

# The Darwin-Haunted World

By Karoline Leach

Creationism fails because it can't actually explain anything and cannot be falsified on its own terms. Yet it is upheld by a rigid dogma of belief that simply refuses to yield to rationalism and doubt.

Unfortunately the same is almost entirely true of neo-Darwinism - at least in its most extreme form. It too cannot be falsified on its own terms and it too is upheld by an increasingly rigid, if not hysterical, dogma, that refuses to yield to any form of progressive rational analysis. It is based on antiquated Victorian thought-systems about hierarchies in nature and the ultimate dominance of mankind; its central tenet 'the survival of the fittest' is simply a tautology. It makes little effort to break out of its Newtonian paradigm and address either the failings and gaps in its own system or to adapt to the new discoveries and shifting awareness in other related disciplines.

I'm *not* a Creationist or a believer in Intelligent Design, but I feel queasy at the way that 'natural selection' is sold as being a far more complete and realistic model than it really is; I dislike the way the many problems it faces from a scientific perspective are obscured. I dislike the way that anyone who questions, however mildly, the received wisdoms of this 'science' are labeled 'Creationists' and made the victims of hysterical witch-hunting and intolerance. I think this is symptomatic of much that is presently wrong with us all.

Beyond the hysteria it's simply true that the idea of a 'natural selection' of random mutations has always had many serious problems, both in biology and in physics. Most obviously there is the extreme rarity in the fossil record of morphological changes in a given species. Put simply - T-Rexes remained T-Rexes for 20 million years without altering; so did brontosaurids, giant elk etc. The skeletons from the beginning and end of their span on earth look virtually identical. We find lots of different types of animal, and some with obvious relationships between each other, but very little consistent sign in any given set of skeletons of the actual morphing process whereby the T. Rex, or the brontosaurus, or the elk might be shifting into something else. Instead what we seem to have is sudden swift changes, often accompanying global cataclysms, where one species dies and another new one seems to immediately to arise from 'nowhere' and take its place.

This is not what the theory evolution predicts and so the very fossil record itself has always challenged it in that regard. It was in response to this that Stephen Jay Gould developed the idea of what he called 'punctuated equilibrium', in which he posited that species remain stable for thousands or millions of years, before undergoing a rapid 'morphing' over a few thousand years (rapid in geological time) into something new. This fits better with the fossil record, but yet it really flies in the face of Darwin's original idea of a slow mutation brought on by pressures of competition and environment - the hard evidence for which remains almost entirely lacking.

For this and numerous other reasons, neo-Darwinism is - and has been for some time - in a paradigm crisis. The evidence that is amassing doesn't really fit the theory, the theory needs to be questioned, modified, maybe even discarded in part. And this is where the problem starts.

Most biologists have been raised in a paradigm that equates any questioning of Darwin with the 'demon haunted world' of superstition and irrationality. Ergo, when Darwin is questioned it *must* be being questioned irrationally. And ergo, again, any defence of the theory *must* be rational. The neo-Darwinists like Richard Dawkins are so imprisoned by this false syllogism ("Darwin='rational', ergo if I am defending Darwin I am being rational"), that they entirely fail to see themselves morphing into exactly the kind of non-rational, dogma-haunted, truth-fearing bigots they - understandably - most fear and despise.

They have sunk, in some quarters now, to the moral bankruptcy of blacklisting the heretics in their own midst. The likes of Sheldrake are non-people now for the true zealots. They control what is published in journals like *Nature* so rigidly that none of the newer ideas can get a hearing. They have so successfully managed the media that few people know there even is a discussion of 'alternatives' or 'amendments' to Darwin beyond the ludicrous extreme of Creationism. They present a false either/or dichotomy, in order to herd people into consensus.

There is no either/or. The truth is, life is hardly less a mystery for us than the origins of the universe, and Darwin himself might be appalled at the extremes of hubris to which his theory is taken. Evolution was developed to offer a way of understanding how species evolved. It doesn't even presume to try to tell us how life itself actually began, let alone how the universe came into being. Yet somehow we tend to forget all of that. Not only do our scientists try to disguise the theory's numerous problems, but as a culture we take the theory and elevate it beyond anything it was ever designed to be until it becomes a shorthand formula for the lazy belief underpinning our culture that we know everything and don't need to wonder any more!

Creationism has no place being taught in a classroom, but neither has an uncritical approach to neo-Darwinism. Perhaps it would be best to teach them both, and to lay bare the weaknesses inherent in them, and indeed in all schemes we have thus far designed for explaining the universe to ourselves. But to regard one as a symbol of progress and the other as a symbol of regress is just to be simplistic. They are both dogmas based on religious or quasi-religious precepts. Both should be presented as interesting ideas, and their most fanatical adherents considered as a warning of what happens to the human mind when it abandons doubt for belief.