

The Origins of Idiots

Excerpted from *Silence of the Bunnies* by Dan Stark.

It's a little late in the day to revisit the debate over evolution. Darwin's theory, summarized bloodily and briefly as the "survival of the fittest," is now accepted by most rational people as fact. Fossils are sold at natural history museums. People even have warmed to the notion that we share common ancestry with primordial slime. It helps explain some of their relatives. Evolution has become comfortable because it proves what we want to believe—that we are the best, that after hundreds of millions of years of creatures and entire species losing out in the battle to survive, it is we who are kings and queens of the mountain!

Yet something is wrong. I finally was able to identify what was troubling me after spending the day with representatives of a large insurance company, trying to secure their necessary pre-approval to obtain medical treatment for my wife. These were not the truly smart but evil types that squashed the hopes of the few insured who broke through the early skirmish lines. These were the early greeters, whose job it was to be very pleasant but use their innate lack of intelligence to thin the claimant ranks by answering each question incorrectly and sending claimants the wrong forms. With evolution culling the imperfect from the herd, where did the insurance companies find such people? Or to put the question generically:

If humans endured millions of years of evolutionary struggle from which only the fittest could emerge, why are we surrounded by morons?

It's not an easy question. Evolution has been going on for a very long time, with the unfit being eaten or otherwise rendered non-procreative. The ancestors of the current batch of idiots couldn't have been too sharp either, so why did they live to sire progeny rather than ending up in the belly of a large prehistoric crocodile? Something was not quite right with Darwin's thinking.

I heard in the background an account of a baseball game. The Yankees, with the best line-up that money could buy, were losing to a lesser team. It took me a minute to realize the significance of this to evolutionary theory. Sometimes the best team didn't win! The fittest should, but did not always, win out! Darwin had overlooked probability theory.

The most enjoyable illustration of probability theory is the truism that if there are enough monkeys sitting at enough typewriters, it is probable that one monkey will type, if only by happy accident, a Shakespearean sonnet. Don't try this at home. It requires a very large number of monkeys. Even if you did round up enough, think of the feeding, the other bodily functions, the public health clearances and so on. What a mess. This helps explain why Shakespeare remains so famous despite his sometimes awkward phrasing—he could write those same sonnets without the monkeys, allowing him to produce great art at low cost and without a lot of fuss.

It's only fitting to apply this monkey story to evolution. Darwin assumed that the fittest would survive and prosper. They should, but occasionally the fittest just have a bad day. Now think of probability theory playing out through the expanse of the universe on the untold number of planets where fit and unfit do battle. If, as appears likely, we are dealing with as many planets as Shakespeare-wannabee monkeys, then the same improbable results would probably occur on some of those planets. Just as most monkeys would type gibberish, some would type a few insipid words, and every once in a long while one would type a Shakespearean sonnet, so on most planets the fittest would survive, on a few it would be a mixed bag, and on some planet somewhere the least fit would consistently survive and reproduce.

Think of an African plain where a hungry lion is stalking a herd of gazelles. Picture two gazelles. The first is a bucktoothed misfit with one foot shorter than the rest, resulting in a limp and a lack of speed out of the blocks. The other gazelle is buff and knows it, with bulging leg muscles toned by constant sprints, capable of blinding speed, and possessing a scent that drives female gazelles wild.

On virtually every one of the millions and millions of planets, the name and picture of the second gazelle will appear in the family tree.

On that planet of the long odds where sonnets are written, the buff gazelle steps in a gopher hole and traps his foot. His last coherent thought as the lion's bite forces him to lose consciousness is disbelief that bucktooth is trotting away into the area of bush popular for gazelle procreation with a nubile female. Repeat the improbable enough times, generation after generation, and you will have a planet on which only the least fit survive. Mr. Darwin studied animals, not the stars, and he likely had no thoughts about other planets where lions may chase gazelles. Darwinism needs to be refined to acknowledge that on most planets the most fit will survive, while at the extreme end of improbability there will be a planet on which only the least fit survive, and stretched out in between will be an array of planets where, to varying degrees, the most fit should but occasionally don't survive.

What kind of planet are we on? Misfits seem to be thriving, and the fit seem at increasing peril. The thought depressed me. I closed my papers and started to stand up, having no more energy to fight the forces of evil that day. As I did so, I felt a gentle tug at my sleeve by someone trying to rouse my attention. It was one of the insurance greeters with my insurance coverage forms in his hands. He looked puzzled. "They've been approved," he said. "You, know," he added, "I can't remember that ever happening before. Oh you hear stories, but to actually see coverage approved. Wow!" Thoughts of going home empty handed vanished. I had my insurance!

The greeter went over to some of his friends to tell of his participation in this rare event. They soon went off to tell others, and I was left unsupervised. I looked at the door from which the greeter had emerged with news of my coverage. The impulse was irresistible. I opened the door wanting to see and perhaps even thank him or her. I was shocked to see row after row of monkeys sitting before typewriters, denying insurance applications.

As I stared with my mouth hanging open, I noticed one monkey, wearing what looked to be an old Jerry Garcia tie, smiling at me. I'll be damned if he didn't wink. I don't know if he'll ever type a sonnet, but he did enough that day to earn a place on the mountain. I winked back, and left to share the unexpectedly good news with my wife.