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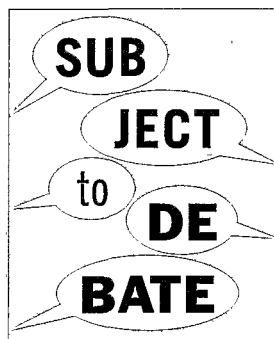
Weird Science

My first thought upon hearing that the Kansas state education board had removed evolution from its mandatory curriculum was: Go ahead! Be like that! Handicap your kids for life. Let the "secular humanists" have all the good colleges and get all the good jobs. I know this was an unworthy thought—Darwin's demotion was a political maneuver by Christian conservative politicians, not a grassroots effort by Kansas parents, much less their unfortunate children—but there you are. As a rootless cosmopolitan, I get tired of being expected to pay homage to "the heartland" as the moral center of the universe.

And creationism, honestly! In 1999! All summer, serious newspapers have felt it necessary to publish casuistical Op-Eds by apologists for "creation science"—and the Old Testament is the only biology textbook you really need, these clever fellows forgot to add. What's going on? As Stephen Jay Gould pointed out in *Time*, in no other Western country is the teaching of evolution regarded as controversial. Throughout the world, one way or another, most Christian denominations have managed to reconcile belief in God with belief in the mechanisms of natural selection. A French or German or Scandinavian politician who called for students to entertain as a reasonable deduction from existing evidence the proposition that Earth is at most 10,000 years old would be bundled off to a mental hospital.

Creation science is religion, no matter what its apologists say; let's start from there. No one looking at the physical record would determine that dinosaurs and humans coexisted, that fossils represent the creatures drowned in Noah's flood and so on. The only way those notions would even occur to you is if you considered the Bible an unerring historical document—but why would you think that unless you accepted the Bible as divine revelation of factual truth? The *Topeka Capital-Journal* asserted that "creationism is as good a hypothesis as any." Because no human witnessed the beginning of life on Earth, one guess is as good as another. Of course, a great deal of science involves making inferences about phenomena no human has witnessed—the birth of stars, the interior of the sun, subatomic particles. And, as one wag asked in a letter to the *New York Times*, would creationists argue that the vast majority of crimes, which occur unwitnessed, should not be prosecuted?

As Theodore Schick Jr. and Lewis Vaughn explain in their wonderful book *How to Think About Weird Things*, the theory of evolution fulfills all the scientific criteria of adequacy: It is falsifiable, it predicts, it leads to further discoveries, it is conservative, and it fits what we already know. That isn't to say a better theory might not come along someday, but it won't be creationism, which fails all those tests in spades. To call creationism science (or to call evolution religion, as *National Review* seemed to be doing when it recently said Darwinism and creationism are equally "fundamentalist") is to destroy the whole concept of science. After all, if the creationists are right, not just biology must go but also geology, archeology, astrophysics, physics; so must radiometric and carbon-14 dating. Indeed, creationists should be protesting every



natural history museum in the country that uses public funds to promulgate the "secular humanist" doctrine of geological time.

In a better world, science teachers would teach creationism along with evolution as an exercise in critical thinking. But critical thinking is not what creationists are interested in. Nor, so far, are the usual people who love to weigh in on educational scandals. In fact, that's one of the most interesting aspects of the creationism flap. Al Gore, who bills himself as Mr. Science, finds himself unable to speak out on

Kansas, saying that the decision to teach evolution should be left to local school boards (the same position taken by George W. Bush). And where are the doughty soldiers in the science and education wars who profess to uphold standards and truth against the irrationalist hordes? Where are the customary bemoaners of educational "fads" and politicized curriculums—Michael Kelly, William Buckley, Bill Bennett, Maureen Dowd? Sparring on ABC with a refreshingly rational George Will, William Kristol said teaching creationism was understandable enough.

If, as so many commentators maintain, it's good for black students to read *Huckleberry Finn* even if its use of the n-word in dialogue hurts their feelings (and I would say it *is* good), why isn't it good for the children of fundamentalists to study modern biology even if that unsettles their faith? If standard biology is adequate to show that breast implants don't cause autoimmune diseases, why is it useless to help us decide if eohippus is the ancestor of the modern horse? The ferocious defenders of the scientific method were quick to take to the word processor to congratulate Alan Sokal when he succeeded in publishing a parody of left-academic science critique as the real thing a few years ago. They don't seem to see that the mainstreaming of creationism presents some of the same issues as the "postmodernism" or "antifoundationalism" they despise: Both stances reject the idea of the "master narrative" of science based on reason, evidence and expertise in favor of cultural relativism; both accept the idea that "truth" is social and political and provisional, not "out there." For both, knowledge is a social construct. Creationism is just as political, and just as damaging to real education, as Afrocentrism, "Egyptian mathematics" and other self-esteemful tidbits tossed out by schools to placate powerless but angry constituencies or flatter liberal psyches. But it's infinitely more likely that incontrovertible evidence will someday show that the Egyptians really were black, that the Iroquois really did inspire the US Constitution and that women ruled in the Old Stone Age than that creationism will ever meet the standards of verifiability by which the contents of our nation's textbooks are supposedly judged.

Maybe the science wars in academia focus on the "left" because they are partly a struggle over academic turf. In the universities, fundamentalists are irrelevant. In the real world, though, fundamentalists have lots of power and lots of votes, so no one wants to alienate them. Just ask Al Gore and George W. ■

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