



National Center for Science Education

Defending the Teaching of Evolution in Public Schools

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Guide to *Episode 5: Why Sex?*

For a 45–60 minute dialogue on Episode 5 of *Evolution*

By Phina Borgeson, M.Div.

“Put bluntly, the creationists are committed to finding permanent, intractable mystery in nature. To such minds, even the most perfect being we can imagine still wouldn’t be perfect enough to have fashioned a creation in which life would originate and evolve on its own. The nature they require science to discover is one that is flawed, static, and forever inadequate. Science in general, and evolutionary science in particular, give us something quite different. Through them we see a universe that is dynamic, flexible, and logically complete. They present a vision of life that spreads across the planet with endless variety and intricate beauty. They suggest a world in which our material existence is not an impossible illusion propped up by magic, but the genuine article, a world in which things are exactly what they seem, in which we were formed, as the Creator once cared to tell us, from the dust of the earth itself.”

— Kenneth R. Miller, *Finding Darwin’s God* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 288–289.

Image

Peacocks, peacocks, and more peacocks. They are everywhere in this episode, with their extravagant tail feathers.

Dig

Peacocks were a favorite decorative motif for Victorians, but a stumbling block for Darwin. Why would selection favor something that might actually encumber an animal? What answers to Darwin’s dilemma are offered in the episode?

Dialogue

In Darwin’s day many theologians seemed to feel that the beauties of the natural world were created by God to inspire human reverence. The popular English hymn “All things bright and beautiful” typifies this sentiment. As evolution has expanded our knowledge, we’ve seen the utilitarian role played by much color, ornamentation, and display, and our anthropocentrism has been challenged as well. This is not to say that nature cannot inspire our awe and turn us to God, only that this is a by-product. Consider some of your favorite hymns and prayers that speak of creation. How might they better reflect an understanding that is informed by, not opposed to, evolution?

Explore

1. For more tales of sexual selection, see chapter four, pp. 73–99, of *Frogs, Flies, and Dandelions* by Menno Schilthuizen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). You might be inspired to read all of this entertaining book on a topic — speciation — usually intriguing only to evolutionary biologists.

2. The Victorians had a particularly difficult time accepting sexual selection. One of the reasons was the notion of female choice of mates. Because of their social mores around human sex roles, they were blinded to female choice in animals as a vector of evolution. It's still easy today for people to let their feelings about human beings get in the way of seeing clearly what is going on among other animals. Did you have any of these feelings watching the episode? In what ways do religious or societal sexual taboos keep us from taking an objective view of the processes of evolution and the wonders of the world around us?

Act

One of the great questions that will probably never be answered is the balance between biology and culture in determining the roles and life choices of women and men. The best approach is probably to continually pay attention to both. Take stock in your households and your faith community. Where has there been too much dependence on a “biology is destiny” approach? Where has the evidence of human evolution been ignored? (Many of the qualities we look for in pastoral leadership, for example, are those biological evolution would attribute to women, yet many denominations denied these roles to women for centuries.) Where have cultural assumptions gotten in the way not just of seeing the rest of animal life realistically, but of respecting the unique contributions of the people around us?

Please send comments on these guides, and any questions about ideas and resources for extending the conversation, to:

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