

Denying Darwin in the Era of “Fake News” and Anti-Science Fundamentalism

by David Orenstein

The long-term intellectual ability humans have developed to investigate, gather information and learn from the material world has led us on a continuous journey of discovery. But, in every generation, there have been segments of the population that either cannot or will not adjust their worldview when new paradigms, once unknown, are uncovered and then reshape our world. Even as extraordinary evidence builds to dethrone incorrect conclusions long held, wrong ideas about the natural world persist and keep those unwilling or unable to adjust to new information stuck inside their static comfort zone.

Probably the most visible failure of our human imagination occurs when those with power seek to obfuscate and deny evolution for their personal gain. There is certainly nothing wrong with being a skeptic about natural processes. Such skepticism is actually very healthy and important to science, to research and to life in general. But there is a difference between skepticism, obstructionism and the full-on denial of scientific truth.

Healthy skepticism about the material world can best be described as the rational need for detailed, observable, measurable or irrefutable evidence in order to claim something is indeed true. Take gravity for instance. Although we cannot see it, we can read about the nature of the force, scientists have shown that such force exists, and none of us leave our homes by walk-

ing off the roof. We know full well that gravity, even unseen, is operating and will indeed pull us down towards Earth. We understand the nature of gravity because we understand that humans cannot float or fly without the machines we’ve invented which can defy gravity’s powers.

Extraordinarily, paleontologists have recently found evidence in Morocco that the earliest members of modern humans date back 300,000 years, replacing the evidence for an antecedece of just 175,000 years. Exciting, right? The search for human origins is good science. It is on par with nanotechnology, the quest for the Higgs boson, and every modern method of looking at the world through healthy scientific inquiry using the scientific method.

The Long History of Fake News

Much has been written about the “Scopes Monkey Trial” – from the newspaper reports at the time, to the legal record, to the book *Inherit the Wind*, to the major film of the same title. The Tennessee evolution trial of the century would in the end crystallize the start of an ongoing modern culture war concerning natural selection and the teaching of evolution. An emotional war bent on preserving a Biblical worldview and theistic view of human creation. A legal war which would attempt to recast and invalidate the First Amendment of the

Constitution regarding the separation of church and state. A personal war between people about ideas, either accepting or repulsed by the theory that humans evolved from older primate lineages without the need for divine creation.

Some four decades later, in 1966, 24-year-old high school biology teacher Susan Epperson, working in Little Rock, found herself in violation of Arkansas' 1928 anti-evolution law. Because of changes in both science curriculum and their newly recommended science

textbook, Epperson and her colleagues included information on both Charles Darwin and natural selection in their teaching. While controversy ensued, it was Epperson who taught using the new materials.

In 1987, the Supreme Court was again visited by the creation-versus-evolution debate. Now it was Chief Justice William Rehnquist's Court that would find that yet another state had violated the First Amendment's separation clause. In 1981, the Louisiana legislature passed the *Balanced Treatment for Creation-Science and Evolution-Science Act*. As the bill suggests, it required that public school science classes teach both Biblical creation and Darwinian evolution as completely equal and factually validated theories of how life on Earth and the universe were created.

In 2004, this is exactly what happened in Dover, Pennsylvania, as the school board chose to include the creationist textbook *Of Pandas and People* in their science curriculum and wrote a press release which stated that, at the start of the school year, high school science teachers would be required to read a prepared statement in their classrooms, stating that evolution was just a theory and that Intelligent Design (ID) is a possible al-

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ternative explanation of life which differs from Darwin's view.

The coming legal battle mirrored the Scopes Monkey Trial in many ways. It garnered a great deal of national attention. It again placed Darwin's theories in the forefront of the American consciousness. Many thought the final result of the trial would be to end the argument regarding evolution. Finally, like Scopes, the Dover trial had its theatrics and dramas playing out on small and large stages within the community.

Many families felt alienated from one another because of the stance they took for or against ID, and many friendships were tested and harmed before, during and even after the trial.

In his 139-page ruling, Judge Jones wrote very directly and very plainly. He found that intelligent design was not based on science and was in fact creationism and theology, that the *Of Pandas and People* textbook made false claims and used untruthful examples, that ID was essentially a religious argument for the basis of life and that ID had been successfully refuted by the scientific community.

Modernity and Fake News: Neo-Attacks on Darwin's Work

Ardent Catholic politician and former Senator Rick Santorum (R-PA) attempted to infuse and expand creation science and intelligent design curricula throughout the United States in one fell swoop. In 2001, while then President George W. Bush was remaking federal education policy with his *No Child Left Behind* legislation, Santorum and the Discovery Institute crafted an amendment to the bill as it went before both the House and Senate.

But federal legislators haven't given up the

fight to “teach the controversy” and it appears that governors and senators still see ID as their way

to Christianize and shape the minds of young people using public monies to teach creationism in public schools.

In fact, the former Republican governor of Indiana and current vice-president, Mike Pence, has gone on record stating, “*Only the theory of Intelligent Design provides even a remotely rational explanation of the known universe.*” So it is clear that almost 100 years after the Scopes Trial, elected government officials in some areas of American politics, in local, state and national venues, haven’t given up but have instead doubled down on creationist ideology.

As Donald Trump has now taken office and will be leading the United States for the next four and possibly eight years from that time, his cabinet selections, especially for the Department of Education, will be telling as to where the government may move with regard to federalizing intelligent design as a companion or outright alternative to teaching evolution in public school settings. Certainly, the selection of controversial conservative billionaire Betsy De Vos, an advocate for charter schools, and whose husband Richard is a devout *ID* proponent, is somewhat chilling. Although there is no crystal ball or smoking gun, it is not unreasonable to assume that Intelligent Design will gain federal support, based on the statements of the De Vos family.

The Cure for Fake News is Scientific Truth and Scientific Vigilance

While many may find it astonishing, paleontologists continue with confidence to discover and verify how humans, and all life on the planet, evolved, based on sound research methods, field techniques, and observations. With such evidence, anthropologists provide ongoing support for Charles Darwin’s grand theory of Natural Selection.

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No matter how random and accidental evolution appears, to those who accept our

antecedence, there is a deeper form of liberation that comes from knowing that we are one human family. However, materialistic evolution remains incomprehensible to those who wish to deny our human place in the universe in favor of a personal creation mythology. Such obstructionism and denial is ripe in the United States and around the world.

Obstructionism is essentially a delaying tactic that provides individuals and oftentimes local, regional or national governments time to deliberately delay access to information about evolutionary biology in favor of either no information or a competing alternative analysis. A good example of this can be found in the United States when local school boards attempt to infuse the public school curriculum with the faulty concepts of Intelligent Design, or as they attempt to strip or water down the concept of natural selection from K-12 biology textbooks through policy or legislation. Outside the United States, we need not look any further than the country of Turkey, which in 2017 set new national science standards in public education throughout the nation that officially removed evolutionary biology from the pre-college curriculum.

What religious obstructionism attempts to deny or prevent us from knowing is exactly what evolutionary theory tells us by its very existence. We anatomically modern humans are not the period at the end of the sentence in the last line of the book of creation. Darwin’s work shows that 14.5 billion years after the Big Bang, and following 4.6 billion years of Earth undergoing continuing transformations through global mass extinctions, climate change, plate tectonics, speciation, and adaptation, we humans are just one paragraph in one chapter in a grand encyclopedia of life on Earth and, by extension, perhaps life in the universe.

We needn't visit the Creation Museum and Ark Encounter in Kentucky to access the full denial of materialistic and naturalistic evolution. The museum is sending out their creationist agenda through sophisticated email marketing as well as via the Internet. The Museum's YouTube page is constantly adding dogmatic episodes that all fervently deny evolution while simultaneously pushing an Evangelical version of life whose beginning is understood through Biblical interpretation, which isn't science at all. And I know personally about their marketing tactics because somehow my private email wound up on their mailing list, offering me discounts to their products, passes to the museum and park and, of course, requests for donations.

Can you imagine buying a telescope with which, when you look through the lens, you could only focus your sight on the top of the trees? You'd most probably return the instrument as broken simply because you know from the evidence of your senses that the universe is both wider and deeper. But this lack of vision is what the Creation Museum sells as true. The Creation Museum sells you a broken telescope, essentially the product of

a faulty human imagination that sees no further than our limited religious self-interests.

To this end we should remind ourselves of the beauty by which we grasp scientific knowledge as it plays a part in defining what we know as truth. Such understanding helps to make our naturally inquisitive species willing to further push the boundaries of the known. It underscores our ideas about material reality. It allows us to build technologies, new systems and ways of thinking that would seem like science fiction or even magic to those in the past as well as to those who currently choose to be uninitiated. Perhaps this is also why we should be proud, but not in a hubristic way, to hope that our intellect will conquer our fears about evolutionary science and the acceptance of the sciences in general.

Dr. David Orenstein is the Deputy Chairperson and full professor of Anthropology at Medgar Evers College (City University of New York), and is the author of a new book on Charles Darwin coming out this fall from the Humanist Press. A primatologist by early training, he is a dedicated teacher and Humanist who views life rationally and the cosmos with deep respect and amazement.

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