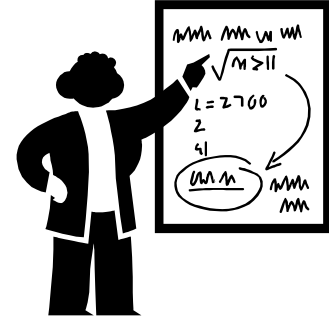


# SHOULD EVOLUTION BE TAUGHT IN SCHOOL?



Understanding for understanding's sake is an apt paraphrase of a common dictum that applies to the study of biological evolution. Many human beings derive increased appreciation of the world surrounding them from an understanding of it. But for those of a more utilitarian orientation, this is but the tip of the iceberg. Twentieth century advances in health care, production of food, and harnessing of nature to meet other material needs, are grounded in understanding of biological evolution.

The geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky once said that “nothing in biology makes sense except in the light of evolution.” Evolution is the unifying theme in biology because all biological phenomena are products of evolutionary processes and relationships.

We can also celebrate Darwin's ideas for the same reasons that we celebrate Shakespeare's literature. Darwin, like Shakespeare, was an imaginative intellect whose influence on our society is pervasive. For example, a philosophy generally referred to as “Social Darwinism” continues to be brought up in discussions of public policy (even though Darwin never advocated it). Whether one finds Social Darwinism persuasive or repulsive, it cannot be discussed intelligently and honestly without some knowledge of the evidence and arguments put forth by Darwin and his many intellectual descendants.

Evolution is part of a proper educational program for our society, part of our common cultural and educational heritage — not just the domain of an elite group of scientists. Attacks on evolution may be usefully thought of as part of an all-round assault on public education at all levels in the United States. Throughout the

country, there are many examples of radical groups accusing teachers of undermining common values or of simply wasting students' time. This type of attack has succeeded in weakening sex education and programs designed to slow the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Major conservative policy groups continue to attempt to divert school funding into subsidies for middle-class parents to send their children to religious schools (despite repeated court rulings that such subsidies are unconstitutional). Attempts to thwart or limit the teaching of evolution are part of a larger political agenda.

Anti-evolutionists continue to make political hay by portraying evolution's defenders as elitist scholars who are more concerned with defending academic privilege than shaping a good society, as an out-of-touch group that sees itself as wiser than the general run of humanity. Past attacks have been successful because there is an element of truth to such portrayals. But there also have been and continue to be earnest efforts by evolutionary scholars to bring their ideas into the public forum through serious popular books.

Perhaps there is little danger that anti-evolutionists will succeed in banning evolutionary ideas, but we need to be sure that evolution is freely discuss in classrooms and at the dinner table, and not just locked up in an ivory tower.

(text by Dr. Hilary Callahan,  
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