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Darwin's More Stately Mansion

Stephen Jay Gould

A famous Victorian story reports the reaction of an aristocratic lady to the primary heresy of her time: "Let us hope that what Mr. Darwin says is not true; but, if it is true, let us hope that it will not become generally known." Teachers continue to relate this tale as both a hilarious putdown of class delusions (as if the upper crust could protect public morality by permanently sequestering a basic fact of nature) and an absurdist homily about the predictable fate of ignorance versus enlightenment. And yet, I think we should rehabilitate this lady as an acute social analyst and at least a minor prophet. For what Mr. Darwin said is, indeed, true. It has also not become generally known, at least in our nation.

What strange set of historical circumstances, what odd disconnect between science and society, can explain the paradox that organic evolution—the central operating concept of an entire discipline and one of the firmest facts ever validated by science—remains such a focus of controversy, even of widespread disbelief, in contemporary America?

In a wise statement that will endure beyond the fading basis of his general celebrity, Sigmund Freud argued that all great scientific revolutions feature two components: an intellectual reformulation of physical reality and a visceral demotion of *Homo sapiens* from arrogant domination atop a presumed pinnacle to a particular and contingent result, however interesting and unusual, of natural processes. Freud designated two such revolutions as paramount: the Copernican banishment of Earth from center to periphery and the Darwinian "relegation" (Freud's word) of our species from God's incarnated image to "descent from an animal world." Western culture adjusted to the first transformation with relative grace (despite Galileo's travails), but Darwin's challenge cuts so much closer (and literally) to the bone. The geometry of an external substrate, after all, carries much less emotional weight than the nature of an internal essence. The biblical Psalmist evoked our deepest fear by comparing our bodily insignificance with cosmic immensity and then crying out: "What is man, that thou art mindful of him?" (Psalm 8). But he then vanquished this spatial anxiety with a constitutional balm: "Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels . . . thou madest him to have dominion . . . thou hast put all things under his feet." Darwin removed this keystone of false comfort more than a century ago, but many people still believe that they cannot navigate this vale of tears without such a crutch.

Denigration and disrespect will never win the minds (not to mention the hearts) of these people. But the right combination of education and humility might extend a hand of fellowship and eventually end the embarrassing paradox of a technological nation entering a new millennium with nearly half its people actively denying the greatest biological discovery ever made. Three principles might guide our pastoral efforts: (i) Evolution is true—and the truth can only make us free. (ii) Evolution liberates the human spirit. Factual nature cannot, in principle, answer the deep questions about ethics and meaning that all people of substance and valor must resolve for themselves. When we stop demanding more than nature can logically provide (thereby freeing ourselves for genuine dialogue with the outside world, rather than clothing nature with false projections of our needs), we liberate ourselves to look within. Science can then forge true partnerships with philosophy, religion, and the arts and humanities, for each must supply a patch in that ultimate coat of many colors, the garment called wisdom. (iii) For sheer excitement, evolution, as an empirical reality, beats any myth of human origins by light-years. A genealogical nexus stretching back nearly 4 billion years and now ranging from bacteria in rocks several miles under Earth's surface to the tip of the highest redwood tree, to human footprints on the moon. Can any tale of Zeus or Wotan top this? When truth value and visceral thrill thus combine, then indeed, as Darwin stated in closing his great book, "there is grandeur in this view of life." Let us praise this evolutionary nexus—a far more stately mansion for the human soul than any pretty or parochial comfort ever conjured by our swollen neurology to obscure the source of our physical being, or to deny the natural substrate for our separate and complementary spiritual quest.

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