

Dr. Keith Benson Presents “Charles Darwin, Flounder Eyes, and Intelligent Design”

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Dr. Keith Benson’s mother was an evangelical Christian and referred to Charles Darwin’s evolution theory as “diabolical.” Benson himself doesn’t see a necessary conflict between being a devout Christian and acknowledging Darwin’s framework for how species are formed in the natural world. Benson, principal of Green College and professor in the Department of History at the University of British Columbia, spoke to a standing-room-only crowd on October 20, 2005, as part of INBRE’s Café Scientifique speaker series.



Charles Darwin published his work, the *Origins of Species*, in 1859 and, according to Benson, there is little evidence of substantial opposition against evolution theory until after the infamous Scopes trial in 1925, when high-school biology teacher John Scopes was charged with illegally teaching the theory of evolution in the state of Tennessee. Although Scopes lost, the trial was widely declared a victory for Darwin’s supporters. But the controversy has not abated, and even the title of Benson’s talk – “Charles Darwin, Flounder Eyes, and Intelligent Design” – stirred up emotions among concerned community members during the weeks leading up to the event.

Charles Darwin was shaped by the same philosophical tradition as Isaac Newton; they both studied the laws of nature by testing, measuring, and observing. Benson said this is what separates evolution and the theory of intelligent design, a view that claims the natural world is so complex that it must have been created by an intelligent force. One is based on science, whereas the other has its roots in religion and is fueled by a political and social agenda. “I would welcome a theoretical framework for intelligent design that could actually be tested,” Benson said.

Detractors of evolution argue that the occurrence of seemingly perfected organs suggests that they were carefully designed rather than randomly formed through the process of natural selection. The eyes of a young flounder, for example, sit one on each side of the head during larval development, but as the fish grows older and flattens, the eyes wander until they are placed on the same side of the head. St. George Jackson Mivart, one of those who attacked natural selection, claimed it is hard to fathom what the evolutionary stages of this organ would have looked like, and in any case, naturalists are rarely able to observe these transitional stages. Benson acknowledged that this was one of the “gaps” of the theory with which Darwin himself struggled.

According to Benson, Darwin called the problem of design in nature “insoluble,” just two years before he died. “But what scientific theory doesn’t have problems? What causes gravity? Why is water liquid?” Benson rhetorically asked the crowd and added: “Just because evolution theory has some problems doesn’t mean it’s not a robust theory.” When asked if intelligent design should be taught in schools, Benson responded that he doesn’t see any danger in students learning the background of the theory in history classes, “so that they know why we discarded certain ideas 150 years ago.”

By Linda McGurk