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The creationism and antievolution movements in the United States have benefited enormously from a decentralized public education system that grants relative autonomy to local and state school boards composed of elected officials; however, schools have been equally constrained by their status as government-funded institutions subject to the establishment clause, which requires them to avoid supporting any particular religion. For this reason, morality framing in the evolution and creationism debates has been and still is inextricably linked to key legislative rulings and subsequent attempts by creationists to adapt their language in response to court decisions. This dynamic has pushed creationists deeper and deeper into epistemological territory as they fight to uphold their moral convictions while at the same time co-opt scientific language and avoid religious language. During the 1960s, the United States sought to overhaul its science curriculum in response to an increasing need for a scientifically literate and capable population. However, the migration of the debate to a scientific frame has done nothing to reduce its moral salience, and, increasingly, proponents of evolution are framing their stance as a moral one.

THE POPULIST AND MAJORITARIAN VIEWPOINTS

In the United States, early opposition to the theory of evolution by natural selection took the form of populist, majoritarian (rule by the majority) rhetoric. One of the theory’s most vociferous critics at the end of the 19th century was William Jennings Bryan, a three-time Democratic nominee for president whose speeches resonated well with the values of Midwestern agrarian communities. Bryan’s political platform was built on a belief in the superiority of Christian civic morality, and he saw Christianity as the only way a society could make progress in peace. Bryan professed the nobility of “plain people” and often spoke of the need to protect them from the elite classes (originally the bankers opposing free silver and later the educated scientists and professors advocating that evolution be taught in public schools) (Maddux, 2013).
Through thousands of speeches spanning two decades, Bryan gave clear and unambiguous voice to the moral and ethical arguments for antievolution views in America at the dawn of the 20th century. In one of his earliest antievolution speeches, “The Prince of Peace,” Bryan declared, “Religion is the foundation of morality in the individual and in the group of individuals” (Bryan, 1914). In “The Menace of Darwinism,” a speech first given in 1921, Bryan declared that religion and belief in God are the “mainspring” upon which man’s life depends—“that anything that weakens belief in God weakens man,” that “it is the duty of the moral, as well as the Christian world to combat” any influence that threatens belief in God, and that Darwinism “is obscuring God and weakening all the virtues that rest upon the religious tie between God and man.” According to Bryan, he was the voice of an American majority that was “trying to protect itself from the effort of an insolent minority to force irreligion upon the children under the guise of teaching science” (Bryan, 1921; Maddux, 2013).

THE FUNDAMENTALIST VIEWPOINT

The Christian fundamentalist movement of the early 1900s arose out of the ruins of a fractured movement (premillennial dispensationalist) that viewed the return of Christ to earth as near. When the end of World War I in 1918 did not result in the return of Christ despite the confident predictions of dispensationalist religious leaders, this failure was capitalized on by an evangelical leader named William Bell Riley. He formed the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association, organized the World Conference on Christian Fundamentals, and began publishing a periodical titled The Christian Fundamentalist (Evans, 2017).

The fundamentalists adopted an argumentative frame toward evolution that was grounded in empirical reasoning. Throughout the 1920s, fundamentalists (including Riley) engaged professors and experts in the field of evolutionary biology to public debates. In these debates, fundamentalists argued for the scientific implausibility of the theory and used the Bible as an authoritative record of historical fact to contradict scientific explanations. “The first and foremost reason for [evolution’s] elimination is the unquestionable fact that evolution is not a science; it is a hypothesis only, a speculation,” argued Riley (quoted in Numbers, 1987). This is not to say that they abandoned moral and ethical arguments altogether but that they increasingly attempted to base their arguments on science or a redefining of science, using the methods and norms of scientific discourse to argue their side (Maddux, 2013).

THE SCOPES TRIAL

In 1925 in Dayton, Tennessee, John Thomas Scopes went on trial for violating Tennessee’s Butler Act, which prohibited the teaching of evolution by natural selection in the state’s school systems. The trial addressed three primary debates, and to this day, these debates continue to frame legal challenges to teaching evolution: (1) a substantive debate of the theory of evolution itself and its scientific merit,
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(2) a procedural debate that concerned the question of whether or not ordinary citizens should be able to set curricular policies for public schools, and (3) a debate on the autonomy of teachers in their classrooms (which ironically is now used by creationists to try and allow teachers to teach alternatives to evolution) (Berkman & Plutzer, 2010).

William Jennings Bryan led the prosecution and used the platform to further promote his populist views. The burgeoning Christian fundamentalist movement, however, was at the same time endeavoring to reframe the debate in terms of (1) the alleged weaknesses of the science behind evolutionary theory and (2) the inerrancy of the Bible—the belief that the Bible was free from errors in the realm of science as well as in matters of faith. Bryan, who had taken up the antievolution cause more than 15 years prior, was increasingly ill equipped to engage in public debates of this type, and he found himself inadequately versed in the science of the time and unable to stand up to the defense’s cross-examination when Bryan agreed to take the stand as an expert witness for the creationist position. Bryan’s most common answers to the interrogations of Clarence Darrow, the lead defense attorney for Scopes, were, “I don’t know” and “I have been too busy on things that I thought were of more importance than that.” It is this mischaracterization of Bryan as a fundamentalist as opposed to a populist that, scholars argue, is the cause for his ridicule as a fundamentalist fool (Maddux, 2013).

In the end, the court in the Scopes trial steered clear of the substantive debate and upheld a majoritarian position that Scopes, as a public employee, was responsible for teaching in accordance with the desires of the people and the laws established by the Butler Act. Although Scopes’s fine did not stand up to appeal, the Butler Act was affirmed by the Tennessee Supreme Court and would have major implications for the next 30 years of antievolution efforts as Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma passed antievolution bills. By 1929, almost all school biology textbooks had been revised to appease the fundamentalist agenda (Berkman & Plutzer, 2010).

OPPOSITION TO MAJORITARIAN DEMOCRACY

In 1961, a major overhaul of America’s science curricula was undertaken in response to the Soviet Union’s successful launch of the Sputnik satellite. One outcome of this effort was a series of textbooks published under the auspices of the Biological Science Curriculum Study (BSCS). These textbooks, which included chapters on evolution, were quickly and widely adopted across the nation (Berkman & Plutzer, 2010). However, opposition from conservative Christian parents and leaders was immediate, and they argued that the inclusion of evolution in the textbooks was offensive and undermined their faith. Parents began to protest, and officials in many states requested modifications to the textbooks or pasted disclaimers in the bindings that read “evolution is simply a theory” (Berkman & Plutzer, 2010).

In 1965, teachers at Little Rock Central High School recommended a BSCS textbook, and the administration adopted the text for the upcoming school year. This presented second-year biology teacher Susan Epperson with a dilemma. The school
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had adopted a textbook that included sections on evolution, but an Arkansas law
dating from 1928 made it illegal for any teacher at a public school or university to
teach that humans “descended or ascended from a lower order of animals.”

At the trial, Arkansas’s Chancery Court ruled in Epperson’s favor for her right to
teach evolution, stating that the Arkansas law violated the First Amendment because it “tends to hinder the quest for knowledge, restrict freedom to learn, and restrain the freedom to teach” (quoted in Epperson v. Arkansas, 100). This statement by
Arkansas’s Chancery Court is significant because it legitimizes academic freedom
as a viable source of opposition to majoritarian democracy. In fact, the antievolution
law in Arkansas was passed by an initiative, that is, citizens had proposed the law,
and it was subject to a majority vote in a general election. It was approved by
63 percent of the voters (Gray, 1970). The Arkansas State Supreme Court, however,
rejected this argument upon appeal and ruled that banning evolution “is a valid exer-
cise of the state’s power to specify the curriculum in its public schools” (quoted in
Epperson v. Arkansas, 1968: fn. 7). The case then went to the U.S. Supreme Court,
which voted 9–0 in Epperson’s favor. The Supreme Court ignored arguments for
academic freedom and focused on the First Amendment’s establishment clause. Abe
Fortas, in writing for the majority, noted that “there can be no doubt that Arkansas
has sought to prevent its teachers from discussing the theory of evolution because
it is contrary to the belief of some that the Book of Genesis must be the exclusive
source of doctrine as to the origin of man” (Epperson v. Arkansas, 1968: 107).

CREATION SCIENCE, INTELLIGENT DESIGN, AND THE
EVOLUTION OF ANTE EVOLUTION LEGISLATION

The Epperson v. Arkansas ruling prompted a major shift in creationist framing
arguments. With an increasingly educated and secularized public less likely to be
swayed by evolution’s inherent threat to religion and with all their legislative efforts
being shot down by the establishment clause, creationists embarked on what would
become a decades-long push to establish scientific evidence that contradicted evolu-
tion and supported biblical interpretations of history. This had been done before,
but now they were more mindful to avoid religious language and instead stressed
the science in purer, albeit increasingly disingenuous ways. For example, the Cre-
ation Research Society headed by Henry M. Morris (1918–2006) published a hand-
book for high school teachers called Scientific Creationism (1974). In the
handbook, Morris argues that creationism could “be taught without reference to
the book of Genesis or to other religious literature or religious doctrines” and that
schools should teach only “the basic scientific creation model,” stripped of all re-
ference to its biblical origins. This framing of creationism as simply another scientific
model for human origins on par with the evolution model became known as
the two-model approach, and it would become the primary approach used to per-
suade school boards to provide space for creation science in the classroom. By the
1980s, laws and policies mandating “balanced treatment” were increasingly com-
mon (Numbers, 1992).
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After a series of court rulings making it abundantly and unambiguously clear that creationism had no place in school curricula, concerted efforts were undertaken by creationist organizations to purge their rhetoric of creationist language. For example, draft versions of a creationist textbook, Of Pandas and People, replaced about 150 instances of variations of the word “creation” with the words “intelligent design” and in one instance actually left the typographical error of “cde-sign proponents” (Matzke, 2006). Intelligent design, as espoused by the Discovery Institute’s Center for Science and Culture, was (and in many ways still is) at the leading edge of efforts to provide a scientific foundation for creationist beliefs. The Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District ruling of 2005 hindered intelligent design efforts when the school district tried to impose a policy that required the teaching of intelligent design and a federal court again appealed to the establishment clause in its decision to rule the policy unconstitutional. Since then, groundbreaking research using new statistical tools (phylogenetics) to study cultural transmission has provided a clear way of tracking the evolution of antievolution policy and legislative proposals. Using these techniques, it has been shown that a 2004 model bill created by the Discovery Institute has been modified by various states in attempts to pass antievolution policies or legislation while at the same time attempting to deny its religious origins (Matzke, 2016).

CONTEMPORARY MORAL ARGUMENTS AND MORALIZED RATIONALITY

A survey of a few of the most prominent creationist organizations including The Creation Research Institute, Discovery Institute, Answers in Genesis, and The Institute for Creation Research shows that moral arguments against evolution still play a pivotal role in their worldviews. Answers in Genesis claims, “Most evolutionists adhere to a moral code and believe in the concept of right and wrong. But evolutionists have no rational reason for this position. Thus, only creationists have a rational, logical, and consistent reason for morality” (Purdom & Lisle, 2009). The Discovery Institute lays out a syllogistic argument in its multimedia section discussing the moral implications of Darwinism, claiming that Darwinism makes plausible the idea of atheism, which is incompatible with a traditional, “transcendent” account of morality; in another section, it claims that “the idea that evolution undermines objective moral standards is hardly a recent discovery of sociobiology” (Discovery Institute, 2011).

However, as the creationist movement has had to push deeper and deeper into epistemological territory to remain in the fray, secularists have responded by increasingly taking a moral stance on issues regarding evolution and science. Interestingly, research suggests that the debate can be just as morally salient an issue for evolutionists as it is for creationists. This is a result of the psychological phenomenon of moralized rationality, that is, assigning a high degree of moralization to rationality that is statistically independent of the degree of importance ascribed to rationality (Stähl, Zaal, & Skitka, 2016).
Currently, the “new atheists,” such as popular scientists Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, are at the forefront of a social movement that increasingly argues for a moral obligation to adhere to strict standards for rational discourse and empirical scientific methodologies. Instead of engaging in the substantive debate of creationism, the new atheists are actively seeking to frame the argument as a moral one through the tools and language of science, thus attempting to provide moral frameworks and answer moral questions. As such, they present religious beliefs as inherently immoral in a way similar to how early creationists presented scientific beliefs. For example, Sam Harris’s book The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values is essentially an extended deposition of religion’s assumed monopoly on morality and a philosophical treatise on how we can and should derive our morality from science. This attempt by scientists to address the moral foundations of creationists’ arguments ushers in a new and exciting era of a now more than 150-year-old debate.

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FURTHER READING


