Creationism: An Immodest Proposal

By Barry Belmont

In recent years, debates have raged whether “creationism” should be taught in public schools as a substitute and/or a complementary theory to evolution. Creationists believe if one theory about any topic is discussed, in this case evolution, then opposing theories should receive equal time and the students can decide which theory to believe. This proposal to include creationism in the curriculum of public school biology classes, has gone so far as to be referred to as a “modest proposal.” Much like Jonathan Swift’s “modest proposal” to eat the poor babies of Ireland, the idea sounds rational but is hard to take seriously.

Creationism, also known as creation science, attempts to prove the world was created by God and disprove evolution, offering interpretations of “scientific data” to “prove” the creation account in Genesis. One would think such an idea would be enough to deflate the entire argument. Creationism teaches that God created everything, God is religious, church and state are separate in public schools, hence, creationism cannot be taught in public schools. But creationists gave the central figure of their theory a new, less dogmatic name: intelligent designer. Intelligent design is a theory explaining an intelligent designer’s role in the creation of the universe/mankind, arguing that the very complexity and organization of the world makes a designer’s intervention the only reasonable explanation.

Creationists claim their beliefs are founded on entirely scientific grounds, saying the evidence to show an intelligent designer exists is “overwhelming.” Many cite William Paley, who, in his book Natural Theology, put forth the infamous “watchmaker” complex. If one found a watch on the ground, it could be deduced that the watch had a watchmaker because it is too complex to be found in nature. The watchmaker obviously had a purpose in making the watch. So, anything complex is made by a maker with a purpose, or so the argument goes. This is usually backed up by Michael Behe’s notion of “irreducible complexity,” which states there are certain systems found in nature that are “composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning.” It is also assumed that these “irreducibly complex” systems cannot be created by gradual processes, and thus, the intervention of a “designer” is needed. However, this claim has been refuted many times by showing that something complex can evolve from something simple. In fact, no biological systems are “irreducibly complex.”

Creationists also use the rationale “Just look around; could this all come about by a random chance of evolution?” Now, while one aspect of evolution is random - gene variation - the idea of natural selection is the exact opposite of random. If a gene variant improves the survival of an organism (for example, by allowing an organism to make better use of an available nutrient or to escape predators more effectively - such as through stronger legs or disguising coloration), the organism carrying that gene are more likely to survive and reproduce than those without it. Over time, on the scale of millions to hundreds of millions of years, their descendants will tend to increase, changing the average characteristics of the population. This is where the idea of “survival of the fittest” fits in.

Although the genetic variation on which natural selection works is based on random elements, natural selection itself produces “adaptive” change—the very opposite of chance. Do not mistake what the word “adaptive” means in this sense, though. If any animal “needs” something to survive in an environment, it will not get it through evolution. In this respect, mutations are random—whether a particular mutation happens or not is unrelated to how useful that mutation would be. The variation in the genetic structure of an organism can be beneficial, neutral, or harmful for the organism; mutations do not try to supply what the organism “needs.”

Creationists always ask for “just one piece of evidence to prove evolution.” Yet, there are literally hundreds of millions of fossils which clearly show lines of transition. Not one of them satisfies creationists, however, because none of the fossils explicitly say evolution on
Evidence aside, evolution is a "theory." If someone does not know enough about scientific terminology, someone might refer to it as just a theory. Creationists say "no one has ever seen evolution, so it can only be just a theory." However, in the scientific context, the word "theory" does not mean "guess." That the earth revolves around the sun; that's a theory. The idea of Relativity proposed by Einstein, the very thing that makes GPS, atomic bombs, and cell phones possible; that's a theory. That atoms exist; that's a theory. Electricity, the very thing that produces the light above your head, the sound for your CD player, and is inside virtually every product you own, is based on the existence of a subatomic particle that has never been seen; that's just a theory. None of these theories can ever become "fact." Theories and facts are not the same thing. A fact says how something happens. A theory, in the scientific context, explains why something happens. Fact: An apple fell from a tree to the ground. Theory: The reason the apple fell from the tree to the ground is explained through gravity. Continental Drift, Atomic Theory, the Theory of Relativity, the Theory of Gravity, and the Theory of Evolution can never become facts simply because facts and theories are two different things.

The real question is: should competing theories be taught in schools? The answer should depend upon what one means by "competing theories." If someone wanted both punctuated equilibrium taught simultaneously with natural selection when learning about evolution, then certainly a second year biology class or a zoology class would be appropriate. If someone were talking about teaching the "creation theories" of the Sumerians, Babylonians, Koreans, Greeks, and Gilbert Indians who believe the world was created from the parts of a slain monster; the Cook Islanders, Tahitians, and Zuni Islanders who believe the world was created by the interaction of primordial parents; or the Japanese, Persians, Chinese, Samoans, and Hindus who believe the world was generated from an egg, all in a biology class, then the answer would most certainly be "no."

Creationism exists not because there is empirical evidence to show that a supernatural intervention was necessary; in fact, such evidence is impossible to come by through scientific means. Once a supernatural aspect is factored into science, all science (including "creation-science") becomes meaningless.

The reason creationism exists is because certain Christians believe the theory of evolution contradicts their interpretation of the Bible. To put the evolution vs. creationism debate into perspective would be like teaching astrology in an astronomy class or alchemy in a chemistry class. The idea that physics governs the workings of the universe would have to be taught alongside the belief that magic does too; all aspiring psychologists would be forced to learn palm reading alongside their other basic courses; neuron surgeons would have to be well-versed in phrenology before graduating; cartographers would have to reconstruct two types of globes—one flat, the other round. This may sound ridiculous to most people because they understand the grounding of each sciences. Chemistry, physics, neurology, psychology, and cartography have all yielded beneficial results in the everyday lives of a majority of the population. Sadly, not many people understand how much evolution explains. For example, why do all mammals have five digits on their appendages? Evolution. Why does medical testing on animals work? Evolution. What explains such peculiarities in human beings as the appendix and the tailbone? Evolution. Thousands of examples exist which reassert evolution, yet many Christians see this as a direct contradiction to their deeply-held religious beliefs.

Not all Christians question Evolution, however. In his 1996 Address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, Pope John Paul II made the bold statement about evolution and religion: "Truth cannot contradict truth." He went even farther, saying, "The convergence in the results of these independent studies—which was neither planned nor sought—constitutes in itself a significant argument in favor of the theory [of evolution]." So if a major religious figure of the Christian religion said the Theory of Evolution and the religion's theological teachings are not at odds, why do people still not accept evolution?

The reason is simple: people simply do not want to believe. The idea that people evolved gradually over billions of years from simple, single-celled organisms to the very complex species we are today can be quite discomforting, especially when it contradicts a long held viewpoint. The knowledge of evolution may put hope or fear into the hearts of the people who accept it, but as Charles Darwin once said, "We are not here concerned with hopes or fears, only with the truth as far as our reason permits us to discover it."

Whether people think creationism being taught in a public school science class is great, "modest," or just plain ridiculous, ultimately doesn't matter: creationism is just not science and thus cannot and should not be taught.