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ARE THERE NONRELIGIOUS SKEPTICS OF DARWINIAN EVOLUTION AND PROPONENTS OF INTELLIGENT DESIGN?

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SYNOPSIS

Honest truth seekers and agenda-driven atheists rarely pose the same questions, but both ask whether any nonreligious scientists and scholars challenge neo-Darwinism and/or support intelligent design (ID).

A logical response explains that an argument holds merit apart from the religious (or nonreligious) beliefs of the person arguing. Darwinism may be flawed regardless of whether its critics are religious. Rejecting an argument because of the personal religious beliefs of the arguer commits the genetic fallacy.

Nonetheless, many find it rhetorically persuasive to learn about atheists and agnostics who challenge materialistic accounts of origins. These nonreligious scientists and scholars who doubt modern Darwinian theory include former U.S. National Academy of Sciences biologist Lynn Margulis, medical professor Raymond Tallis, Rutgers cognitive scientist Jerry Fodor, New York University philosopher and legal scholar Thomas Nagel, and Princeton-trained mathematician David Berlinski—all of whom have publicly challenged neo-Darwinism and/or sympathized with ID. Significantly, many of these scholars have faced harsh reactions from fellow nonbelievers. Margulis observes that those who attack Darwin become “*persona non grata*,” and Fodor has faced pressure to suppress his doubts “in public.” This demonstrates academic intolerance toward Darwin-skeptics, and leads one to wonder how many other atheists would challenge Darwinism if they had the academic freedom to do so.

At Discovery Institute, where I am employed, we receive many e-mails asking about evolution and intelligent design (ID), specifically whether there are nonreligious scientists and scholars who challenge modern neo-Darwinian theory and/or support ID.

As might be expected, a certain percentage of questioners merely want to taunt us with objections they think we can't answer. But this question is posed not just by angry Internet critics but also by thoughtful truth seekers.

Of course, there are good answers to the query. The primary response is strictly logical. An argument must stand or fall on its own merits, and scrutinizing the religious beliefs (or lack thereof) of a person making an argument commits the genetic fallacy. After all, if Darwinian theory is flawed, those weaknesses remain, whether they are expounded by the Pope or the Devil.

Nonetheless, there is something inherently persuasive about a person with no philosophical bias predisposing them toward a particular viewpoint, adopting that position. Many find it convincing to learn about atheists or agnostics who doubt naturalistic accounts of origins. Thus, the second part of my response is rhetorical, as it recounts nonreligious scientists and scholars who challenge neo-Darwinism and/or sympathize with ID—often in the face of great pressure to conform to the materialist party line.

RAYMOND TALLIS

Raymond Tallis is a professor of medicine at the University of Manchester, a fellow of the Academy of Medical Sciences, and a self-described “atheist humanist.”¹ His 2011 book, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis, and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* critiques the scientism that has invaded the study of consciousness, as well as Darwinian explanations for the origin of the human mind.

Tallis coins the term “neuromania” to describe an ongoing media crusade telling the public that each “new discovery” has *finally* demonstrated a purely material explanation for consciousness. “Part of the attraction of Neuromania,” he writes, “comes from the belief that it is brand new and that it has grown out of the latest discoveries in the laboratory.”² But Tallis calls the view that “there must be an organ in the body where the soul or mind or consciousness is to be found” an “enduring myth.”³

Darwinitis

Tallis believes that evolutionary psychologists also overextend their arguments. Though he maintains he has “no quarrel with Darwinism,”⁴ he critiques those who have “Darwinitis”—the tendency to explain everything in Darwinian terms. Tallis illustrates how Darwinitis leads evolutionary psychologists to propose plausible-sounding hypotheses that are completely false:

*Consider the recent claim that evolutionary psychology can explain why pink is associated with femininity and blue with masculinity. Women in prehistory were the principal gatherers of fruit and would have been sensitive to the colours of ripeness: deepening shades of pink. Men, on the other hand, would have looked for good hunting weather and sources of water, both of which are connected with blue. In fact, in Victorian Britain blue was regarded as the appropriate colour for girls (being associated with the Virgin Mary) and pink for boys (being a watered down version of the “fierce” colour red). Colour preferences are therefore scarcely rooted in the properties of brain shaped in the Pleistocene epoch. They are historically, not biologically, determined; but don’t expect an evolutionary psychologist to spot that.*⁵

As a self-described “good Darwinian,”⁶ Tallis understands natural selection to be a “blind watchmaker,” that cannot select for future goals. But he acknowledges what few Darwinians will admit—that blind selection cannot explain the goal-directed nature of human consciousness: “Darwinism, therefore, leaves something unaccounted for: the emergence of people like you and me who are indubitably *sighted watchmakers*....Isn’t there a problem in explaining how the blind forces of physics brought about (cognitively) sighted humans who are able to see, and identify, and comment on, the ‘blind’ forces of physics...?”⁷

Tallis recognizes “the failure to explain *any* form of consciousness, never mind human consciousness, in evolutionary terms.”⁸ But he is hardly the only atheist who questions Darwinian explanations.

LYNN MARGULIS

A member of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, and once the wife of Carl Sagan, biologist Lynn Margulis (1938–2011) is not the first person one might expect to critique neo-Darwinian theory vocally. But that’s exactly what she did. In an interview shortly before her death, Margulis explained, “Neo-Darwinists say that new species emerge when mutations occur and modify an organism. I was taught over and over again that the accumulation of random mutations led to evolutionary change—led to new species. I believed it until I looked for evidence.” Echoing the arguments of many ID proponents, Margulis maintains that “new mutations don’t create new species; they create offspring that are impaired.”⁹ In a 2003 book co-authored with Dorion Sagan (the son of Carl), she elaborates:

This Darwinian claim to explain all of evolution is a popular half-truth whose lack of explicative power is compensated for only by the religious ferocity of its rhetoric. Although random mutations influenced the course of evolution, their influence was mainly by loss, alteration, and refinement....Mutations, in summary, tend to induce sickness, death, or deficiencies. No evidence in the vast literature of heredity changes shows unambiguous evidence that random mutation itself, even with geographical isolation of populations, leads to speciation.¹⁰

Some Darwin defenders have cited Margulis’s eminence as evidence that critics have freedom to express their views. Margulis doesn’t agree, noting that “anyone who is overtly critical of the foundations of his science is *persona non grata*.”¹¹ Other atheists who challenge Darwin have made similar observations.

JERRY FODOR

Jerry Fodor is a philosopher and cognitive scientist at Rutgers University. In his 2010 book, *What Darwin Got Wrong*, coauthored with Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini, the two profess being “outright, card-carrying, signed-up, dyed-in-the-wool, no-holds-barred atheists,” but nonetheless contend “there is something wrong—quite possibly fatally wrong—with the theory of natural selection.”¹² Like Margulis, they face pushback from peers who feel they are betraying science: “We’ve been told by more than one of our

colleagues that, even if Darwin was substantially wrong to claim that natural selection is the mechanism of evolution, nonetheless we shouldn't say so. Not, anyhow, in public. To do that is, however inadvertently, to align oneself with the Forces of Darkness, whose goal is to bring Science into disrepute."¹³ They observe that in the ivory tower, "neo-Darwinism is taken as axiomatic," "literally goes unquestioned," and contrary views are "*ipso facto* rejected."¹⁴ Nonetheless, Fodor isn't afraid to challenge the consensus. Natural selection "cannot be the mechanism that generates the historical taxonomy of species,"¹⁵ he writes, for "the theory of natural selection is internally flawed...there's a crack in the foundations."¹⁶

Complexity or Coincidence?

Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini raise an inherent problem in Darwinian theory where neo-Darwinism is forced into "searching implausibly large spaces of candidate solutions."¹⁷ In other words, random mutation and natural selection alone are unable to find the extremely rare DNA sequences that yield solutions to complex biological problems. They give classic examples of this problem, observing: "With a sixth of a wing an animal does not fly a sixth of the time or a sixth of the distance. It does not fly at all. Therefore, the challenge for gradualist adaptationism is to explain how mutations capable of producing full wings can have accumulated silently over a long evolutionary time in the absence of any adaptive advantage."¹⁸

As a lesser-known illustration, they recount how a certain wasp injects a series of carefully orchestrated stings into a cockroach to make the bug "zombified." This allows the wasp to "manipulate the cockroach's antennae, or literally ride on top of it,"¹⁹ leading the brain-dead cockroach to become food for the wasp's young. Fodor and Piattelli-Palmarini call this a "complex, sequential, rigidly pre-programmed"²⁰ system, which won't work unless all components are present, thereby challenging Darwinism. They conclude: "Although we bet some naturalistic explanation will one day be found, we have no such explanation at present. And if we insist that natural selection is the only way to try, we will never have one."²¹ They are "committed to a naturalistic biology, so God is out,"²² but admit that "we don't know what the mechanism of evolution is" and "nobody knows exactly how phenotypes evolve."²³ Other atheists, however, are more sympathetic to design.

THOMAS NAGEL

Thomas Nagel is a philosopher and legal scholar at New York University, and a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. This well-known atheist is also a longtime critic of neo-Darwinian evolution and supporter of ID. In a 2008 article titled, "Public Education and Intelligent Design," Nagel argued that teaching ID in public schools is "constitutionally defensible."²⁴ His 2012 book *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* elaborates his critiques of Darwinism: "It is *prima facie* highly implausible that life as we know it is the result of a sequence of physical accidents together with the mechanism of natural selection. We are expected [by mainstream biologists] to abandon this naïve response

[critiquing standard materialist explanations of life's origins], not in favor of an alternative that is really a schema for explanation, supported by example. What is lacking, to my knowledge, is a credible argument that the story has a nonnegligible probability of being true."²⁵

Regarding the origin of life, he observes that "the genetic code—an arbitrary mapping of nucleotide sequences into amino acids, together with mechanisms that can read the code and carry out its instructions—seems particularly resistant to being revealed as probable given physical law alone."²⁶ As for the evolution of life, Nagel believes that "it is no longer legitimate simply to imagine a sequence of gradually evolving phenotypes, as if their appearance through mutations in the DNA were unproblematic—as Richard Dawkins does for the evolution of the eye."²⁷

Asking Questions

Nagel boldly maintains that the "consensus" avoids asking hard questions about origins. "Doubts about the reductionist account of life go against the dominant scientific consensus," he writes, "but that consensus faces problems of probability that I believe are not taken seriously enough."²⁸

Like Margulis, he recognizes that critics of materialist thinking face harsh reactions: "I have been stimulated by criticisms of the prevailing scientific world picture...by the defenders of intelligent design....The problems that these iconoclasts pose for the orthodox scientific consensus should be taken seriously. They do not deserve the scorn with which they are commonly met. It is manifestly unfair."²⁹ In his view, "the defenders of intelligent design deserve our gratitude."³⁰

STEVE FULLER

Nagel would probably find a kindred spirit in University of Warwick sociologist Steve Fuller. A "secular humanist,"³¹ Fuller not only sympathizes with ID, but testified as an expert witness in support of teaching ID in public schools at the 2005 *Kitzmiller v. Dover* trial.

As a sociologist, Fuller has a unique perspective on the tactics of ID critics. He believes ID isn't "anti-science," as it's often labeled, but rather is "anti-establishment,"³² since it challenges the power structure of the Darwinian paradigm. Fuller believes ID shouldn't be dismissed simply because it challenges the consensus since "the very idea of a scientific consensus" is "antithetical to the spirit of free inquiry."³³ He sees methodological naturalism as a McCarthyist strategy employed to retain academic power: "The bigotry lurking beneath methodological naturalism is ultimately fuelled by a paranoia regrettably familiar from the annals of US political history—except that now the ideological tables have been turned, with the left persecuting the right in the one arena where the left's dominance remains more or less assured...academia."³⁴

In contrast, Fuller believes ID is healthy for science. In his view, science is "the natural outgrowth of monotheism"³⁵ and "'intelligent design theory'...was responsible for the modern scientific world-view."³⁶ He recognizes that today ID "conducts its business in the currency of science"³⁷ and "wishes to pursue research that might

eventuate in design-based explanations of the natural world.”³⁸ Indeed, Fuller believes that “design-based thinking fosters the context of scientific discovery”³⁹—and helped inspire Darwin’s own ideas.

A Fading Fad?

In the long-term, Fuller predicts Darwin’s ideas won’t hold sway. He imagines that “a reader of neo-Darwinism in the year 2100 will smile knowingly at references to ‘natural selection’ just as today’s reader of neoclassical economics smiles knowingly at references to the ‘invisible hand.’”⁴⁰ He observes that “no one has ever won a Nobel Prize for having specifically contributed to the neo-Darwinian synthesis,” and “neo-Darwinism could be abandoned tomorrow, and most research programs in genetics—and the other biological disciplines—could continue apace.”⁴¹

According to Fuller, Darwinism remains popular largely because it “constrains a vast range of biological disciplines, more in the spirit of a political party platform than a mathematical physical theory.”⁴² He sees the “guild-like arrogance of scientists”⁴³ steadily turning academics away from Darwinian naturalism.

DAVID BERLINSKI

Another nonreligious scholar who is both a skeptic of Darwinian evolution and an ID sympathizer is David Berlinski. Trained in philosophy at Princeton, and later a postdoctoral fellow in molecular biology and mathematics at Columbia University, he is also a senior fellow at Discovery Institute. In 2009, Berlinski published a volume titled, *The Deniable Darwin and Other Essays*, offering critiques of biological and chemical evolution. Using his typical wry wit, Berlinski explains his secular credentials: “The Discovery Institute does not propose to inaugurate a form of theocratic kingship in the United States, and far from being a Christian right-wing fundamentalist, I am myself a secular Jew, one who has faithfully maintained since the age of 13 a remarkable indifference to the religious life.”⁴⁴

Intelligent Inquiries

In his famous essay, which gave the volume its name, Berlinski elegantly and comprehensively critiques Darwinian theory. First, he tackles the fossil record:

*The facts in favor of evolution are often held to be incontrovertible: prominent biologists shake their heads at the obduracy of those who would dispute them. Those facts, however, have been rather less forthcoming than evolutionary biologists might have hoped. If life progressed by an accumulation of small changes, as they say it has, the fossil record should reflect its flow, the dead stacked up in barely separated strata. But for well over 150 years, the dead have been remarkably diffident about confirming Darwin’s theory....there are gaps in the graveyard, places where there should be intermediate forms but where there is nothing whatsoever instead.*⁴⁵

Berlinski observes that the complexity of the cell is “insignificant in comparison with the mammalian nervous system; and that far impossibly ahead, there is the human

mind, an instrument like no other in the biological world, conscious, flexible, penetrating, inscrutable, and profound.”⁴⁶ In his view, these complex features imply design: “We never attribute the existence of a complex artifact to chance. And for obvious reasons: complex objects are useful islands, isolated amid an archipelago of useless possibilities....An artifact is the overflow in matter of the mental motions of intention, deliberate design, planning, and coordination. The inferential spool runs backwards, and it runs irresistibly from a complex object to the contrived, the artificial, circumstances that brought it into being.”⁴⁷

According to Berlinski, “Darwin’s theory of evolution rejects this counsel of experience and intuition,” and instead relies on “sheer dumb luck.”⁴⁸ After quoting scientists who doubt Darwinism, he notes that evolutionary theory is “in the doubly damned position of having compromised the concepts needed to make sense of life—complexity, adaptation, design—while simultaneously conceding that the theory does little to explain them.”⁴⁹

TIP OF THE ICEBERG

Space limitations prevent a full discussion of all nonreligious scientists and scholars who challenge materialist accounts of origins, but a few others deserve coverage due to their stature and influence.

Antony Flew (1923–2010) was a celebrated atheist who defended atheism against C. S. Lewis. In a 2004 interview with Gary Habermas, Flew announced he had become persuaded by intelligent design. “It now seems to me that the findings of more than fifty years of DNA research have provided materials for a new and enormously powerful argument to design,”⁵⁰ he explained. His subsequent book, *There Is No a God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*, elaborates on his deconversion from atheism. In his own words: “The only satisfactory explanation for the origin of such ‘end-directed, self-replicating’ life as we see on earth is an infinitely intelligent Mind.”⁵¹

Another famous atheist who supported ID was Fred Hoyle (1915–2001), a theoretical physicist at Cambridge University. His 1983 book *The Intelligent Universe* maintained, “Darwinian theory is wrong because random variations tend to worsen performance, as indeed common sense suggests they must do.”⁵² Elsewhere Hoyle famously stated, “If one proceeds directly and straightforwardly in this matter, without being deflected by a fear of incurring the wrath of scientific opinion, one arrives at the conclusion that biomaterials with their amazing measure of order must be the outcome of intelligent design.”⁵³

One noteworthy up-and-coming atheist who sympathizes with ID is Bradley Monton, a philosophy professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder. In 2009, Monton published a book titled *Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design*, where he argues ID “needs to be taken more seriously than a lot of its opponents are willing to.”⁵⁴ While he doesn’t offer a “full-fledged endorsement of intelligent design,” he says ID arguments “have some merit—they make me less certain

of my atheism than I would have been had I never heard of (or thought of) the arguments.”⁵⁵

With so many prominent nonreligious scientists and scholars critiquing the fundamental tenets of materialism, theists can rest assured that religion isn't the only force driving doubts about Darwinism. Significantly, many of these scholars and scientists share an acute awareness of the hostility faced by critics of the evolutionary consensus. Their stories suggest that neo-Darwinism retains its academic prestige not so much by the power of reason, but by the power of intimidation. One cannot help but wonder how many other Jerry Fodors or Thomas Nagels exist, waiting silently until they have academic freedom to publicly join the ranks of Darwin-skeptics.

Casey Luskin is an attorney with graduate degrees in science and law. He is research coordinator for the Discovery Institute, and cofounded the Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness (IDEA) Center.

NOTES

- 1 Raymond Tallis, *Aping Mankind: Neuromania, Darwinitis, and the Misrepresentation of Humanity* (Durham, UK: Acumen Publishing, 2011), 211.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 *Ibid.*, 209.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 48.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 229.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 212.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 181.
- 9 Lynn Margulis, quoted in Darryl Madden, “UMass Scientist to Lead Debate on Evolutionary Theory,” *Brattleboro Reformer*, February 3, 2006.
- 10 Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Acquiring Genomes: A Theory of the Origins of the Species* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 29. Margulis and Sagan go on to propose an alternative materialistic account of evolution based upon symbiosis.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 Jerry Fodor and Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini, *What Darwin Got Wrong* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2010), xiii.
- 13 *Ibid.*, xx.
- 14 *Ibid.*, xiv.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 56.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 81.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 90.
- 20 *Ibid.*
- 21 *Ibid.*, 91.
- 22 *Ibid.*, 141–42.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 153.
- 24 Thomas Nagel, “Public Education and Intelligent Design,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 36 (2008): 187–205.

- 25 Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.
- 26 Ibid., 10.
- 27 Ibid., 9.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., 10.
- 30 Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos*, 12.
- 31 Steve Fuller, *Dissent over Descent: Intelligent Design's Challenge to Darwinism* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 8.
- 32 Ibid., 133.
- 33 Ibid., 4.
- 34 Ibid., 39.
- 35 Ibid., 53.
- 36 Steve Fuller, *Science vs. Religion: Intelligent Design and the Problem of Evolution* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 2007), 2.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid., 99.
- 39 Ibid., 101.
- 40 Ibid., 128.
- 41 Ibid., 132.
- 42 Ibid., 9.
- 43 Ibid., 105.
- 44 David Berlinski, *The Deniable Darwin and Other Essays* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2009), 16.
- 45 Ibid., 42.
- 46 Ibid., 50.
- 47 Ibid.
- 48 Ibid., 48–49.
- 49 Ibid., 62.
- 50 “Atheist Becomes Theist: Exclusive Interview with Former Atheist Antony Flew,”
<http://www.biola.edu/antonyflew/page2.cfm>.
- 51 Antony Flew and Roy Abraham Varghese, *There Is No a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 132.
- 52 Ibid., 48.
- 53 Fred Hoyle, *Evolution from Space* (Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow Publishers, 1982), 28.
- 54 Bradley Monton, *Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design* (Peterborough, Ontario (Canada): Broadview Press, 2009), 7.
- 55 Ibid., 20.