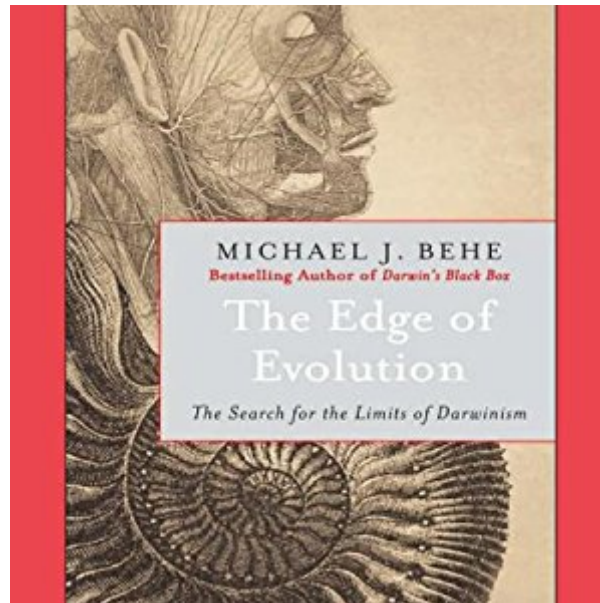


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The Edge Of Evolution: The Search For The Limits Of Darwinism



Synopsis

When Michael J. Behe's first book, *Darwin's Black Box*, was published in 1996, it launched the intelligent design movement. Critics howled, yet hundreds of thousands of readers -- and a growing number of scientists -- were intrigued by Behe's claim that Darwinism could not explain the complex machinery of the cell. Now, in his long-awaited follow-up, Behe presents far more than a challenge to Darwinism: He presents the evidence of the genetics revolution -- the first direct evidence of nature's mutational pathways -- to radically redefine the debate about Darwinism. How much of life does Darwin's theory explain? Most scientists believe it accounts for everything from the machinery of the cell to the history of life on earth. Darwin's ideas have been applied to law, culture, and politics. But Darwin's theory has been proven only in one sense: There is little question that all species on earth descended from a common ancestor. Overwhelming anatomical, genetic, and fossil evidence exists for that claim. But the crucial question remains: How did it happen? Darwin's proposed mechanism -- random mutation and natural selection -- has been accepted largely as a matter of faith and deduction or, at best, circumstantial evidence. Only now, thanks to genetics, does science allow us to seek direct evidence. The genomes of many organisms have been sequenced, and the machinery of the cell has been analyzed in great detail. The evolutionary responses of microorganisms to antibiotics and humans to parasitic infections have been traced over tens of thousands of generations. As a result, for the first time in history Darwin's theory can be rigorously evaluated. The results are shocking. Although it can explain marginal changes in evolutionary history, random mutation and natural selection explain very little of the basic machinery of life. The "edge" of evolution, a line that defines the border between random and nonrandom mutation, lies very far from where Darwin pointed. Behe argues convincingly that most of the mutations that have defined the history of life on earth have been nonrandom. Although it will be controversial and stunning, this finding actually fits a general pattern discovered by other branches of science in recent decades: The universe as a whole was fine-tuned for life. From physics to cosmology to chemistry to biology, life on earth stands revealed as depending upon an endless series of unlikely events. The clear conclusion: The universe was designed for life. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

Behe's sequel to Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution is very different from its predecessor, which deservedly created a firestorm in the scientific debate concerning origins, and will persist as a landmark in the demise of NeoDarwinian evolution. If you haven't read it, you should do so before you read this important sequel. "Darwin's Black Box" is very readable and accessible to the lay reader. I've used it in tandem with SJ Gould's Full House: The Spread of Excellence from Plato to Darwin to educate bright high-schoolers on the nature of science and scientific progress, and the debate on origins. In "Darwin's Black Box," Behe makes the compelling case that NeoDarwinian mechanisms are incapable of producing the remarkably complex biological functions and systems we observe, because multiple simultaneous mutations/developments would be required in order to produce systems that could function and then be naturally selected for, while the NeoDarwinian paradigm is limited to progress in gradual, random, incremental steps. Behe illustrates his case by clearly describing in fascinating detail several irreducibly complex biological systems, most famously the bacterial flagellum. So, having demonstrated that the NeoDarwinian model is incapable of producing irreducibly complex systems (macro-evolution), Behe addresses the next question: What CAN it do? This is where Behe's biochemistry expertise really shines.

Just as a massive star bends light, so emotion warps thought when we approach the question of origins. An eminent professor who takes the wrong position on this subject can lose tenure. A less eminent researcher may lose his job. Despite his forty-some peer-reviewed articles and a tenured faculty position, and the careful, measured tone in which he writes, Michael Behe will be called an "ID-iot," his honesty disputed, and anyone who agrees with him dismissed as an ignorant, red-neck hick who can barely muster the cognitive powers of a good high school student. In such an

environment (and if you doubt my appraisal, read some of the reviews below), it takes conscious intent to ignore manipulative appeals to the "argument from sociology" and attend to substance. For the record, Behe is not an "ID-iot." He is a sharp and thoughtful biologist who doesn't think evolution can work on its own. In this book he argues for common descent, but argues that naturalistic evolution is limited. He thinks the mechanisms suggested for powering the massive creativity and innovation in nature could not come from mutations alone. His primary tool for advancing this argument is the evolution of the malaria bug, and of human immune defenses against it, over the past several thousand years. Behe shows that while microbes can and do evolve resistances to medicine, they generally do so by breaking down in some way, as does the human body. Touching briefly on the evolution of e coli and HIV, then on other critters, he makes the case that bugs that evolve rapidly, and through huge communities, demonstrate the limits to naturalistic evolution.

After reading the many negative reviews of this book, I decided to read the book from cover to cover. I conclude that the negative reviews do not reflect the total contents of the book. Much of the material in this book is a review of the literature, which almost none of the critics found fault with. One can quibble with Behe's statistics, most of which he relied on those computed by others, but I have concluded that his main point is valid. I and others would find it very helpful if those who disagree with Behe's results to do their own calculations or refer us to the relevant literature. I have done similar calculations, only with mammals, and have concluded that combining mutational probability and the number of mammal life forms that have existed historically paints a far worse picture than Behe documents for bacteria. The number of uncorrected mutations compared with the number of mammals does not provide much hope that Darwinian mechanisms alone could provide the raw material to evolve mammals from their theoretical common ancestor. There are far too few mammals and far too few uncorrected mutations, most all of which, as has been well documented, are detrimental or, worse yet, near neutral. Many if not most mammals have historically, and today, existed in relatively small numbers. Ecologists have estimated how many Pandas, bears, big cats, and other mammals have ever existed, and the numbers are tiny compared to bacteria. The most successful mammals are the rodents and even their number is tiny compared to bacteria. I also found that many of the critical reviews of this book were just plain wrong. One of many examples is the claim that Behe "quickly" dismissed "the Red Queen hypothesis as a 'silly statement'

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