

A Split Emerges as Conservatives Discuss Darwin

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Published: May 5, 2007

Evolution has long generated bitter fights between the left and the right about whether God or science better explains the origins of life. But now a dispute has cropped up within conservative circles, not over science, but over political ideology: Does Darwinian theory undermine conservative notions of religion and morality or does it actually support conservative philosophy?

On one level the debate can be seen as a polite discussion of political theory among the members of a small group of intellectuals. But the argument also exposes tensions within the Republicans' "big tent," as could be seen Thursday night when the party's 10 candidates for president were asked during their first debate whether they believed in evolution. Three — Senator Sam Brownback of Kansas; Mike Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas; and Representative Tom Tancredo of Colorado — indicated they did not.

For some conservatives, accepting Darwin undercuts religious faith and produces an amoral, materialistic worldview that easily embraces abortion, embryonic stem cell research and other practices they abhor. As an alternative to Darwin, many advocate intelligent design, which holds that life is so intricately organized that only an intelligent power could have created it.

Yet it is that very embrace of intelligent design — not to mention creationism, which takes a literal view of the Bible's Book of Genesis — that has led conservative opponents to speak out for fear their ideology will be branded as out of touch and anti-science.

Some of these thinkers have gone one step further, arguing that Darwin's scientific theories about the evolution of species can be applied to today's patterns of human behavior, and that natural selection can provide support for many bedrock conservative ideas, like traditional social roles for men and women, free-market capitalism and governmental checks and balances.

"I do indeed believe conservatives need Charles Darwin," said Larry Arnhart, a professor of political science at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, who has spearheaded the cause. "The intellectual vitality of conservatism in the 21st century will depend on the success of conservatives in appealing to advances in the biology of human nature as confirming conservative thought."

The arguments have played out in recent books, magazine articles and blogs, as well as at a conference on Thursday at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington. There Mr. Arnhart was grouped with John Derbyshire, a contributing editor at National Review, against John G. West and George Gilder, who both are associated with the Discovery Institute, which advocates intelligent design.

Mr. Derbyshire, who has described himself as the "designated point man" against creationists and intelligent-design proponents at National Review, later said that many conservatives were disturbed by positions taken by the religious right.

"There are plenty of people glad to call themselves conservatives," he said, "who don't see any reason not to support stem cell research."

The reference to stem cells suggests just how wide the split is. "The current debate is not primarily about religious fundamentalism," Mr. West, the author of "Darwin's Conservatives: The Misguided Quest" (2006), said at Thursday's conference. "Nor is it simply an irrelevant rehashing of certain esoteric points of biology and philosophy. Darwinian reductionism has become culturally pervasive and inextricably intertwined with contemporary conflicts over traditional morality, personal responsibility, sex and family, and bioethics."

The technocrats, he charged, wanted to grab control from “ordinary citizens and their elected representatives” so that they alone could make decisions over “controversial issues such as sex education, partial-birth abortion, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research and global warming.”

Advances in biotechnology — and pressure on elected Republicans to curb them — are partly responsible for the surge of interest in linking evolutionary and political theory, said those in the thick of the debate.

The fledgling field of evolutionary psychology also spurred some conservatives to invoke Darwinism in the 1990s. In “The Moral Sense” (1993), followed by “The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families” (2002), James Q. Wilson used evolution to explain the genesis of morality and to support traditional family and sex roles. Conservative thinkers from Francis Fukuyama to Richard Pipes have drawn on evolutionary psychology to support ideas like a natural human desire for private property and a biological basis for morality.

Debates over Darwinism became more pointed in 2005, however, as school districts considered teaching intelligent design, and President Bush stated that it should be taught along with evolution. The conservative commentator Charles Krauthammer wrote in Time magazine that to teach intelligent design “as science is to encourage the supercilious caricature of America as a nation in the thrall of a religious authority.” George F. Will wrote that Kansas school board officials who favored intelligent design were “the kind of conservatives who make conservatism repulsive to temperate people.”

Mr. Arnhart, in his 2005 book, “Darwinian Conservatism,” tackled the issue of conservatism’s compatibility with evolutionary theory head on, saying Darwinists and conservatives share a similar view of human beings: they are imperfect; they have organized in male-dominated hierarchies; they have a natural instinct for accumulation and power; and their moral thought has evolved over time.

The institutions that successfully evolved to deal with this natural order were conservative ones, founded in sentiment, tradition and judgment, like limited government and a system of balances to curb unchecked power, he explains. Unlike leftists, who assume “a utopian vision of human nature” liberated from the constraints of biology, Mr. Arnhart says, conservatives assume that evolved social traditions have more wisdom than rationally planned reforms.

While Darwinism does not resolve specific policy debates, Mr. Arnhart said in an interview on Thursday, it can provide overarching guidelines. Policies that are in tune with human nature, for example, like a male military or traditional social and sex roles, he said, are more likely to succeed. He added that “moral sympathy for the suffering of fellow human beings” allows for aid to the poor, weak and ill.

To many people, asking whether evolution is good for conservatism is like asking if gravity is good for liberalism; nature is morally neutral. Andrew Ferguson in The Weekly Standard and Carson Holloway in his 2006 book, “The Right Darwin? Evolution, Religion and the Future of Democracy,” for example, have written that jumping from evolutionary science to moral conclusions and policy proposals is absurd.

Skeptics of Darwinism like William F. Buckley, Mr. West and Mr. Gilder also object. The notion that “the whole universe contains no intelligence,” Mr. Gilder said at Thursday’s conference, is perpetuated by “Darwinian storm troopers.”

“Both Nazism and communism were inspired by Darwinism,” he continued. “Why conservatives should toady to these storm troopers is beyond me.”

Of Mr. Arnhart, he said, “Larry has a beautiful Darwinism, a James Dobson Darwinism” — referring to the chairman of the Christian organization Focus on the Family — “a supply-side Darwinism.” But in capitalism, he added, “the winners don’t eat the losers.” Mr. West made a similar point, saying you could find justification in Darwin for both maternal instinct and for infanticide.

It is true that political interpretations of Darwinism have turned out to be quite pliable. Victorian-era social Darwinists like Herbert Spencer adopted evolutionary theory to justify colonialism and imperialism, opposition to labor unions and the withdrawal of aid to the sick and needy. Francis Galton based his “science” of eugenics on it. Arguing that cooperation was actually what enabled the species to survive, Pyotr Kropotkin used it to justify anarchism.

Karl Marx wrote that “Darwin’s book is very important and serves me as a basis in natural science for the class struggle in history.” Woodrow Wilson declared, “Living political constitutions must be Darwinian in structure and in practice.”

More recently the bioethicist and animal rights activist Peter Singer’s “Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution, and Cooperation” (1999) urged people to reject the notion that there is a “fundamental difference in kind between human beings and nonhuman animals.”

At the American Enterprise Institute’s conference, the tension between the proponents of intelligent design and of evolution was occasionally on display. When Mr. Derbyshire described himself as a “lapsed Anglican,” which he compared to “falling out of a first-floor window,” Mr. Gilder piped up, “Did you fall on your head?”

What both sides do agree on is that conservatives who have shied away from these debates should speak up. Mr. Arnhart said that having been so badly burned by social Darwinism, many conservatives today did not want “to get involved in these moral and political debates, and I think that’s evasive.”

Yet getting involved is more important than ever, after “the disaster” of “President Bush’s compassionate conservatism,” he said, because the only hope for Republicans is a “fusion of libertarianism and traditionalism, and Darwinian nature supports that conservative fusion.”

Mr. West agreed that “conservatives who are discomfited by the continuing debate over Darwin’s theory need to understand that it is not about to go away”; that it “fundamentally challenges the traditional Western understanding of human nature and the universe.”

“If conservatives want to address root causes rather than just symptoms,” he said, “they need to join the debate over Darwinism, not scorn it or ignore it.”

As for Mr. Derbyshire, he would not say whether he thought evolutionary theory was good or bad for conservatism; the only thing that mattered was whether it was true. And, he said, if that turns out to be “bad for conservatives, then so much the worse for conservatism.”

New York Times 5/5/2007