

The New Fundamentalism

By GREGG EASTERBROOK

If John Scopes were alive today, he might be arrested for speaking *against* evolution in a public school, rather than in favor of it.

Scopes stood trial in Dayton, Tenn., 75 years ago this summer for using "Hunter's Civic Biology," a textbook containing a paragraph on Charles Darwin, in violation of a state law prohibiting the teaching of natural selection. The Tennessee law was embarrassingly wrong-headed. Evolution unquestionably occurs and is essential to understanding biology.

But today the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction, with everyone from the Supreme Court to establishment media holding that students should hear only Darwin's side of the debate. This situation is just as preposterous as the situation in Tennessee in 1925—and just as bad for freedom of thought. Once you weren't supposed to question God. Now you're not supposed to question the head of the biology department.

Dogmatic Science

Consider the reporting on the actions of the Kansas Board of Education. Last year, when the board voted to delete some requirements for the teaching of evolution from the state's nonbinding guidelines, the reaction was as if Galileo had been hauled back before the Inquisition. Headlines proclaimed Kansas had "banned" the teaching of Darwin, when the board's action was strictly advisory. Local school districts were free to ignore the guidelines, and almost all did.

Last week, when the board members who had voted for the new guidelines were defeated in the state primary, assuring that pro-evolution guidelines will be restored, news accounts treated this as a last-second victory over the forces of darkness. They didn't add that because of a copyright snafu, the 1999 guidelines were never actually promulgated. Not only had darkness not fallen over Kansas, from the standpoint of the classroom nothing had happened at all.

The 1999 guidelines did not endorse or even mention creationism. In 1986, the Supreme Court correctly ruled that public schools must not teach creationism because it is effectively a religious doctrine. The version of creationism that supposes that Earth was formed a relatively short time ago, and that man has no evolutionary antecedent, is a Biblical contention without any scientific support.

What Kansas's board did do was suggest schools teach only part of natural selection theory. It advised that children be taught that living things evolve in response to changes in their environments. The evidence on this point, as Harvard's Stephen Jay Gould has noted, is as strong as the evidence that Earth orbits the sun. But the board advised against teaching that life began through a totally natural, undirected process. The board was wrong to try to edit contemporary biology in this way. Even if a wholly spontaneous origin

of life turns out to be incorrect, it is today's mainstream science and children need to learn it.

More objectionable, perhaps, was the board's advice against teaching Big Bang theory. Big Bang theory enjoys almost unanimous support among cosmologists and even has moderate theological backing, for instance from the Vatican Observatory. This theory may or may not stand the test of time—all previous theories of the origin of the cosmos are now thought wrong, so don't hold your breath for the Big Bang—but kids cannot understand astronomy without knowing the ideas behind it.

Yet though the Kansas board was wrong some points, those who denounced

If the Scopes trial were held today, the teacher would be in the dock for daring to question evolution, not for backing it.



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Clarence Darrow (left) and William Jennings Bryan, at the Scopes trial.

it skipped the valid substance behind its thinking. There is a lively scientific debate these days on the absence of explanations for the origin of life. Evolutionary theory is commonly misunderstood to explain the origin of life; actually, it applies only to how organisms that already exist respond to their environments. All theories on origins, most recently the "RNA world" hypothesis (that life began with a chemical relative of DNA), are extremely conjectural. Darwin himself said he had no clue how life began, and considered creation an impenetrable mystery.

Inability to explain how life began hardly disproves natural selection. The question is simply outside the theory's perimeter. But because today's dogma assumes science can already explain everything, most of those who denounced the Kansas board didn't seem to know that the origin of life and how life evolves are two entirely separate issues. The Kansas board was right to suggest that the origin of life is a huge unknown, and to be skeptical of applying what Mr. Gould has called evolutionary "fundamentalism."

One small bit of editing by the Kansas board has been overlooked. The board changed the definition of science from "the search for natural explanations"—the wording preferred by the National Acad-

emy of Sciences—to the search for *logical* explanations. When it comes to intellectual rigidity, there's little difference between the national academy declaring that only natural forces may be considered, and the church declaring that only divine explanations may be considered. The quest for logical explanations for the world is a much richer and more engaging goal.

These concerns intersect at the evolving new theory of "intelligent design." Unlike creationism, intelligent-design theory acknowledges that the universe is immensely old and that all living things are descended from earlier forms. But the theory goes on to contend that organic biology is so phenomenally complex that it is illogical to assume that life created itself. There must have been some force providing guidance.

Intelligent design is a sophisticated theory now being argued out in the nation's top universities. And though this idea assumes existence must have some higher component, it is not religious doctrine under the 1986 Supreme Court definition. Intelligent-design thinking does not propound any specific faith or even say that the higher power is divine. It simply holds that there must be an unseen intellect imbedded in the cosmos.

The intelligent design theory may or may not be correct, but it's a rich, absorbing hypothesis—the sort of thing that is fascinating to debate, and might get students excited about biology class to boot. But most kids won't know the idea unless they are taught it, and in the aftermath of the Kansas votes, pro-evolution dogma continues to suggest that any alternative to natural selection must be kept quiet.

But then, just as in 1925 opposition to natural selection was not really about the theory but about sustaining a status quo in which people were not supposed to question clergy, so today's evolutionary fundamentalism is not so much about the theory but about sustaining a new status quo in which people are not supposed to question scientists. Yet this discourages students from engaging in one of the most fascinating—if not *the* most fascinating—of questions: Why are we here?

Teach the Controversy

The obvious solution is to teach the controversy. Present students with the arguments for and against natural and supernatural explanations of life, and then let them enter into this engaging, fertile debate. Yet many school systems are steering away from teaching intelligent design, believing it to be an impermissible idea under the Supreme Court ruling. Editorials and columnists prefer not to mention the new theory, hoping to tar all non-Darwinian ideas as mere creationism. This isn't freedom of thought—it's the reverse. Where is the new Scopes who will expose the new dogma as being just as bad as the old?

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