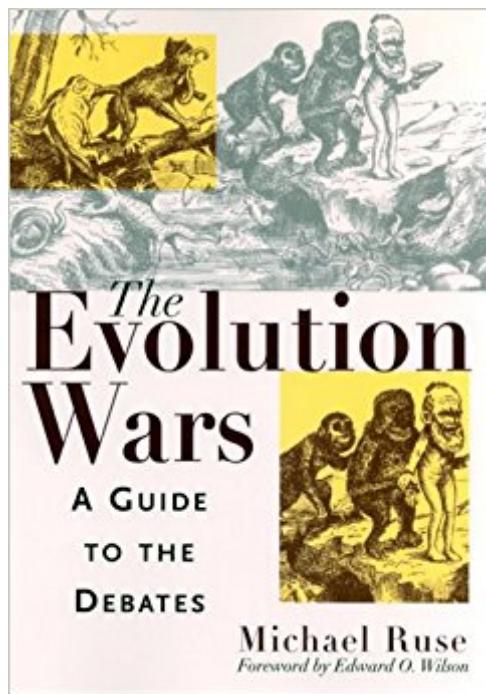


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The Evolution Wars: A Guide To The Debates



Synopsis

The Evolution Wars draws on history, science, and philosophy to examine the development of evolutionary thought through the past two and a half centuries. It focuses on the debates that have engaged, divided, and ultimately provoked scientists to ponder the origins of organisms—including humankind—paying regard to the nineteenth-century clash over the nature of classification and debates about the fossil record, genetics, and human nature. Much attention is paid to external factors and the underlying motives of scientists. In these pages you will meet Charles Darwin's ebullient grandfather Erasmus, the contentious Frenchmen Georges Cuvier and Etienne Geoffroy Stain-Hillaire, new creationist Phillip Johnson, the brilliant J. B. S. Haldane, outspoken Richard Dawkins, and many other stars of the debates. The Evolution Wars explores the ten greatest controversies surrounding evolution in world history, with emphasis on recent times, including the infamous Scopes trial of the 1920s: the search for human origins and speculation about the “missing link,” spurred by the discovery of “Lucy”; the debate surrounding the new theory of paleontology proposed by Stephen Jay Gould; and the rise of teaching “creation science” in public school as a subject on par with evolution. Although the author takes a strong stand on the side of evolution, he also shows respect for dissenting viewpoints. Thus, the book is intellectually rewarding not only for evolutionists but also for opponents of evolution theory, especially those who want to see how one of the great ideas of Western civilization resonates through time, both within and beyond the scientific community.

Book Information

Paperback: 352 pages

Publisher: Rutgers University Press; Revised ed. edition (September 1, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0813530369

ISBN-13: 978-0813530369

Product Dimensions: 7 x 0.7 x 10 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars 8 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #675,705 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #168 in Books > Christian Books & Bibles > Theology > Creationism #3558 in Books > Science & Math > Evolution #3629 in Books > Science & Math > History & Philosophy

Customer Reviews

"Ruse delivers an engaging, thought-provoking, and witty analysis of the history of evolutionary thought. . . . A must read." -- Choice

Award-winner: Outstanding Academic Title 2000 CHOICE --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Michael Ruse, a Professor of Philosophy at FSU, and a veteran of the evolution-vs.-creation tug-of-war for the hearts and minds of the American public provides an excellent overview for the layman of the intellectual debates that have raged between supporters and opponents of Charles Darwin and his theory of descent with modification, commonly referred to as evolution. Ruse also highlights and elucidates the points of view of the various types of evolutionary scholars, including the classicists, neo-Darwinists, sociobiologists, etc., and offers his own perspective regarding the relative merits of each of these approaches. The book is meticulously referenced, and each chapter includes comprehensive lists of additional reading material for those interested in more in-depth study of the particular chapter's subject matter. Overall, this book is an invaluable resource to those interested in understanding the current status of evolutionary thought among scientists, and how that thought (pardon the pun) "evolved" over the past two and a half centuries.

This book does a wonderful job of presenting a wide variety of debates that have surrounded evolutionary theory from the time of Darwin to the present. Ruse makes his own positions known, but tries to present all sides fairly, and for the most part does it well. He is especially interesting in his dissection of the underlying philosophical concerns that have driven the discussion of evolution. In spots the writing rambles somewhat and can become unclear. After going to great lengths to define what is meant by "evolution," Ruse makes no such effort to define his term, "secular religion," which recurs frequently throughout his discussions. In other places, the author veers off in a new direction before finishing his point. For example, while addressing Philip Johnson's criticism of the "methodological naturalism" of science, Ruse slides off into the question whether one can be a methodological naturalist and still believe in God. It's a fascinating and worthwhile discussion, but it leaves out what seems to me to be the more important question in response to Johnson: can one do science at all without assuming that physical events have predictable physical causes? For serious students of the subject, this book will not be the last word. For general readers it opens up a window on the rich field of evolutionary science and the debates that have surrounded it. The suggested additional reading at the end of each chapter should help

anyone who is interested in pursuing a topic further. It helps to have some basic background in biology to understand this book, but no extensive knowledge is necessary.

...to provide an INTRODUCTION to the multiple debates spawned by the introduction of Darwinian theory...it is clear, concise, and interesting...more to the point it provides excellent references to allow readers to further pursue those debates and controversies which they find most interesting.

With due recognition of the importance of a son's opinion, Michael Ruse's book is simply good, not the best. I'd recommend two others for different reasons. DAWKINS VS GOULD by Kim Sterelny because it's much more succinct without losing the substance of the debate; also THE DARWIN WARS since it's written by a journalist for a general audience, and it doesn't assume readers have a biology background. This last point is the main criticism I have with THE EVOLUTION WARS especially since the book bills itself as "A guide to the Debates". Ruse writes in a style that is not easily accessible by non scientists. In fact he is on record as saying that the "popularizers" of science do their field of study a disservice. If that's the authors view he should not be surprised if the vast number of popular science readers do this book a disservice by ignoring it. It's the authors fault, and it's also a pity because Ruse is by far the most knowledgeable of the three. What he does better than the others is put the debate into it's historical setting, tracing the origins right back to Erasmus Darwin (Charles' grandfather). As a philosopher, Ruse is also the best equipped to deal with the nexus of religion and science. The book is ultimately rewarding but it's a bit of a slog. I got annoyed in parts where the opportunity for "simplification" and clarity for a general reader presented itself, but Ruse instead chose to express his scientific prowess.

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