

EDITORIAL

THE DISREGARD FOR DISCARDS

I was listening to the chairman of the House Education Committee of the State of Oregon discuss the merits of the creation concept. He felt that creation was not valid. It had had its chance, it had been tested by science and had been discarded, it was therefore no longer worthy of consideration. This line of reasoning is common. A recent documentary film issued by the Scientific Research Society of North America iterates the same theme; namely, that the idea of creation had been rejected by scientists long ago. I heard somewhat the same concept expressed at a meeting sponsored by the Biological Sciences Curriculum Study. Here the speaker declared that biology textbooks should boldly assert the fact of evolution because, as he stated, “after 100 years [since Darwin] it’s about time.”

These arguments center on the concept that once an idea is discarded, it is no longer valid. This is not necessarily the case. The history of science reveals that ideas can be rejected for erroneous reasons; later, when the error is discovered, the discarded ideas are again considered valid.

Up to the 16th century there was a general belief in the spontaneous generation of life. It was commonly accepted that simpler organisms such as flies, frogs, and moths spring spontaneously from sources such as mud, decaying carcasses, water, and even fog. In fact Van Helmont (1577-1644) gained some notoriety by providing a formula for manufacturing mice. It consisted of putting grain, cheese, and old rags in a container and leaving it undisturbed in a quiet dark place like an attic. After a while mice would appear. While the results of Van Helmont’s experiments can still be confirmed today, we do not agree with his inference that mice can arise spontaneously.

The battles over spontaneous generation that ensued a little later, especially the ones over the origin of microorganisms, were prolonged and tedious. They finally ended with the carefully worked out experiments of the French scientist Louis Pasteur (1822-1895). He helped confirm the principle of biogenesis which states that only life begets life. Spontaneous generation had passed from an accepted to a discarded idea — but not for long. The idea that life can arise by itself is again given serious consideration albeit in a different format than Van Helmont’s experiments with mice. The contemporary biological literature that discusses how life could have arisen by itself is extensive. Even high-school biology textbooks go into detail describing the primitive conditions under which life could have

originated spontaneously, and a number of noted scientists have devoted their careers to supporting this concept.

The question of hibernation in birds is another example of the reacceptance of a discarded idea. In the ancient world and also more recently, it was generally believed that birds hibernate. Aristotle himself is thought to have believed that storks hibernated in trees. It was a reasonable way of explaining the disappearance of birds in winter, for, as with some of their mammalian counterparts, it was thought that they were “sleeping” during the cold winter months. Many centuries later as the science of ornithology developed, it was discovered that birds disappear in winter not because of hibernation but because they migrate to a more salubrious environment. It was learned that some birds (e.g., the arctic tern) travel as far as 11,000 miles. Thus migration became the accepted dogma. All seemed well until the naturalist Edmund C. Jaeger discovered a poorwill unmistakably hibernating in a cave in Southern California! We are back again, at least in part, to the belief that birds hibernate.

Because scientists sometimes readopt once-rejected ideas, it does not seem valid to argue that creation should no longer be considered because it is a discard. As new information comes forth, old ideas that better fit the new data may be revived.

An asset of scientific methodology is its openness to ideas and its consequent willingness for revision. However, this openness is negated if old ideas are not reconsidered as new pertinent data come forth. Creation may be a discarded idea to some scientists, but it can also be an idea to be tested and retested by science as new information becomes available.

It is noteworthy that some scientists have never discarded creation. One main reason is that no one has been able to come up with a competing idea that explains all the evidence for intelligent design in our natural world. To a number of scientists it is too much to expect that all of life with its impressive complexities at several levels of organization came about as a result of only natural causes. Until evolutionists can provide better answers to this and other basic questions of origins, it is especially important not to label the creation concept as unworthy of reconsideration because it has been discarded. This is not the way science works.

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