And what conceivable process could modify an existing algorithmic structure to yield another with a truly novel capability?

On this latter question Prof. Murray Eden, a specialist in information theory and formal languages at MIT, pointed out several years ago that random perturbations of such structures simply do not accomplish such magical feats. He said, "No currently existing formal language can tolerate random changes in the symbol sequence which expresses its sentences. Meaning is almost invariably destroyed. Any changes must be syntactically lawful ones. I would conjecture that what one might call 'genetic grammaticality' has a deterministic explanation and does not owe its stability to selection pressure acting on random variation."

The origin of such language structures is, of course, the central issue of the origin of life question. The simplest bacteria have genomes consisting of order 10^6 codons. (Each codon, or genetic word, consists of three letters from the four-letter genetic alphabet.) Do coded algorithms 10^6 words in length arise spontaneously by any known naturalistic process? Is there anything in the laws of physics that suggests how such structures might arise in a spontaneous fashion? The honest answer is simple. What we presently understand from thermodynamics and information theory argues persuasively they do not and cannot.

If one does not harbor a prior bias against such a possibility, a most reasonable and plausible conclusion is that what we have in these coded algorithms is incontrovertible evidence for Superintelligence. Johnson's plea that scientists pay serious attention to their metaphysical assumptions and think through how these assumptions may be affecting their reasoning process and the interpretations they give their observations would then seem to be entirely appropriate.

Graham's criticism of Johnson's claim that the fossil record does not support the theory of evolution also deserves comment. The glaring absence of transitional forms in the fossil record is what Stephen J. Gould of Harvard has called "the trade secret of paleontology." Darwin himself recognized and acknowledged this profound difficulty with his theory. He devotes chapter 10 in *The Origin of Species* to the problem. In the introduction to that chapter he writes, "But just in proportion as this process of extermination has acted on an enormous scale, so must the number of intermediate varieties, which have formerly existed, be truly enormous. Why then is not every geological formation and every stratum full of such intermediate links? Geology assuredly does not reveal any such finely-graduated organic chain; and this, perhaps, is the most obvious and serious objection which can be urged against the theory." He adds, "The explanation lies, as I believe, in the extreme imperfection of the geological record."

But after 135 years with thousands of professional paleontologists earnestly investigating the record, the gaps are as glaring as in Darwin's day. A modern day evolutionist, David Kitts, writing in the journal *Evolution*, observes, "Despite the bright promise that paleontology provides a means of 'seeing' evolution, it has provided some nasty difficulties for evolutionists, the most notorious of which is the presence of 'gaps' in the fossil record. Evolution requires intermediate forms between species, and paleontology does not provide them."

This very real difficulty motivated evolutionists like Stephen Gould, Niles Eldridge, and Steven Stanley some 15 years ago to put forward the idea of punctuated equilibrium in order to at least give the appearance of explaining the absence of intermediate types. The problem of conceiving of a mechanism sufficient for realizing such large scale change in the coded genetic information, of course, is exacerbated with such a proposal. The fact remains that the actual field evidence one expects to find, were evolution really true, is just not there. Graham's claims to the contrary, in my assessment, are simply not in accord with reality nor with the conclusions of professional paleontologists.

This lack of intermediates applies just as surely to the case of humankind and a presumed primate ancestor. The ongoing emphasis on australopithecine types, including the recent *A. ramadis*, in the face of the giant anatomical gap between australopithecine's and *H. sapiens* is a tacit admission of the reality of the gap.

In summary, there are indeed substantive scientific reasons why the evolution controversy is not over. Graham raises two--the fundamental mechanism and the fossil evidence. There are several others, but space limitations preclude their discussion here. Hopefully there will be future forums where free and open and friendly interchange on such issues will take place.

I heartily commend the Work Force Diversity Office for sponsoring Prof. Johnson. I believe his encouragement to scientists to examine their philosophical underpinnings is legitimate and healthy. I concur with him that the tendency on the part of some to equate science with naturalism is an improper tactic, at odds with the history of science, with serious negative sociological consequences. Of course, there are those who disagree and want to continue to press the notion that what is contrary to naturalism cannot be science.

But many of us at the Lab are pleased to identify with a significant company of the great scientists from the past, which includes, among many others, Kepler, Pascal, Newton, Faraday, Maxwell, Pasteur, Kelvin, and Rayleigh, who were avowedly not naturalists but rather were quick to acknowledge their honest conviction of a reality transcendent to what is material. May free and candid discussion of such issues grow and flourish in our midst.