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12.06.2016

## [A Pseudo-Darwin Quotation](#) [5]

“It is asking a great deal of intelligent people to believe the theory which is not supported by evidence, just where evidence is most needed. Now these missing links, if there are any, should be more highly developed than the forms lower down in the scale from which they evolved, and therefore more able to continue. Then why not continue, if they ever evolved, while their weaker progenitors, less able to live, continue to this day?”

In “Evolution—A False Philosophy,” a pamphlet published sometime in the 1930s by William Bell Riley (1861–1947), the Baptist preacher who was as responsible for the flourishing of the antievolution crusade of the 1920s as anyone, there appears a spurious

quotation attributed to Darwin. Riley is here concerned to claim that the “whole doctrine of transmutation”—change in species—is “unknown to nature’s ways,” and he naturally wants to invoke Darwin in support.

This fact was admitted by Darwin himself. Here is Darwin’s language from “The Descent of Man,” the 1874 edition:

“It is asking a great deal of intelligent people to believe the theory which is not supported by evidence, just where evidence is most needed. Now these missing links, if there are any, should be more highly developed than the forms lower down in the scale from which they evolved, and therefore more able to continue. Then why not continue, if they ever evolved, while their weaker progenitors, less able to live, continue to this day?”

Now listen to Darwin’s answer to his own question:

“But this objection will not appear of much *weight* to those who, from general reasons, believe in the general principle of Evolution.” (emphasis in original)

Although the answer is Darwin’s (except for the emphasis on “weight” and the capital *E* in “Evolution”), the question is not. What Darwin wrote was, “The great break in the organic chain between man and his nearest allies, which cannot be bridged over by any extinct or living species, has often been advanced as a grave objection to the belief that man is descended from some lower form,” to which he answered, “But this objection,” etc.

Riley was in error in misrepresenting “It is asking,” etc., as a passage quoted verbatim from Darwin, of course. (It seems to be his own invention; neither it nor any of its distinctive phrases seems to have appeared in print previously.) And he would have been in error in presenting it as a gloss of what Darwin wrote. Darwin, after all, is not talking about “missing links” in general, but about “missing links” in human evolution in particular. Moreover, Darwin is talking *only* about “missing links,” whereas Riley is importing what is, in essence, the “why are there still monkeys?” challenge, discussed, e.g., by NCSE’s Eric Meikle and Eugenie C. Scott in [“Why Are There Still Monkeys?”](#) [6] in *Evolution: Education and Outreach* in 2010, by NCSE’s Stephanie Keep in [“Let’s Stop Monkeying About, Shall We?”](#) [7] in 2014, and no doubt by long-suffering science teachers in classrooms across the country right now in 2016.

By the way, it’s worth asking when the “why there are still monkeys?” challenge first emerged, but it’s hard to answer the question—there are lots of ways to express the same basic thought, after all. The earliest instance I found in a quick search was in a squib on “Spontaneous Generation” in the May 19, 1907, issue of *The Freethinker* by W. P. Ball, who mentions “the extremely superficial, but by no means uncommon, objection, in which the Evolutionist is asked, ‘If monkeys evolved into men, why are there any monkeys left; why have they not *all* become men?’” (emphasis in original)—suggesting that the challenge was shopworn even then. (I disagree, parenthetically, with Ball’s diagnosis, which locates the trouble in “a fundamental misconception of the work of Natural Selection”; the problem, as Meikle and Scott and Keep suggest, involves a misconception about the patterns rather than the processes of evolution.)

A further problem with Riley’s treatment of Darwin is that he quotes only the first sentence of Darwin’s response to the problem he articulated, leaving the reader to infer that the response consisted solely in

the assertion that the evolutionist would refuse to acknowledge the problem. Of course, Darwin proceeds to explain, at length, the reasons for the “great break,” citing the facts that “in all the vertebrate classes the discovery of fossil remains has been a very slow and fortuitous process” and that “those regions which are the most likely to afford remains connecting man with some extinct ape-like creature, have not as yet been searched by geologists.” Even so, he notes, it is still possible to discern the outlines of the human lineage, with “Man, the wonder and glory of the Universe,” proceeding from the ancient Old World monkeys. Yet Riley complains, “This is the sad thing of the whole Evolutionary propaganda.”

Curiously, in “Darwin’s Philosophy and the Flood,” also a pamphlet of Riley’s published sometime in the 1930s, Riley accurately quotes not only the answer but also the objection from *The Descent of Man*, suggesting that the spurious passage from “Evolution—A False Philosophy” misattributed to Darwin was the product of carelessness rather than malice. There is also no trace of the importation of the “why are there still monkeys” challenge in “Darwin’s Philosophy and the Flood.” Nevertheless, Riley still quotes only the first sentence of Darwin’s response, and immediately thereafter explicitly charges, “In other words, they are not open to conviction! ... THEY ARE NOT EVEN DISTURBED BY ITS INSUFFICIENT PROOFS” (emphasis in original), without acknowledging even that Darwin’s answer was extensive, let alone the fact that, by the 1930s, the hominid fossil record was rapidly improving.

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