

Would Darwin be a Darwinist today?

by *Don Batten*

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Charles Darwin did some good science. Some of his research, such as that on coral growth, marine atolls and the important role of earthworms, stands today. On the other hand he was a creature of his time—a time dominated by deistic ideas that God was remote and the universe ran itself according to laws of nature.

Amongst the intelligentsia, “natural theology”—the study of nature to find God—had largely replaced the Bible (revelation from God himself).

With the influence of James Hutton and Charles Lyell,¹ ideas of vast ages of slow and gradual change had taken root, overturning the earlier acceptance of biblical history where Creation and the Flood accounted for the rocks and fossils.²

Into this context, Darwin’s idea of natural processes explaining the origin of life’s diverse forms found acceptance. But would Darwin be a Darwinist if he were alive today?

The origin of life

In *Origin of Species*,³ Darwin concentrated on the origin of the diversity of life. In a letter to botanist Joseph Hooker in 1863, Darwin lamented having pandered to public opinion in writing in *Origin*, of the first life form, “into which life was first breathed”⁴ (as if he believed in divine creation). Yet he conceded, “It is mere rubbish thinking at present of the origin of life; one might as well think of the origin of matter.”^{5,6}

However, eight years later, consistent with his drive to explain origins entirely materialistically, he speculated:

"... if (and Oh! what a big if!) we could conceive in some warm little pond, with all sorts of ammonia and phosphoric salts, light, heat, electricity, etc., present, that a protein compound was chemically formed ready to undergo still more complex changes ..." ⁵

At that time scientists knew that organisms such as insects did not form spontaneously, but they continued to speculate about microbes. These seemed fairly simple—blobs of jelly—and so, many thought that they might arise spontaneously. However, the creationist scientist Louis Pasteur, a contemporary of Darwin, showed that microbes did not form spontaneously either. ⁷

Today, with so much more known about the complexity of even the simplest living things, the origin of life has become an intractable problem for those who refuse to believe in creation. Cells are not mere blobs of jelly; they are incredibly complex assemblages of nano-machines that Darwin could not have conceived in the slightest way. And they are full of programs (software) that specify how to construct and operate each living cell with its thousands of nano-machines that are essential to life (e.g. see [ATP synthase](#)). Professor Paul Davies admitted:

"How did stupid atoms spontaneously write their own software ... ? Nobody knows ... there is no known law of physics able to create information from nothing." ⁸

Daily, new discoveries add to our knowledge of the breathtaking complexity of life, making the idea of the spontaneous origin of life more and more untenable. ⁹

Antony Flew, famous hard-nosed English atheistic philosopher, abandoned atheism because of the weight of evidence from these modern discoveries. He said, "It now seems to me that the findings of more than fifty years of DNA research have provided materials for a new and enormously powerful argument to design." ¹⁰ This research, "has shown, by the almost unbelievable complexity of the arrangements which are needed to produce (life), that intelligence must have been involved". ¹¹

Darwin was wrong, but then he had little idea of such things.

Natural selection

Darwin titled his book, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. He speculated that the variation in living things was both continuous and without limits, writing,

"Whatever the cause may be of each slight difference in the offspring from their parents—and a cause for each must exist—it is the steady accumulation, through natural selection, of such

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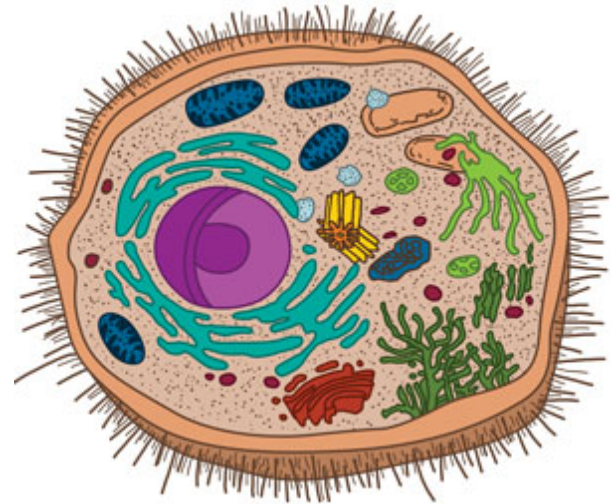


Figure 1. Students learn to label the parts of a cell, but scientists are continually amazed at the nano-machines and the programming in the DNA that specifies how to make them and use them that lie behind simplistic diagrams.

differences, when beneficial to the individual, that gives rise to all the more important modifications of structure, by which the innumerable beings on the face of this earth are enabled to struggle with each other, and the best adapted to survive.”¹²

A contemporary of Darwin, Gregor Mendel, a creationist, discovered the laws of genetics. He published his work in a prominent journal in the late 1860s, but it remained unrecognized for over 30 years, possibly because it did not fit with the growing acceptance of the Darwinian view. Mendel showed that genetic variation was limited and that when a new trait seemed to appear, it was actually already in the genes of the parents; it was not expressed because of *dominant* genes hiding the effect of *recessive* genes.¹³

The re-discovery of Mendel’s work around 1900 brought a crisis to Darwinism because the variety in offspring was now seen to be due to sorting of existing genes, existing information, rather than new information arising spontaneously. But then mutations, which are accidental changes to the genes, were discovered. Evolutionists grafted these into the Darwinian picture to account for the new genes (novel genetic information) needed for evolution to proceed from microbe to mankind. The ‘modern synthesis’ was born.

However, sixty years of research since has shown how mutations wreck genes and genetic controls. Mutations cause thousands of human diseases. They do not create new genes, such as those for making feathers to change a reptile into a bird. Mutations cause the wrong type of change.¹⁴ Nor do such random accidental changes create new functional gene control systems, which are another level of complexity again.

A Smithsonian biologist said,

“The ‘modern evolutionary synthesis’ convinced most biologists that natural selection was the only directive influence on adaptive evolution. Today, however, dissatisfaction with the synthesis is widespread, and creationists and antidarwinians are multiplying. The central problem with the synthesis is its failure to show (or to provide distinct signs) that natural selection of random mutations could account for observed levels of adaptation.”¹⁵

Note that sometimes mutations can be beneficial, but they are still defects. For example, a mutation that prevents a beetle from making normal wings might be beneficial to that beetle on a windy island where winged ones get blown into the sea, but it is still a defect.¹⁶

And natural selection can only select what mutations throw up, so it is not creative, but conservative, weeding out the organisms that are less fit to survive because of the mutations they have suffered. So, even with the addition of mutations, natural selection still cannot account for the diversity of life on earth.

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Darwin was wrong about natural selection. But then if he had believed the Bible, he would have known that, because Genesis says ten times that God created living things to reproduce “after their kind” (see [Genesis 1:11](#))—a principle of biology that everyone understands and takes for granted (cats will always give birth to cats).

Transitional fossil links

Darwin said,

“ ... the number of intermediate varieties, which have formerly existed on the earth, [must] be truly enormous. Why then is not every geological formation and every stratum full of such intermediate links? Geology assuredly does not reveal any such finely graduated organic chain; and this, perhaps, is the most obvious and gravest objection which can be urged against my theory. The explanation lies, as I believe, in the extreme imperfection of the geological record. ... We should not forget that only a small portion of the world is known with accuracy.”¹⁷

Darwin expected that once researchers looked for the in-between, transitional fossils they would find them. However, in 150 years they had not found them. As Robert Carroll, well-known paleontologist, said:

“What is missing are the many intermediate forms hypothesized by Darwin ... ”¹⁸

Darwin’s appeal to the incompleteness of knowledge at the time (“fossils of the gaps”?) has not been vindicated. He was wrong about the fossils.

The tree of life

Darwin reasoned that, assuming unlimited variation and natural selection, in time all living things could have developed from a single original life form. So he had the idea of the ‘tree of life’, which he first drew in 1837 in a notebook. And it is in chapter 4 in *Origin*; the only illustration. In the final chapter, he said,

“I should infer from analogy that probably all the organic beings which have ever lived on this earth have descended from some one primordial form ... ”⁴

However, even this idea is also under serious attack today:

“Molecular phylogeneticists will have failed to find the ‘true tree’, not because their methods are inadequate or because they have chosen the wrong genes, but because the history of life cannot properly be represented as a tree.”¹⁹

The popular-level science magazine, *New Scientist*, created a furore when it published a feature article, “Uprooting Darwin’s tree”.²⁰ Atheists ranted on blogs, scornful of the magazine’s critique of this



evolutionary icon. They threatened to cancel subscriptions. This all goes to show that evolution is not about science; rather, it is a religious idea. No one gets so upset about truly scientific ideas. As Rev. Adam Sedgwick, Professor of Geology at Cambridge from 1818 to 1873, commented in 1860:

"From first to last it [*Origin*] is a dish of rank materialism cleverly cooked up ... And why is this done? For no other reason, I am sure, except to make us independent of a Creator ... "21

The *New Scientist* article recognizes how central and important this tree of life idea is to Darwinism:

"Without it the theory of evolution would never have happened. The tree also helped carry the day for evolution ... Ever since Darwin the tree has been the unifying principle ... "20

Now many scientists are questioning it. The fossils did not reveal a tree of life—the transitional forms and common ancestors are notable for their lack. However, evolutionists hailed the newer field of molecular biology as the redeemer that would establish the tree. Increasingly, this further argument from ignorance has failed as the data have been collected:

"By the mid-1980s there was great optimism that molecular techniques would finally reveal the universal tree of life in all its glory. Ironically, the opposite happened."20

The molecules contradict the earlier trees and different molecules give different trees. They now propose massive horizontal gene transfer (movement between organisms that are not closely related by common ancestry) to try to explain the patterns revealed. Darwin's tree is dead.

Of course such a pattern of similarity is perfectly consistent with a super-intelligent, supernatural Designer creating living things: you would expect an Intelligent Designer to re-use specifications in different organisms that might be dissimilar in other respects. Indeed such a pattern, which speaks of one Designer but thwarts naturalistic attempts to explain the pattern of design, would be expected from [Romans 1:20](#):

"For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse".

Darwin was also wrong about this core idea. Is there anything left?

So ... would Darwin be a Darwinist today?

Given the grand failure to fulfil Darwin's expectations, we might think that he would not be a Darwinist today, if he were alive. However, it is not the evidence that drives belief in evolution, as can be readily seen by reading the vitriol of the zealous advocates of evolution. As from the beginning, 'evolution' means 'naturalism'; nature is all there is and there is no need of God to explain our origins. Indeed,

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"[Darwin] made no secret of his view that he did not believe religion to have any rational foundations at all."²²

Darwin embraced materialism as a young man.²³ As such, if he were alive today, he may well be like materialists of today, who are given to "futile thinking" ([Romans 1:21–22](#))—like professor of genetics, Richard Lewontin, who wrote that "materialism is absolute, for we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door."²⁴

So, if Darwin were alive today, would he be a Darwinist? Probably—in spite of the evidence.

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