

Interview with Dr. John West, author of *Darwin's Conservatives: The Misguided Quest*

This is an edited transcript of a recent interview with Dr. West about his latest book, *Darwin's Conservatives* and the strange relationship between some conservatives and Darwinism. The interview originally was broadcast on ID The Future (<http://intelligentdesign.podomatic.com>) on November 3, 2006.

A number of conservatives, such as George Will, James Q. Wilson, and Larry Arnhart, recently have been defending Darwinian biology, even urging conservatives to draw on Darwin's theory for support. Dr. John West joins us today to talk about his forthcoming book, *Darwin's Conservatives: The Misguided Quest*, in which he argues that the quest for Darwinian conservatism is fundamentally flawed. Dr. West is a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute and was previously the chair of the Department of Political Science and Geography at Seattle Pacific University. Dr. West has written, edited, or co-authored ten books, including last year's critique of Judge Jones's ruling in the *Kitzmiller vs. Dover* trial, *Traipsing Into Evolution*.

What made you want to write a book about conservatism and Darwinism?

Dr. John West: Well, actually, it was what you already mentioned. An increasing number of conservatives like George Will, or Charles Krauthammer, or at *National Review*, John Derbyshire, have either been attacking intelligent design or advocating that we ought to follow Darwin's theory, blasting anyone who's critical of Darwin. I think they're misguided, and I wanted to point that out.

Why do you think some of these conservatives are so quick to defend Darwin or attack intelligent design?

I think one key reason is that it's fashionable. In the nineteenth century we had Marx and Freud, and both of them have been debunked and refuted, but Darwin is still some sort of secular saint.

Also, I think there's ignorance. If you look particularly at George Will and Charles Krauthammer and some of the things that they've said, it's really apparent that they haven't been keeping up with things. For example, Charles Krauthammer castigated the Board of Education in Kansas for trying to impose intelligent design in their curriculum. The Kansas Board of Education didn't do that. In fact, they did the exact opposite. They actually said that they weren't putting intelligent design in the curriculum, they were just studying the scientific criticisms for and against Darwin's theory. It's obvious that Krauthammer, when he said this, hadn't even read the science standards.

So I think there is a large dose of ignorance, and then I think, finally, there are some conservatives who keep this issue at arms-length because they don't think it's important and they'd rather not get into it. They think, "let's just focus on tax policy or even issues

like partial-birth abortion” and that this is just an arcane debate over the finer points of biology or philosophy, when in fact, Darwinism really is intertwined with a lot of key debates today about the economy, about limited government, about bioethics, about morality. Far from being arcane, it really is a fundamental debate that conservatives should be interested in.

In sounds like this sort of ignorance about the issue is combined with this sort of politically incorrect attitude that people don’t want to take, so they decide that this isn’t an issue that they’re going to challenge.

There are some, though, who are more thoughtful than others. Who would you say are the ones that are challenging, picking up on the issue, and are defending conservatism from a Darwinian perspective in a thoughtful manner?

James Q. Wilson and Larry Arnhart are probably the most thoughtful proponents of this view. Arnhart, who is a political science professor and political theorist at Northern Illinois University, wrote a book last year called *Darwinian Conservatism*. A large part of my book dissects his arguments. Dr. Arnhart and I have had some interesting discussions, including in Philadelphia just a few weeks ago, where we sort of went at it. I do think he’s thoughtful, but I think he’s thoughtfully wrong, and I try to show that.

If Larry Arnhart is a thoughtful Darwinian conservative, who is the least thoughtful?

I’d rather not answer that! People can read my book and judge for themselves.

Some conservatives argue that Darwinism protects us against utopian government because it establishes that many of our dispositions are rooted in biology and can’t be changed. What do you think of that argument?

Two things. One is that some Darwinian conservatives confuse biology with Darwinism. They equate any showing that we have a biological nature with Darwinism. I think that’s just false. I mean, we can understand that there are basic biological differences between men and women, which I certainly believe, and that we have dispositions that are based out of our biology, without buying into the Darwinist story that these came about through a purposeless process of survival of the fittest.

But another issue here is that the track record of Darwinism when it comes to utopianism is pretty clear. Over the past hundred years, Darwinists have been at the forefront of promoting utopian schemes, particularly eugenics, which resulted in more than 60,000 people being sterilized against their will, many of whom would not be considered mentally handicapped in today, and this was just abhorrent. Yet the people who were promoting it the most were the leading Darwinian biologists. That’s just one issue. I recount several in my book. This idea that Darwinism somehow is a good fit for limited government or keeping the government out of utopian schemes to remake the world – history refutes that.

In addition to the arguments about utopian government, I've also heard some conservatives argue for Darwin's theory based on an economic idea, the idea that natural selection and survival of the fittest fit with free enterprise, that it's really analogous to the idea of competition in a free market. Why don't you agree with that argument?

Ironically, Darwin's theory in the nineteenth century was primarily used to attack capitalism as nothing but survival of the fittest, so it was leftists who were anti-conservative who really liked that analogy because they thought it could stigmatize capitalism. That's also one reason why most capitalists – not all, but most in the nineteenth century and beyond – didn't like the claim that Darwinism was analogous to capitalism. They thought it was too negative. Nineteenth century free marketeers and capitalists thought, just like George Gilder today, that capitalism benefits everyone. The Darwinian view really grew out of Thomas Malthus's idea that we need to be concerned about human overpopulation and that you should apply survival of the fittest in nature to human society. Nineteenth century capitalists thought that was way too negative because it suggests the only way one person can get ahead is by walking over another person's dead body. They pointed out that, in fact, free economic exchange benefits both sides. It benefits the poor as well as people who are not poor.

Fundamentally, Darwinism and free enterprise aren't a good fit because the things you see that make competition go are really intelligently designed. When someone designs a product, it is because they've worked on it, they've had an idea. It's not a random mutation; it's not a random variation. So the thing that makes competition work is all the intelligent designers who are making things they think will add to our wealth and add to our creativity and benefit human society. These products and innovations are not blind, random variations of the sort called for in Darwinism.

I think that's where George Gilder comes from because he talks about creativity and imagination. Beyond that, what do you think is the most important reason that Darwinism doesn't support conservatism, in your view?

I'd have to say it's Darwin's undercutting of any sense of universal moral truth or even universal human rights. In the *Descent of Man* Darwin makes very clear that morality is a function of natural selection and the current environment. So although our current dictates of morality—say, kindness, or treating other people fairly—help our current society, if the environmental conditions for survival change, they can go completely out the door. Thus, trying to have a permanent basis for things like limited government or human rights is very hard in a Darwinian sense because Darwinism says that anything that exists, even something like rape, as described by a recently written book about the natural history of rape, has to serve some sort of biological function. In some sense it's blessed by natural selection, but if the environment changes, you get something completely different.

Where this really comes out is in Darwin's own writing. He has this startling passage where he compares us to hive bees. This brings out the radical reductionism and moral relativism that is endemic to Darwinism. Darwin said, "If, for instance, men were reared under precisely the same conditions as hive bees, there can hardly be a doubt that our unmarried females would, like the worker bees, think it a sacred duty to kill their brothers, and mothers would strive to kill their fertile daughters, and no one would think of interfering."

What he's saying here is that if we had the same environmental conditions for survival that hive bees are subjected to, it would then be moral for brothers and sisters to kill each other, and for parents to kill off their daughters. This is radically relativistic. How do you have a permanent standard of things like limited government and basic human rights when they are subject to complete change depending on the environmental conditions?

This is all very fascinating. Thank you very much for answering our questions. The forthcoming book is *Darwin's Conservatives: The Misguided Quest* by Dr. John West, which will be published by Discovery Institute Press in November.