

Leaders and Followers in the Intelligent-Design Movement

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Why did I devote the better part of a July weekend to attending a creationist conference in Kansas City called “Darwin, Design, and Democracy III: Teaching Origins Science Objectively”? It certainly wasn’t for the joy of hearing clichés about how “irreducibly complex” machines somehow defy Darwinian explanations, or how the genome possesses “specified complexity” explicable only by invoking supernatural agents. Nor was it to be informed that Darwinians, through skull-duggery and anti-God militancy, have managed to obtain a dissent-crushing stranglehold on science. And I had no desire to hear pronouncements that evolution, far from bringing sense and unity to the study of life, is the cornerstone of a secularist worldview that is not only amoral but possibly communist and racist besides.

The conference was promoting intelligent-design (ID) theory, which emerged roughly a decade ago and quickly became the rallying cry of evolution-doubters who craved intellectual respectability. Not for them the ridiculous excesses of the young-Earthers, with their wholesale rejection of modern science and thinly veiled fundamentalism. ID purported to offer a purely scientific critique of Darwinism. It appeared to be informed by cutting-edge data and was decked out with extravagant mathematical notation and scientific jargon. It was presented by a small band of iconoclasts who claimed to work unencumbered by the philosophical blinders of naturalistic science.

In public, ID proponents claim only that certain aspects of natural history depend on an intelligent agent for an explanation. This, they maintain, is ob-

vious to anyone whose brain has not been befogged by science’s naturalistic bias. In private, ID supporters run the gamut from young-Earth creationists to those who accept the common descent of humans and other species.

The intellectual heavy lifting of the movement is done by biochemist Michael Behe, professor of biological sciences at Lehigh University, and mathematician William Dembski, professor in the conceptual foundations of science, a specially created position at Baylor University. Behe argues that if a multipart biochemical machine becomes nonfunctional when one of its parts is removed, then the machine must be irreducibly complex and so impervious to gradualistic Darwinian explanations. Dembski suggests that just as the intricacy and recognizability of the faces on Mount Rushmore tell us immediately that they were designed (and did not form by weathering), so the complexity and functionality of biological systems indicate that they were designed as well. Philosophical support is contributed by Phillip Johnson, emeritus professor of law at the University of California–Berkeley, and Alvin Plantinga, professor of philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. They argue that evolution is accepted not because of its ability to provide testable explanations, but because of a commitment to naturalism and, by implication, atheism.

Social conservatives have shamelessly peddled ID to gain a foothold for their agenda. So far there has been no court ruling on the constitutionality of teaching ID in science classrooms, but proponents have made inroads in the political arena. State school boards are being pressured to include ID in their science

standards, for example. The current battleground is Ohio, where as of this writing it seems that students will be taught “both evolution and the debate over its validity,” according to the Associated Press. Senator Rick Santorum of Pennsylvania recently proposed language for President Bush’s education bill that would have required the teaching of “multiple viewpoints”—code for ID—in biology classrooms. The language was later consigned to the conference report attached to the bill, where it has no force of law, yet two of Ohio’s representatives have used it to pressure that state’s school board into including ID in its standards. Similar efforts are under way in other states.

The mainstream media have often bought the line that ID is scientific. *Time* religion correspondent Richard Ostling, for example, wrote in the *Washington Post* last March that a panel in Ohio was deciding “whether high school biology students should be told about potential problems with Darwinism and evidence that life on Earth was planned.” Gregg Easterbrook declared in an op-ed piece in the *Wall Street Journal* that ID is “a sophisticated theory now being argued out in the nation’s top universities.” But when preaching to the choir, the ID proponents reveal just how little science there is in their arguments.

Consider the opening presentation at last July’s conference, entitled “Darwin Does Hollywood: Naturalism in the American Movies.” Darwinism was represented as synonymous with immorality and unbelief. When a young Paul Newman played an amoral but sympathetic character who laments the nonexistence of an afterlife in *Hud* (1963), his failings were attributed to

Darwinism. When Clint Eastwood played a similarly amoral fellow in *High Plains Drifter* (1972), that was Darwinism too. Likewise for more recent films such as *Wall Street*, *Boiler Room*, and *Pleasantville*. Darwinism all.

And what to make of the one-act play that broke up the monotony of Saturday afternoon? Entitled *The Rule*, it told the story of a besieged biology teacher who just wanted to teach “origins science” objectively but was prevented from doing so by an arrogant school-board Darwinist and a humorless attorney from the American Civil Liberties Union. What is “the rule” in *The Rule*? Methodological naturalism, that fiendish, arbitrary requirement that science not invoke supernatural entities in its explanations.

I attended a breakout session in which participants were taught how to manipulate the media (emphasize that Darwinians want censorship, while ID supporters want objectivity). Other sessions encouraged high school and college students to form clubs to promote ID and coached attendees in how to communicate effectively with school boards and state legislatures. Concessions in the lobby sold the latest creationist wares: books and videos with titles like *I Was a Teenage Darwinist!* and *Vestigial Organs Are Fully Functional*.

As a long-time reader of creationist literature, I was not surprised by the distortions and the deceitful anti-Darwinian propaganda that passed for scientific discourse. Strikingly, however, it was never explained what scientists should be doing differently in their day-to-day work. This is understandable: One does not try to seize the reins of public policy by disputing the origins of complex biological systems. The advocacy of enthusiastic student groups is

not the normal way to disseminate novel biological theories, but it is the preferred tool of religious and political campaigns. ID differs from young-Earth creationism only in the relative modesty of its claims.

But my most interesting experiences at the conference were not in the formal sessions. The behavior of the attendees stood in stark contrast to the rhetoric of the speakers. I could not have been treated with more generosity. During the breaks between talks, many people asked me to clarify my arguments. Others offered that they were pleased some-

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one had the courage to express a different viewpoint.

At lunchtime, seeing that I was looking for a place to sit, several people invited me to join them. When I mentioned I was a mathematician, they immediately sought my opinion of some arguments from information theory that appear in ID literature. The questions sometimes betrayed simplemindedness about the nature of mathematics, but they were neither ignorant nor rude. The conference-goers were willing to engage complex ideas, but they lacked discernment in deciding whom to read.

Scientists who have responded to ID arguments in print have generally done so with a tone of sneering contempt. This is understandable: ID supporters present fallacious arguments, use dis-

honest rhetoric, and often present non-contemptuous responses as evidence that their theories are gaining acceptance. Unfortunately, sneering contempt from societal elites is a fact of everyday life for many followers of ID. For them the argument is not about whether, say, gene duplication and divergence can account for information growth in the genome. They perceive instead a clash of worldviews in which they are being unfairly excluded from the discussion. The nature of quotidian scientific work is foreign to them, as it is to most people not engaged in it.

It is easy to caricature the views of people you have not met, a fact that works to the detriment of all sides. This conference was within an hour's drive of three major universities. So where were the science faculties from these schools? Why was I the only one who felt it worth a weekend to offer interested people a more realistic view of modern science?

Efforts to inject creationism into the schools must be vigorously opposed. At the ballot box, at the courthouse, and in the legislature, biologists must continue to fight for science, no matter how distasteful the fight may be. But such battles are not the end of the story. There is a time for angry confrontation, and there is a time for calm discussion. The leaders of the ID movement are filling a vacuum left by scientists unwilling to engage the public about the true nature of their work. Interacting with people on the other side is the only way to remedy this situation.

And that is why I attended this conference.

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