

PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

Many exo-planets are now known to exist. Most of them are gaseous but that may be because they are easier to detect. The nearest one is 10.5 light years away, so a round-trip radio exchange would take 21 years -- but that planet is gaseous. If one exists that is suitable for life it would probably take even longer.

Astronomers were excited when they received non-random sequences of "dots" from outer space. Many of them had obvious meanings: and showed an awareness of number and arithmetic. For ease in reading, using our so-called Arabic numerals instead of dots, 1, 4, 9, 16 and 1, 8, 27, 81, as well as 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8 and 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 11 and 20, 10, 5, 16, 8, 4, 2, 1 had similar implications. Comparable but not identical messages have been sent from earth as acknowledgments but not enough time has elapsed to expect a reply.

When 2, 8, 8, 18 was received this seemed to imply some knowledge of atomic structure, giving rise to the hope that somehow it might be possible to exchange more information about the material world! As more complex sequences were received the cryptographer Guillermo VerdaderoHombre was consulted. Without going into the arcane details, he has been

able to deduce a vast literature from intelligent beings elsewhere in the universe.

Some of them believe in and worship a higher power; others reject this as devoid of evidence. The theists point out that there are innumerable forms of life, many of which consume carbon dioxide and exude oxygen; lots of the others take in oxygen and give off carbon dioxide. Still other organisms are exceedingly tiny and difficult to study. Only the oxygen-consumers have the brains which are necessary to feel pain but they feed only on the brainless carbon dioxide consumers. The latter utilize for their sustenance material from the soil, water, atmosphere, and decaying carcasses of all types. The theists claim that this proves the existence of a benevolent supreme being which planned it all. Pain is experienced only in eliminating or reducing hazards and hence is an essential part of the sacred design.

Earth-bound theists suggest that we should not disillusion them with information about the hideous eating behavior of our lions, tigers, wolves, bears, hawks, alligators, snakes, and spiders. Of course given their beliefs they probably would think we must be making this up. Too blasphemous. ■

Bill Treumann
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Articles in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the ideas or opinions of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

The mission of the Red River Freethinkers is to advocate for a skeptical view of the role of religion in society and to promote critical examination of religious authority and dogma.

Red River Freethinkers is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

Family membership	\$45/year	Membership includes a subscription to this newsletter. Send name, address, phone number, email address and dues to Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND 58107-0405.
Individual membership	\$30/year	
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Newsletter only	\$10/year	

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RED RIVER FREETHINKERS

THE RED RIVER RATIONALIST

ISSUE 128 NOVEMBER 2009

THE "NEW ATHEISTS"

After the resounding successes of several books by atheist authors in recent years, there have been several authors and bloggers who have chal-



lenged the atheists. The most famous atheist author is, of course, Richard Dawkins, who wrote *The God Delusion*. Sam Harris is another.

These authors are lumped together by critics into a category called the "New Atheists". Of course, to atheists of long standing, this description is a bit of a mystery because the arguments presented are the same as those made by the previous generations of atheists. But, to the critics, Dawkins and company present their cases in a different way and, thus, are labeled "new". The critics I am referring to here are those who self-identify themselves, not as fundamentalist Christians, but as more mainstream. That would be folks who believe generally in the separation of church and state, might be tolerant of gays and abortion, do not hold to a literal reading of the Bible and believe in evolution. This set of people appears unhappy that the New Atheists focus their discussion of Christianity on fundamentalists. One author writes that he, himself, is a Christian but does not believe that prayers bring results. Why, he asks,

don't New Atheists discuss his approach to religion? If they did, wouldn't they find that the believers and nonbelievers could coexist quite nicely?

It is true that the New Atheists do not focus on what might be called the vast majority of "Christians" and other religious people. These are people who pray regularly and believe prayer is productive. Such folks, however, fall far short of the requirement that their religious values be codified into, for example, requirements that schools teach creationism.

The answer to these critics is that the New Atheists have taken aim at a specific slice of the US political and religious population. That is, they have aimed their arguments at those who could be called "The New Christians". This is the group that



became advocates of inserting the sword of religion deep into the body politic. Even in Dawkins' rather long book there is not space to discuss groups of Christians with whom he has few arguments. ■

Jon Lindgren
Fargo, ND

POINTS OF INTEREST

- The next **RRF meeting** will be held at Atomic Coffee on Sunday November 15, 2009 from 1 to 3pm. The Red River Freethinkers are happy to have Dr. Davis Cope presenting a talk entitled *"Trying to Understand Fundamentalism"*.
- Thursday November 19, the Philosophy For All Fargo-Moorhead topic will be *"Psychological Oppression and the Tale of an Outlaw Emotion"*. The presentation will be given by Claudia Murphy, MSUM, at 7pm followed by discussion.

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EVOLUTION IS JUST A THEORY

In his article 'Freethinkers Keep it Real' (Red River Rationalist, October, 2009), Jason Schoenack listed four common canards [my word] that are spread, often by religious organizations or their affiliates concerning atheism. I thought it might be informative to examine each of these. So, and in no particular order, #3 on his list "Evolution is just a theory, not a fact" is the topic of this month's essay.

This canard has a few ugly ducklings: Evolution contradicts the 2nd law of thermodynamics; There are no transitional fossils; Evolution does not explain how life began; and my personal favorite- What good is half an eye? These ugly ducklings carry fleas: Genetic mutations never add information; If we evolved from apes, why are there still apes; No one has ever seen evolution in action, a watch implies a watchmaker so complex organs imply a designer. To take the analogy one step further, these fleas harbor the plague: Evolutionary theory promotes social Darwinism and eugenics, then is justifiable as natural consequences of inevitable phenomena, and, that's your interpretation of the observations. We have our own interpretation and so this is just an argument about differing philosophies- and our philosophy is based upon God's holy word.

"Evolution is just a theory" should trigger the question: What is a theory? The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary devotes some 40 lines to definitions of the word theory. I'll return to the OED, but first a definition from *Just a Theory* (Ben-Ari 2005):

"A scientific theory is a concise and coherent set of concepts, claims, and laws (frequently expressed mathematically) that can be used to precisely and accurately explain and predict [emphasis mine] natural phenomena."

Note the phrase 'scientific theory.' This is the only sense in which scientists ever use the word when referring to: cell theory of organisms, atomic theory of matter, the theory of gravity, the germ theory of disease, the theory of plate tectonics, the theory of island biogeography, the theory of general relativity, the theory of evolution, the theory of quantum mechanics and the theory of everything. The crux of a scientific theory is its ability to predict future observations, i.e. its ability to be tested, or in scientific terminology, its ability to be falsified. A theorist must



be able to state conditions, circumstances or observations that would disprove their proposed theory. Such statements are the basis for further experiments which yield observations that test predictions- the very core of the scientific method. Here is a condition that would shake evolutionary theory to its core: a fossilized armadillo is found encased within a Precambrian stromatolite excavated from the Laurentian shield of Canada. We cannot prove that a theory is correct, but we can prove a theory to be incorrect and discard it, and we can amass evidence in support of a theory. These are the logic tools behind all scientific progress. I will not lose sleep worrying about that armadillo.



The sOED does not provide a definition of a scientific theory with the clarity of Ben-Ari, but redeems itself in listing other definitions of theory:

[A theory is] "the formulation of abstract knowledge or speculative thought, systematic conception of something;" "An unsubstantiated hypothesis, a speculative view."

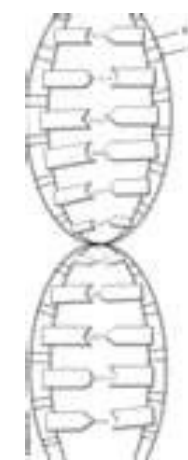
These are common usage definitions of a theory, and this common usage has been utilized by religious groups and their affiliates to sow misplaced doubt. Put in terms of the analogy begun in the opening paragraph, this is feeding the ugly ducklings.

Let's pluck the 'ugly' from these ducklings. First duckling: "Evolution contradicts the 2nd law of thermodynamics." Most charitably stating a creationist version, the second law is: Entropy (disorder) increases over time because every process is not perfectly reversible. Energy is always lost, and the part of this definition which is always lost (add at the beginning): "In a closed system. . ." The purposeful omission by evolution's detractors is to avoid mentioning the Solar Constant. The Solar Constant is the amount of the sun's energy reaching the earth which is measured at 2 calories/ cubic centimeter/ minute. One calorie is enough to raise one cubic centimeter of water one degree Celsius. In a system with a constant energy input, 'islands' of order can exist (or evolve) even while the general amount of entropy in the universe is decreasing. The ugliness of this

duckling is elision.

Next duckling, "There are no transitional fossils." Any organism that has a descendent is at some level, a transitional form. A more detailed answer: in 1859 when *The Origin of Species* was first published, the number of fossil hominids known was precisely zero. A short and by no means exhaustive listing of those discovered since 1859, in roughly chronological order but not necessarily in a linear sequence: *Australopithecus afarensis*, *A. africanus*, *Paranthropus aethiopicus*, *P. robustus*, *P. boiesi*, *Kenyanthropus platyops*, *Homo ergaster*, *H. antecessor*, *H. erectus*, *H. heidelbergi*, *H. neanderthalis*, and archaic *H. sapiens*. The long known but recently exhaustively re-described *Ardipithecus ramidus* appears to be the latest common ancestor between the hominin line of apes and the chimpanzee line of apes. We are apes and the only links truly missing are between nerve synapses of those denying transitional fossils. The ugliness of this duckling, it's a liar.

Another duckling: "Evolution does not tell us how life began." Obviously, since this is not what the theory is about. Evolutionary theory states that life changes over time and species evolve from previous species. Species are composed of populations of individuals. Individuals have characteristics or traits. The expression of any given trait varies among members of a population. Traits are coded for



by genes. Genes are particular sequences of base pairs of amino acids, each pair forming a 'rung' on the double helix 'ladder' of a DNA molecule. The percentage of expression of a given trait can vary between populations. Evolution is the accumulated changes in these percentage expressions (gene frequencies) in populations of individuals over time. More than 20 mechanisms have been identified that contribute to evolutionary processes. A few of these are: natural selection, genetic drift, founder principle, vicariance, meiotic drive, polyploidy, kin selection, bacterial and viral infections, and artificial selection. The ugliness of this duckling is misrepresentation (a straw duck).

Last duckling, "What good is half an eye?" This one was addressed by H.G Wells more than a century ago: "In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." Light sensitivity can be favored over blindness, image formation over light sensitivity, higher image resolution over lower

resolution. This panoply of eye types exists among the mollusks today. An octopus does not suffer from glaucoma, detached retinas, macular degeneration, or cataracts. Their eyes evolved along a different evolutionary pathway than ours. Evolution acts in a fitness landscape, the dimensions of that landscape could be characterized as the number of amino acid base pairs in all the strands of your DNA x the number of possible substitutions for each base of each pair. Our fitness landscape did not produce eyes as 'well designed' as those of an octopus. The ugliness of this duckling: absurdity masquerading as reason, i.e. if I cannot think of how a thing might work, that thing does not work.

Now it is time for the flea powder: "Genetic mutations never add information"- except that chromosomes can be duplicated and their gene sequences duplicated, the duplicates are then 'free' to evolve in their own way. Examples of chromosome duplication are the various species of currants (autopolyploidy), that beloved of vegetables, the rutabaga (allopolyploidy) and Sequoia trees (paleopolyploidy). As for gene duplication, how many legs does a centipede have? "If we evolved from apes, why are there still apes?" Evolution's mechanisms act on populations of individuals and coelacanths are still with us. "No one has ever seen evolution in action"-except for bacteria that mutate and evolve intricate mechanisms to digest nutrients their predecessors could not. When was the last time you went searching for the elusive Wild Broccoli or found a Chinese silkworm. These are new species formed by artificial selection- as are domestic sheep. "A watch implies a watchmaker, complex organs imply a designer." I have had double cataract surgery and I do not even own a pet octopus! Education is a great flea powder. What do these 'fleas' share? They live upon the traits of the ducklings.



Let's look at the traits (the ugliness) we removed from the ducklings: elision, misrepresentation, lying and absurdities. The plague is the result of these ugly traits applied to evolutionary theory. How can a society function when these traits are condoned in the education of its citizens, in political choices made by its electors and by the policy decisions of its leaders? How does a society function when reason is debased? Next month we'll discuss ethics and moral philosophy. ■

**Gerald Fauske
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