

Get off Chuck's back!

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(PhysOrg.com) -- If Charles Darwin were alive today, he would be shaking his head and asking, "Why is everybody always picking on me?"

One Michigan State University professor has heard enough. Danita Brandt, [paleontologist](#) and coordinator of MSU's Darwin Discovery Days, half jests, "It's time to get off Chuck's back!"

The latest incarnation of how Darwin's work is misconstrued came when a political candidate questioned why we don't see apes evolving today. The counter argument was that evolution takes a long time. Stating that evolution is a myth is off the mark. And the rebuttal is off-base, too, because time isn't the issue, said Brandt, a professor of geological sciences.

"Darwin did not say that humans evolved from apes," she said. "His theory of descent explains that humans and other [primates](#) share a [common ancestor](#) and are therefore more closely related to each other than they are to groups like reptiles or fish."

Brandt acknowledges that the last common ancestor of humans and apes must have been ape-like. (She's quick to point out, though, that it must have been human-like, too.) The evolutionary lineage that produced that common ancestor split with one branch leading to the genus "Homo," and the other leading elsewhere.

"Humans are humans and apes are apes; there's no transmogrifying one into another," Brandt said with a smile. "That train left the station 7

million years ago when the last ancestor common to humans and chimps climbed down from the trees and took up knitting."

And while we're at it, let's clear up some other misconceptions:

- Darwin did not invent the idea of evolution. Naturalists hundreds of years before Chuck considered the possibility that species change over time.
- Chuck did not coin the phrase, "Survival of the fittest." That honor goes to economist Herbert Spencer. Darwin did, however, use Spencer's popular phrase in later editions of "The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection."
- Darwin was a spiritual person. In fact he once studied to be a minister. He did have his doubts, though, that humans could ever know whether God exists. Darwin wrote in a letter, "I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. I think that generally (and more and more as I grow older), but not always, that an agnostic would be more correct description of my state of mind."

It is interesting that when the topic is debated, cynics attack the man rather than the concept, Brandt noted. If Darwin had not published his observations of evolution, someone else certainly would have. (In fact, Alfred Russell Wallace's paper on natural selection was read at the same scientific meeting where Darwin's iconic work was presented.)

"Darwin is to evolution as Newton is to gravity," she said. "But attacking Newton's writings does not affect the reality of gravity, and disparaging Chuck's work does not negate the fact of [evolution](#)."

Provided by Michigan State University

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