
How the Mouse Lost its Tail: A Brief History of Lamarckophobia

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Abstract

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Abstract – Lamarck has gotten a bad rap. For over a century, between the 1880's and the 1980's, he played the role of befuddled mystic and believer in the obviously false idea that the offspring of mice with amputated tails are tailless. Even now, biologists and philosophers of biology often cast "Lamarckism" as the principal threat to a rational, scientific understanding of evolution. But in fact, Lamarck himself was deeply committed to a materialist, mechanist and rigorously naturalist account of the development of species. He described living organisms as machines, fully material entities, but not as brute machines. Instead, Lamarck's living machines were agents of their own transformation: machines whose mechanical development and functioning had to be understood in historical terms, as mechanisms that emerged through their own historical activity. The paper examines Lamarck's alternative model of mechanist biology, let us call it "active mechanism," and especially the politics of its banishment from the halls of established science.

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