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## PROFESSOR DAVID BARASH AND “THE TALK””: WHEN GOLIATH STARTS BRAGGING, GO FIND YOUR SLING

by Paul Nelson

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A spectator to the clash between the Philistine and Israelite armies, recorded in 1 Samuel 17, might be excused for getting his wager on the outcome utterly wrong. After all, a towering and brutal professional soldier, outfitted with the best in armaments the period has to offer, doesn't ordinarily lose in one-on-one battle to a teenaged shepherd armed only with a staff and sling.

But you know the rest of the story. Goliath went down hard, and David became king of Israel, lauded in song even today by Israeli children, or by American preschoolers like me in the early 1960s, singing “David, melech Yisrael, chai chai vekayam” (“David, King of Israel, lives, lives, and endures”) at the Jewish nursery school I attended in north Minneapolis. The obvious outcome at first blush isn't always the safe bet.

Likewise, someone observing Professor David Barash's animal behavior and evolution class at the University of Washington might decide that the theistic students in the room don't stand a chance. With the minor allowance that the apparent Goliath, in this case, happens to be named David, all the evidence seems to favor the professor. Barash holds the podium at the front of the class, occupies the tenured professorship, and possesses the authority of the scientific community (or so it appears). What's more, like the biblical Goliath, he speaks with brash—or maybe “barash”—confidence when he delivers what he calls “The Talk.”<sup>1</sup>

As I'll explain, “The Talk” delivers a lot of bad news for theists. First, however, let's identify Goliath not with David Barash himself, but with the neo-Darwinian theory

of evolution. Barash delivers “The Talk” on behalf of that theory. Much as we can imagine Goliath’s armor bearer boasting on behalf of his champion, the Talk is intended to shake up any theist who may be listening, in favor of undirected evolution, along three fronts:

1. No evidence exists for intelligent design in biology, because random variation and natural selection—an entirely mechanical, undirected process—can do the designing. Thus there are no evidential grounds for believing in a creator of life or biological complexity.
2. Human beings are nothing special, really. We are animals like all other animals, and must come to grips with that fact, like it or not.
3. The problem of natural evil is insoluble, and breaks the back of traditional theism. “The more we know of evolution,” says Barash, “the more unavoidable is the conclusion that living things, including human beings, are produced by a natural, totally amoral process, with no indication of a benevolent, controlling creator.”<sup>2</sup>

Does any theist feel much like standing up to that, with only a sling and a handful of stones? Let’s be honest: when presented with masses of scientific data, and no alternatives, “The Talk” sounds crushing. The sensible course of action would seem to be quietly acquiescing to the authority of science, and hoping to be allowed some minutes to oneself on Sunday morning for a hymn and a Scripture verse or two. We’ll just move off here to this little village in Judea, and pay our tribute to the Philistines when they demand it.

But let me suggest another strategy. It starts with finding one’s courage in the face of academic intimidation.

### **KNOWING WHAT STONES TO CHOOSE**

I’m not so old that I don’t vividly remember my own Goliaths. From 1980 to 1984, I studied evolutionary biology and the philosophy of science at the University of Pittsburgh, under self-professed atheist professors like Barash. Their confidence and knowledge were intimidating.

But I also had mentors of a very different sort, such as National Academy of Sciences theoretical physicist Robert Griffiths, a professor at Carnegie-Mellon University (CMU). When I became discouraged, which I must admit was fairly often, I would walk across Schenley Bridge from the Pitt campus to CMU, into Bob’s office.

With unfailing cheerfulness, Bob would encourage me not to be fearful. The atheistic arguments you're facing, he would say (and Bob always took pains to distinguish atheism from natural science itself), are not invincible. Those arguments have weaknesses: erroneous premises, for example, unsupported assumptions, or leaps in logic. Find the weaknesses and you can overcome what seems intimidating right now.

So, in the spirit of Bob Griffiths's advice to me, I offer the following suggestions to any students dealing with their own academic Goliaths.

First, just in case anyone misses the point, David slaying Goliath in this instance is a *metaphor*. The historical account of fighting recorded in 1 Samuel 17 is a deservedly famous account of bravery, but that was a literal battlefield. Your task is to persuade, not harm. Your sling and stones should be the evidence—or its conspicuous absence.

Which brings me to Barash's first and really only significant claim, namely, that "random variation plus natural selection, contains all that is needed to generate extraordinary levels of non-randomness."<sup>3</sup> No intelligent designer need apply: an "entirely natural and undirected process" will do the work of building organisms, including human beings.

If this claim is true, we should be able to find in the scientific literature the detailed explanations for the origin of complex structures and behaviors, rendered strictly in terms of random variation plus natural selection.

Yet those explanations aren't there. I discovered this for myself while still an undergraduate. If I close my eyes, I can see the very spot in the Pitt biology library, in the aisle among the stacks of journals, where I sat month after month thumbing through publications such as *Systematic Zoology* or *Biological Journal of the Linnean Society*, realizing that the examples of natural selection on offer were either strictly hypothetical or at the wrong scale (e.g., insecticide resistance—when it was the origin of the insect itself that neo-Darwinian evolution claimed to be able to explain). Evidentially well-supported, step-by-step explanations, employing random variation and natural selection to explain the major features of life, simply didn't exist. That was thirty years ago, and the situation is the same today.

If anyone doubts this, he should try looking for himself. Choose any complex structure or behavior, and look in the biological literature for the step-by-step causal account where the origin of that structure (i.e., its coming to be where it did not exist before) is explained via random variation and natural selection.

### **Some of the Philistines Know That Goliath May Be Rather Overconfident**

You will be looking a long time. The explanations just aren't there, and this fact is well known to evolutionary biologists who have become disenchanted with received neo-Darwinian theory. When proponents of the received theory, such as Richard Dawkins, face the task of making random variation and natural selection work, they resort to fictional entities such as Dawkins's "biomorphs" — see Chapter 3 of *The Blind Watchmaker*<sup>4</sup>—or flawed analogies such as the "methinks it is like a weasel" search algorithm scenario. No one would have to employ these toy stories, of course, if evidence were available showing the efficacy of random variation and selection to construct novel complexity.

"Research on selection and adaptation," notes Mary Jane West-Eberhard, a disenchanted evolutionary theorist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, "may tell us why a trait persisted and spread, but it will not tell us where a trait came from....This transformational aspect of evolutionary change has been oddly neglected in modern evolutionary biology."<sup>5</sup> Typically, when a disappointed biologist such as West-Eberhard departs in search of a better theory of evolution, her point of leaving is dismay at the explanatory poverty of what neo-Darwinism has delivered over the past several decades. The theory promised big, delivered tiny.

According to University of Chicago evolutionary geneticist and outspoken atheist Jerry Coyne, however, showing the details is not the job of evolutionary biologists: "In such cases the onus is not on evolutionary biologists to sketch out a precise step-by-step scenario documenting exactly how a complex character evolved. That would require knowing everything about what happened when we were not around—an impossibility for most traits and for nearly all biochemical pathways."<sup>6</sup>

But if that is so, then how do we know that random variation and natural selection were actually sufficient? "Feasibility," answers Coyne, and by that generous standard, "we know of no adaptations whose origin could *not* have involved natural selection."<sup>7</sup> After all, writes Coyne a few pages earlier, "we know of no other natural process that can build a complex adaptation."<sup>8</sup>

Evolutionary feasibility can be purchased on the cheap, however. For that matter, you can manufacture plenty of feasibility yourself, given a trace of storytelling ability. Once one gets the hang of it, inventing the variations one needs and some sort of selective pressure to increase the frequency of (and fix) those variations in unobserved populations, becomes a speculative exercise with no connection to biological reality. And saying that natural selection is the only game in town, particularly when one has excluded intelligent design *a priori*, does not provide anything close to genuine *evidential support* for natural selection as the best explanation of biological complexity. The devil is in the details.

Now, intelligent design—the cause that I, and a growing number of scientists and philosophers, think best explains the origin and diversity of life—is still too much for most academic biologists to tolerate. But it helps tremendously to know that Barash-type braggadocio, on behalf of neo-Darwinian theory, is not shared by many of Barash’s colleagues.

Again, I encourage the reader to investigate this for himself. Recently, the leading British science journal *Nature* published an open-access exchange around the topic, “Does evolutionary theory need a rethink?”<sup>9</sup> On the side of “Yes, Urgently” were arrayed several evolutionary biologists who argued that existing neo-Darwinian theory failed to explain the biological evidence already within its purview, and that new discoveries were fast outpacing the ability of the theory to keep up.

Interestingly, these same maverick biologists acknowledged that the presence of stubborn intelligent design Davids, armed with slings, might be motivating neo-Darwinian Goliaths to overstate the case for textbook theory: “Yet the mere mention of [alternatives to neo-Darwinism] often evokes an emotional, even hostile, reaction among evolutionary biologists. Too often, vital discussions descend into acrimony, with accusations of muddle or misrepresentation. Perhaps haunted by the specter of intelligent design, evolutionary biologists wish to show a united front to those hostile to science.”<sup>10</sup>

Once the discussion starts, however—once one questions the adequacy of neo-Darwinian theory—it will be hard, if not impossible, to stop. Goliath is accustomed to getting his way. Challenge him with the right evidence, and before you know it, you may find him lying at your feet, with the rest of the Philistine army in flight.

Or go looking here: the website of the newly formed “Third Way” group of evolutionary biologists: [www.thethirdwayofevolution.com](http://www.thethirdwayofevolution.com). To stick with our David and Goliath metaphor, this would be akin to the Israelites suddenly discovering that a very large number of Philistine soldiers had wandered off during the night to form their own *third* army, standing on a hillside opposite their original compatriots. As the Third Way webpage explains about its biological membership, “Below, you will find a list of researchers and authors who have one way or another expressed their concerns on natural selection’s scope and believes that other mechanisms would better explain evolution processes.”

Didn’t these biologists listen to Barash? Natural selection does all the explaining one could want, he said in *The Talk*. But maybe not, eh?

## **Dare to Be a David**

Random variation and natural selection aren't the only game in town, of course, as the growth of the intelligent design community over the past twenty years, not to mention the proliferation of alternative evolutionary theories, has demonstrated. If Barash's claims about the sufficiency of neo-Darwinian theory fail, his assertions about "indistinguishable" humanity and our bleakly amoral origins will tumble as well. Once the big guy—the Goliath theory—goes down, the lesser claims follow. Barash considers himself free to attack the worldviews of his students. Fair enough: do they have the freedom to raise questions about his favorite theory? Science is as science does: a strong theory, well supported by evidence, needs to fear no questions. A weak theory, supported by bluster, on the other hand—that theory should worry about a stone coming hard from a fast-whirling sling.

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#### NOTES

- 1 David Barash, "God, Darwin and My College Biology Class," *New York Times*, September 27, 2014.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986).
- 5 Mary Jane West-Eberhard, *Developmental Plasticity and Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 197.
- 6 Jerry Coyne, *Why Evolution Is True* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 138.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid., 136.
- 9 <http://www.nature.com/news/does-evolutionary-theory-need-a-rethink-1.16080>.
- 10 Ibid.