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Why Darwinism Survives

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“What is it about even the slightest dissent from Darwin’s theory of natural selection that drives liberal elites (and even some conservative elites) bonkers?” Adam Wolfson asks that question in “Survival of the Evolution Debate: Why Darwin Is Still a Lightning Rod,” an essay published in the January 16, 2006 edition of *The Weekly Standard*.

Wolfson now serves as consulting editor of *Commentary* magazine and a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington. He formally served as editor of *The Public Interest*, which was for many years one of America’s premier intellectual journals.

In this essay, Wolfson wonders aloud why Darwin, together with his theory of evolution, still serves as such a lightning rod for controversy in American culture. In one sense, Wolfson seizes the opportunity to suggest that controversies over Darwinism are often, if not usually, easily traced to the fact that intellectual elites will accept no criticism of Darwinism whatsoever.

Looking back to the 1920s and the infamous (and usually misunderstood) Scopes trial, Wolfson acknowledges that the elites were offended “that anyone could believe the story of Genesis in a literal way.” Five decades later, the scientific establishment and the elites were driven to apoplexy by the emergence of “creation science,” often reaching the front pages of the nation’s leading newspapers. The intellectual elites cannot abide such naysayers in their presence, so they attempt, as Wolfson helpfully explains, to marginalize, ridicule, dismiss, and send into exile anyone who refuses to swallow Darwinism hook, line, and sinker.

As Wolfson cleverly adapts H. L. Mencken, “Liberals are haunted by the specter that someone, somewhere harbors doubts about Darwin’s theory.” Criticism of evolutionary theory is most commonly found among those who reject the overarching evolutionary worldview. Most often—and most naturally—this group would include conservative, Bible-believing Christians who understand the unavoidable collision between evolutionary theory and biblical authority. Beyond this, the huge worldview implications of the debate transform every point of the controversy into a debate of major significance.

In reality, the issue of evolution not only divides, generally speaking, liberals from conservatives in our current age of ideological conflict. Beyond this, the question of Darwinism divides even some conservatives, revealing a split between conservative Christians and those whose conservatism is more directly linked to social, economic, or political concerns. *The Weekly Standard* has emerged as one of the flagship institutions of modern conservatism. Accordingly, Wolfson’s essay is written in a rather detached mode, as Wolfson’s main point appears to be that the elites are overreacting to the challenge of Intelligent Design, and thereby revealing their own intellectual insecurity and the inherent weaknesses in the theory of evolution.

Indeed, Wolfson asserts that, “in truth, most people nowadays do believe evolution’s basics—which is to say that species evolved—and most people believe that natural selection explains part of the change of adaptation.” The debate, he asserts, “is over whether natural selection explains *everything*.”

The “all or nothing” character of Darwin’s theory is often glossed over (if not explicitly denied) by many proponents of evolution. Yet, as Wolfson acknowledges, Charles Darwin understood this dimension of his thought all too well. “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," Darwin wrote in *On the Origin of Species*.

In effect, Darwin invited a challenge to his own understanding of evolutionary theory. In recent years, that challenge has been taken up by the proponents of Intelligent Design, whose central argument is that the complexity of the cosmos cannot possibly be explained by the blind and purely accidental process Darwin described. The concept of "irreducible complexity" counters Darwin's faith in natural selection with an assertion that such complexity would be mathematically impossible without the presence of intelligence and design guiding the process.

As Wolfson explains, the proponents of Intelligent Design rely on recent developments in physics and biochemistry and "argue that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection cannot explain the existence of some complex biological systems." Just in case any reader missed his point, Wolfson simplifies the argument with this simple summary: "That is to say, the emergence of these systems is neither mathematically nor biochemically plausible without some intelligent designer in the background."

Still, Wolfson doesn't appear to buy the theory. He suggests that the proponents of Intelligent Design "are putting old wine into a new bottle." Wolfson cites Thomas Aquinas and William Paley as advocates of a theory-from-design deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. "The basic point is that one can make a legitimate, rational inference from the orderliness and regularity of the cosmos to some sort of intelligent first mover. And it's important to point out that this inference was thought, up until recent times, to stand on its own merits, requiring no assistance from Divine Revelation."

In essence, Wolfson sees the debate over Intelligent Design as an example of philosophical, rather than scientific, conflict. He also recognizes that the most well-known advocates of Intelligent Design argue that the theory should be taught as part of the science curriculum in the public schools. Wolfson clearly believes that the Intelligent Design theorists are on to something, and he acknowledges his own concerns about the viability of Darwinism as a worldview, but he accepts the argument of the dominant scientific community that Intelligent Design is simply not science.

He cites Princeton professor Robert P. George as another conservative intellectual who believes that Intelligent Design is more properly considered as philosophy rather than science. Like Wolfson, George believes that the theory of Intelligent Design has been useful in countering the hyperbolic arguments offered by evolutionary radicals such as Richard Dawkins and the late Stephen Jay Gould, along with Daniel Dennett. Accordingly, Dawkins, who once claimed that "if you meet somebody who claims not to believe in evolution, that person is ignorant, stupid or insane," is dismissed as one who misuses Darwinism "as a battering-ram against religion."

Yet, Wolfson argues that Intelligent Design simply has no adequate scientific model that would replace natural selection in a scientific context, and he cites George as a supporting authority on the question. He also cites Stephen Barr, a theoretical physicist at the Bartol Research Institute of the University of Delaware, as arguing that "some IDers have strayed beyond the confines of science rightly understood." To these authorities Wolfson adds Leon Kass, the former chairman of the President's Council on Bioethics. As Wolfson argues, "Kass credits IDers for drawing attention to various difficulties in orthodox Darwinian theory, as well as for understanding the human stakes involved in such questions." But Kass argues that the idea of a "Designer-God" is not warranted by the evidence. "There is simply no evidence in support of this proposition," he claims.

As should be evident by now, Wolfson has attempted to write an essay that praises Intelligent Design as a means of humbling Darwinism but rejects claims that Intelligent Design can be a replacement for Darwin's theory of natural selection. He fears that Darwinism has become something of an untouchable subject among the elites. Furthermore: "What's unfortunate is that the ideology of Darwinism—that is, the mistaken notion that Darwin defeated God—not only reigns culturally supreme, but also apparently increasingly has the legal backing of the state."

Beyond this, Wolfson laments the establishment of "orthodox Darwinism" as the dogma taught in the public schools. "This marks not so much enlightenment's progress as a narrowing of our intellectual horizons," he suggests.

Missing from Wolfson's argument is any intellectual suggestion about how Darwin's theory is properly scientific while Intelligent Design is presumably not. Beyond this, even as Wolfson rightly criticizes the elites for their ideological insecurity in anxiously dismissing all challenges to evolution, he never explicitly points to a factor that would have strengthened his argument—the fact that Darwinism is as much about a theory of life's meaning as about its origin. In other

words, if Intelligent Design is criticized as philosophy without science, Darwinism is excused as science without philosophy. This is hardly the case.

Nevertheless, Adam Wolfson has demonstrated his intention to write a balanced and fair introduction to the controversy over Intelligent Design and evolution. For that, he deserves our appreciation. Furthermore, the fact that an essay of this character is found in the pages of *The Weekly Standard* indicates that many conservatives, who would not be counted as conservative Christians, are open to a credible critique of Darwinism. In our present intellectual climate, that factor alone may serve to distinguish conservatism from liberalism and to reveal which system of thought is truly open-minded.

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