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The Eclipse of Darwinism

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As an anthro major, I learned that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection underwent a barrage of criticism after the *Origin* was published and before the modern synthesis with genetics clinched the deal.

But I didn't know until years later just how bad it got.

In his 1942 book about the modern synthesis, Julian Huxley described the 1880s to 1920s as "the eclipse of Darwinism." Support for the theory actually dwindled during that period, with ever more biologists feeling it was inadequate to explain all the evidence. Probably didn't help that Darwin kept putting out ever-weaker new editions as he bent over backwards to answer concerns without access to the evidence that would eventually put the theory over the bar. For a while, it was plausible that Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection would be completely thrown over as alternatives were explored, including

- **Orthogenesis** (the idea that life has a natural tendency to change over time in a single direction without external cause)
- **Neo-Lamarckism** (that the features acquired by parents during a lifetime are passed on to progeny)
- **Mutationism** (that new species are created in a single step by mutation)

- **Theistic evolution** (that a supreme being causes the gradual change of forms according to a divine plan)

What Darwin's theory had lacked was a recognized mechanism for heredity. That mechanism had been figured out by Gregor Mendel and even published in the *Proceedings of the Society of Nine Isolated Moravians* in 1866. But it wasn't until the turn of the 20th century that biologist William Bateson and the statistician Udny Yule connected Mendel and Darwin, setting in motion the modern synthesis that would eventually snap everything into place. By the time Huxley's book named the synthesis in 1942, no substantial dissent remained among biologists. Darwin's theory was the accepted explanation for the diversity of life on Earth.

It's an even better example than I thought of how science works.