

# Was Darwinism Refuted Before The 20th Century?



## Orestes Brownson's Critique of Evolution: Was Darwinism Refuted before the 20th Century?

by Nadine Hays Pisani

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The question of whether Darwinism was refuted before the 20th century is a complex one with a long history. In this article, we will explore the major challenges to Darwinism that were raised in the 19th century, and assess their impact on the development of evolutionary theory.

## The Lamarckian Challenge

One of the most significant challenges to Darwinism in the 19th century came from the theory of Lamarckism, which was proposed by the French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck. Lamarckism proposed that acquired characteristics could be inherited, meaning that organisms could pass on traits that they had developed during their own lifetime to their offspring.

Lamarckism provided a potential explanation for the evolution of complex traits, such as the giraffe's long neck. According to Lamarck, the giraffe's ancestors had short necks, but over time, they stretched their necks to reach leaves on high branches, and these acquired characteristics were then passed on to their offspring. This process, known as "inheritance of acquired characteristics," seemed to provide a simple and straightforward explanation for the evolution of complex traits.

However, Lamarckism was eventually disproven by a number of experiments. In the 1880s, the German biologist August Weismann conducted a series of experiments in which he cut off the tails of mice and then bred them together. He found that the offspring of these mice did not have shorter tails, which disproved the Lamarckian theory of inheritance of acquired characteristics.

### **The Recapitulation Theory**

Another challenge to Darwinism in the 19th century came from the recapitulation theory, which was also known as the "biogenetic law." This theory, which was proposed by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, stated that the development of an individual organism recapitulates the evolutionary history of its species. In other words, Haeckel believed that the embryo of a human being passes through stages that resemble the adult forms of its evolutionary ancestors.

The recapitulation theory was popular for a time, but it was eventually disproven by a number of embryological studies. In the 1890s, the American biologist Stephen Jay Gould showed that the embryos of different species do not actually pass through stages that resemble the adult forms of their evolutionary ancestors.

## **The Orthogenesis Theory**

A third challenge to Darwinism in the 19th century came from the orthogenesis theory, which was proposed by the German paleontologist Otto Schindewolf. Orthogenesis proposed that evolution is driven by an internal force that causes organisms to evolve in a predetermined direction. In other words, Schindewolf believed that organisms have an inherent tendency to evolve towards certain goals, such as increasing complexity or adaptation to a particular environment.

The orthogenesis theory was popular for a time, but it was eventually disproven by a number of genetic studies. In the 1930s, the American geneticist Theodosius Dobzhansky showed that evolution is not driven by an internal force, but rather by random mutation and natural selection.

## **The Vitalist Challenge**

A fourth challenge to Darwinism in the 19th century came from the vitalist theory, which was proposed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson. Vitalism proposed that living organisms are fundamentally different from non-living matter, and that they are possessed of a vital force that is responsible for their organization and development.

Vitalism was a popular theory for a time, but it was eventually disproven by a number of scientific discoveries. In the 19th century, the German chemist Friedrich Wöhler showed that organic compounds could be synthesized from inorganic compounds, which disproved the vitalist theory of the origin of life. In the 20th century, the American biologist Jacques Loeb showed that the development of organisms could be explained by physical and chemical laws, which disproved the vitalist theory of the organization and development of living organisms.

The question of whether Darwinism was refuted before the 20th century is a complex one. While there were a number of challenges to Darwinism in the 19th century, none of these challenges were able to definitively refute the theory. In fact, Darwinism has only been strengthened by subsequent scientific discoveries, and it remains the foundation of modern evolutionary biology.

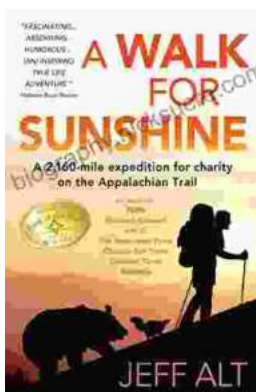


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