"Inherit the Wind" played again

By Tony Zamparutti

Dr. A. Earl Wilder-Smith contended that the theory of evolution is wrong in a debate Wednesday night with Biochemistry Professor Jerome Lettvin '47.

The forum, entitled "Evolution and Creation: A Controversy Revisited," was sponsored by the Lecture Series Committee and the MIT Seekers and moderated by Professor Philip Morris.

Wilder-Smith, who spoke first, declared "I am not going to appeal to theology, I'm going to appeal to science." He disputed what he termed "the popular postulates of Darwinism" by quoting numerous scientific sources in his opening statement.

Wilder-Smith contended that "if we assume that organic chemistry did it [created life] at the start," we should be able to do it today in the laboratory.

He concluded that if there was a process of evolution, it had to occur "by programming" from some outside force. "Concept is the origin of life."

According to Wilder-Smith, each species is a "storage and retrieval system," and "you can't change one holistic storage and retrieval system into another." He asserted that there is "no evidence" for evolutionary relationships between species, and "there are no transitional fossils."

In his opening remarks, Lettvin said that "it strikes me as most important that the metaphysical aspects he discussed" in the debate. Although he remarked "I am not a scientist," Lettvin said that "the fundamental thing" in science is "to make sense out of the works around us" in nature.

Turning to the concept of creationism, Lettvin said "to imagine a God who has to make hundreds of species of flies" was somewhat ridiculous. "I do not object to creationism... But I consider it an administrative slate to avoid thinking." Lettvin continued, "We have only the beginning of information theory" that Wilder-Smith used as part of his argument.

Lettvin illustrated his points by telling a story about the evolution of knives in Harvard Square.

Wilder-Smith said in rebuttal that "variations on a theme are a great concept of creationism." He claimed that one species being transformed into another by random events was analogous to changing a magnetic recording of one piece of music into another specific piece by random processes.

Lettvin countered by saying "there is no noise in the world, only causality."

Lettvin postulated in his rebuttal that "the world was created an hour ago. Let us suppose this is the case. My strategy for looking at the world would be the same." Since we have no way of determining the exact time of a creation, "let us not suppose it occurred at any specific time," he concluded.

Morrison then opened the debate to questions from the audience. Most of the questions were directed toward Wilder-Smith.

In response to one question, Wilder-Smith said "I have no evidence that one species changed into another called man."

Lettvin quickly countered, saying "I don't know what in the world you mean by evidence... Almost nothing [in science] works on the basis of direct evidence. What we're talking about is theory."

Although Morrison tried to be an impartial moderator he interjected to explain one response by Wilder-Smith to a question from the audience. Morrison also shook his head at several other statements made by Wilder-Smith, but kept silent.

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