

Darwinian Doubts

By DAVID BERLINSKI

The defense of Darwin's theory of evolution has now fallen into the hands of biologists who believe in suppressing criticism when possible and ignoring it when not. It is not a strategy calculated to induce confidence in the scientific method.

A paper published recently in the Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington concluded that the events taking place during the Cambrian era could best be understood in terms of an intelligent design — hardly a position unknown in the history of western science. The paper was, of course, peer-reviewed by three prominent evolutionary biologists. Wise men attend to the publication of every one of the Proceeding's papers, but in the case of Steven Meyer's "The origin of biological information and the higher taxonomic categories," the Board of Editors was at once given to understand that they had done a bad thing. Their indecent capitulation followed at once. Publication of the paper, they confessed, was a mistake. It would never happen again. It had barely happened at all. And peer review?

The hell with it.

"If scientists do not oppose anti-evolutionism,"

Eugenie Scott, the executive director of the National Council on Science Education, remarked, "it will reach more people with the mistaken idea that evolution is scientifically weak." Scott's understanding of "opposition" had nothing to do with reasoned discussion. It had nothing to do with reason at all. Discussing the issue was out of the question. Her advice to her colleagues was considerably more to the point: "Avoid debates."

Everyone else had better shut up.

In this country, at least, no one is ever going to shut up, the more so since the case against Darwin's theory retains an almost lunatic vitality.

Look — The suggestion that Darwin's theory of evolution is like theories in the serious sciences — quantum electrodynamics, say — is grotesque. Quantum electrodynamics is accurate to 13 unyielding decimal places. Darwin's theory makes no tight quantitative predictions all.

Look — Field studies attempting to measure natural selection inevitably report weak to non-existent selection effects.

Look — Darwin's theory is open at one end since there are no plausible accounts for the origins of life.

Look — The astonishing and irreducible complexity of various cellular structures has not yet successfully been described, let alone explained.

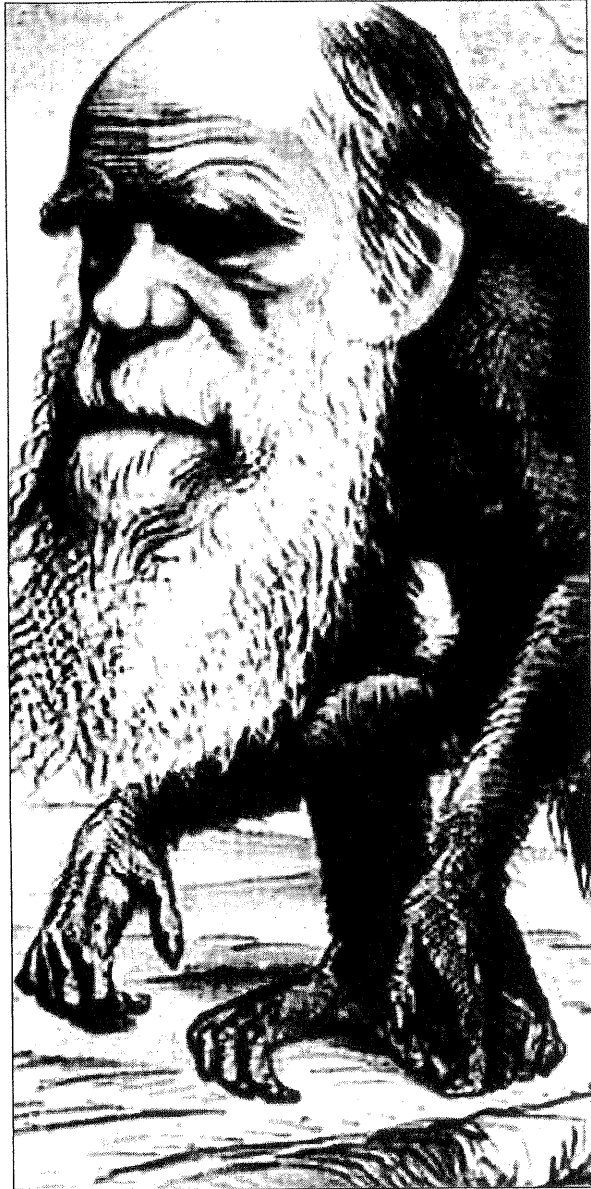
Look — A great many species enter the fossil record trailing no obvious ancestors and depart for Valhalla leaving no obvious descendants.

Look — Where attempts to replicate Darwinian evolution on the computer have been successful, they have not used classical Darwinian principles, and where they have used such principles, they have not been successful.

Look — Tens of thousands of fruit flies have come and gone in laboratory experiments, and every last one of them has remained a fruit fly to the end, all efforts to see the miracle of speciation unavailing.

Look — The remarkable similarity in the genome of a great many organisms suggests that there is at bottom only one living system; but how then to account for the astonishing differences between human beings and their near relatives — differences that remain obvious to anyone who has visited a zoo?

But look again — If the differences between organisms are scientifically more interesting than their genomic similarities, of what use is Darwin's theory since it's otherwise mysterious operations take place by



genetic variations?

These are hardly trivial questions. Each suggests a dozen others. These are hardly circumstances that do much to support the view that there are "no valid criticisms of Darwin's theory," as so many recent editorials have suggested.

Serious biologists quite understand all this. They rather regard Darwin's theory as an elderly uncle invited to a family dinner. The old boy has no hair, he has no teeth, he is hard of hearing, and he often drools. Addressing even senior members at table as *Sonny*, he is inordinately eager to tell the same story over and over again.

But he's family. What can you do?

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