



Darwin's theory of evolution was ridiculed by wags of the day — this cartoon appeared in *The London Sketch Book* of 1874

# From ape to Web man

**O**ur progress from apes to *homo sapiens* has always been the subject of fierce debate, even today, nearly a century and a half after Charles Darwin astounded the world with his book *On The Origin of Species*.

As part of BBC2's Evolution Weekend from this Friday, which commemorates the 140th anniversary of the classic work, online users can enter a debate on human evolution with some of the world's leading authorities by visiting BBC Education's Web site. They can also read specially commissioned material by noted Darwinian scholars.

Is homosexuality in the genes? Are we naturally hard-working or lazy? Can we inherit criminal tendencies? These questions are sure to generate heated argument among a TV panel on Saturday night, and the public have a rare chance to join in afterwards.

Participants in BBC2's *The Darwin Debate*, about the effect of evolution on society, include broadcaster Jonathan Miller, who has written on

TV's evolution debate is moving to cyberspace, says **Gavin Hadland**. But what would Darwin have said?

evolution; genetics professor Steve Jones; neurologist Steven Pinker; and anthropology professor Meredith Small. Some of the questions in the televised debate will come from Web site postings.

The online forum will include Jones and new guests including author and Church of England Reader Russell Stannard and Darwin expert James Moore. Joining the debate from the US will be George Dyson, author of *Darwin Among the Machines*, which linked evolution with technology. The forum is open from 11.15pm on Saturday after *The Darwin Debate*.

George Wright, a researcher for the show, says: "This will not be a cosy common room chat. It will be a raging debate. The discussion will be accessible to everyone worldwide using even the most basic

computer. We hope people at home will question their own beliefs by the end of the debate."

Hugh Montefiore, the former Bishop of Birmingham, who writes on the BBC site about being a Christian and a Darwinist, initially declined to take part in the TV debate but changed his mind after relishing the chance to argue with his academic adversaries. But sadly, because of a leg injury, he cannot appear.

Tony Pearson, Web producer for the weekend, says: "The BBC's qualities are being used to their fullest extent this weekend. It's amazing how heated evolutionary arguments can get."

Since much of the Evolution Weekend's output will be streamed over the Internet, the BBC is expecting a lot of interest and questions from the US.

Commissioning executive Mike Flood Page says: "The whole scientific world has contributed to the weekend. Now the whole world can take part in the debate."

Other TV highlights in the weekend include *The Fossil Roadshow* on Friday night, in which amateur fossil hunters visit experts at the Natural History Museum in London. Digital images of the best finds will appear on the Web site, enabling experts around the world to contribute insights.

Visitors to the site also have the chance to grow their own organism with an interactive program called *Biotopio*, presented by Anthony Liekens. Users design cells from a petri dish which grow appendages and can eat, move and breed according to their shape. If the "creators" wish, the BBC can throw all the organisms together in a large environment and let people know how their organisms fare.

● *The Evolution Weekend Web site is at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/education>*