

HOW DO ID PROPONENTS BEHAVE WHEN PREACHING TO THE CHOIR?

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1. INTRODUCTION

Depending on your perspective, Intelligent-Design (ID) theory is either a radical and important challenge to prevailing evolutionary theory, or it is just the latest form of creationism. Curious to see how ID proponents behave when preaching to the choir, I attended the third annual Darwin, Design and Democracy conference in Kansas City in July, 2002. The behavior of the conference speakers lent far more support to the latter interpretation than to the former.

Roughly speaking, the conference presentation could be divided into three categories: the cultural legacy of Darwinism, scientific questions, and philosophy. I have chosen one representative from each category for this report. All direct quotations were transcribed from video or audio tapes of the proceedings.

2. DARWIN AND THE MOVIES

The opening talk was entitled “Darwin Does Hollywood: Naturalism and the American Movies,” delivered by Christian speaker Jack Cashill. Its premise was that whereas movies of the 30s, 40s, and 50s (the period he describes as “The Golden Age of Hollywood”) conformed to sound moral principles, the majority of today’s films glorify immorality and hostility towards religion. This is related to the decline of the Hayes Code in the fifties, the precursor to the modern movie rating system. The code put certain restrictions on what movies could depict; for example, evil people could not be portrayed favorably.

Those of us not steeped in fundamentalist social analysis might wonder what any of this—to the extent that it is true—has to do with Darwinism. Well, it turns out that Cashill views Darwinian evolution as essentially synonymous with immorality in all its forms: Homosexuality, promiscuous sex, Communism, and hostility to Christianity

being most prominent. For example, in referring to the film director Martin Ritt he says, “It’s also, in fact, Martin Ritt, the director, who was blacklisted as a Communist; Communists didn’t make Communist movies in America; they merely made movies without God in them; which was their kind of a compromise, which is why Marx found Darwin so attractive.” This statement is less a well-formed thought than a stream-of-consciousness pressing of fundamentalist hot buttons. Cashill was discussing Ritt’s 1963 film *Hud*, commonly regarded as an American classic. A second example comes from his discussion of Alfred Hitchcock’s 1948 film *Rope*. The plot of this film involved two prep school students, modeled loosely after Leopold and Loeb, who murder a classmate because they thought him intellectually inferior. Cashill says,

This movie was made while the Hayes Code was still in effect, so the Darwinian characters are bad. They’re also obviously homosexual, they’re played by homosexual actors too. Homosexual critics criticized the movie because it was one of the rare times in Hollywood where homosexuals are seen in a negative light. I think it’s one of the few times Darwinians are seen in a negative light.

Note the casual description of the murdering, amoral thugs as “Darwinian characters” and the equally casual likening of homosexuality to Darwinism. Of course, favorable portrayals of homosexuals are very much a nineties phenomenon; before then movies invariably portrayed gay people as evil, crazy or silly. Cashill fleshed out his thesis by showing various film clips, starting with *Rope*, and going through more recent films such as *Boiler Room* and *Pleasantville*.

Representative of the level of analysis is his discussion of Clint Eastwood’s 1972 film *High Plains Drifter*. Eastwood plays a nameless gunfighter who wreaks havoc on the small western town of Lago. Shortly after he arrives he kills three people, with questionable provocation, and subsequently rapes a woman. Impressed by his skill with a gun, the townspeople overlook his crimes and hire him for protection from the wrath of three newly freed convicts. The convicts bear a grudge against Lago, and had threatened to burn it to the ground upon regaining their freedom. Eastwood is persuaded to accept the job in return for *carte blanche* in the town. Though he repeatedly humiliates the townspeople, their fear of the approaching danger outweighs the damage to their pride. Mayhem ensues.

As Cashill tells it, Eastwood’s character is portrayed favorably despite being completely amoral. He says,

And the bizarre thing, for a protagonist in this movie, not to be indelicate, but the next scene is a rape scene, and Clint Eastwood is the protagonist! Notice the use of language here; trash, goat, pig pooh; it's just constant degradation of the characters. *He has no name.*

Also objectionable is the manner in which the town preacher is portrayed:

The preacher character in *High Plains Drifter* is, of course, like all preacher/religious characters in the last thirty years, a buffoon. And he walks into this bar and he tries to intervene in this bloodletting, and they tell him, and this speaks for Hollywood too, "Take your conscience elsewhere." And Hollywood took its conscience elsewhere.

Cashill seals the deal by comparing *Drifter* unfavorably with *High Noon*:

Compare this movie in your mind to *High Noon*, which was made twenty years earlier, same basic plot, three bad guys escape from prison, one man has to stand up against them. Now if you have the image of Gary Cooper in your head, totally moral, married to a Quaker, defending the town, going to the church, now compare him to the character Clint Eastwood plays here.

Alas, this analysis is simplistic to the point of dishonesty. *Drifter* is really the mirror image of *High Noon*. Whereas *High Noon* is a story about a courageous and decent man who does his duty in defiance both of the odds against success and the cowardice of the people around him, *Drifter* is not really about Eastwood's character at all. In reality, it is a parable about hypocrisy and the wages of sin. The drifter exists only to expose the vastly greater sins of the town. We learn, for example, that the convicts now menacing Lago were hired by the local mining company to murder the town's sheriff. This after the sheriff threatened to expose the criminal activity of the company. The convicts whipped the sheriff to death right in the middle of town, while the silent townspeople merely watched. The point of the film is not that Eastwood's character is admirable. It is that the people of the town are so wretched, so blind to everything beyond protecting their secrets, that they are unable to stand up to him despite his reprehensible behavior. The fact that his character has no name is essential to the plot, as the movie's later scenes make clear.

Next consider Cashill's description of the preacher. This character is indeed told to "Take his conscience elsewhere," but the bloody bar fight exists only in Cashill's imagination. Actually, the statement is made during a meeting of the town's most prominent citizens, during a discussion about whether to hire Eastwood to protect them. The preacher protests that his conscience will not permit him to hire a killer, and he describes himself as a simple man of God. The leader of the mining company replies:

Well, it's time we unsimplified you Reverend. [The three men Eastwood killed] were professional gunfighters on the payroll of the Lago Mining Company to protect our interests, and the interests of this town, which are identical. They stood around drinking beer and looking snotty for a full year. And then, one day before we actually needed the bastards, they went and got themselves killed. So if you've got a suggestion we'd be delighted to hear it. Otherwise, take your conscience elsewhere while we think about saving your ass.

The preacher quickly backs down.? He is indeed presented as a buffoon, but so is everyone else in the town.

Drifter, like all of the films Cashill discussed, is far more rich and complicated than he is willing to admit. From his discussion we learn little about the decline of Hollywood, and much about the simple-mindedness of ID proponents in dealing with moral issues. For example, when Cashill describes the 30s, 40s and 50s as the golden age of Hollywood and contrasts older films favorably against their modern counterparts, he reveals a curious moral blindness. He completely overlooks the racial stereotyping, xenophobia, and blatant sexism in the films of that time. He seems to forget those films invariably presented an America dominated by righteous white males, their women walking two steps behind them, with minorities, when they were presented at all, playing servants or clowns. Modern Hollywood has nothing to apologize for relative to such films.

3. TEACHING BIOLOGY OBJECTIVELY

Cashill's talk was followed by *Icons of Evolution* author Jonathan Wells, and was billed as an objective presentation of modern biology. Here I focus on some of his examples from paleontology and anatomy.

In challenging the claim that fossils provide strong evidence for common descent, Wells presented a diagram showing various fossils connecting a bear-like ancestor with modern whales. The fossils were

presented in chronological sequence, with question marks between the various links. He said,

The reason I have question marks is because even for Darwinian biologists it is not at all clear you can get common ancestry from the fossil record. Here's the chief science writer for *Nature*: "The intervals of time that separate fossils are so huge that we cannot say anything definite about their possible connection through ancestry and descent."

The internal quote was taken from paleontologist Henry Gee, who wrote it in his excellent book *In Search of Deep Time*. This book dealt not with the evidence for evolution, but rather with certain esoteric issues concerning how paleontologists should conduct their work. Gee was arguing that fossil analysis should not be devoted to proving claims like, "This pile of bones over here is the direct ancestor of that pile of bones over there." Instead, the goal should be to establish relative relatedness: "This pile of bones over here and that pile of bones over there shared a common ancestor more recently than either did with that third pile of bones over yonder.

Thus, Wells conflated two separate issues. One is whether the data from the fossil record are consistent with the hypothesis of common descent. Gee, along with all sensible paleontologists, answers yes. The second is whether we can infer specific lines of descent via fossils alone. That question is far murkier.

I know this was Gee's intention since I took the trouble of reading this quote in its proper context:

Depending on how old giant civets had to be before they could breed (something we can never establish, because giant civets no longer exist so that we can watch their behavior), perhaps a hundred thousand generations lived and died between the fossil found by me at site L05 and the next oldest specimen. In addition, we cannot know if the fossil found at L05 was the lineal ancestor of the specimens found at Olduvai gorge or Koobi Fora. It might have been, but we can never know that for certain. The intervals of time that separate fossils are so huge that we cannot say anything definite about their possible connection through ancestry and descent. (Gee, *In Search of Deep Time*, p. 23).

From here Wells went on to a consideration of homologies, bizarre anatomical similarities across vastly different life forms, as evidence

for evolution. Wells demurs, arguing that homologies might indicate not common descent, but common design. Unless biologists can positively exclude that possibility, he claimed, they have no business using homologies as evidence for evolution.

But when scientists refer to “common descent” they have in mind a whole collection of testable hypotheses from paleontology, genetics, anatomy, and other disciplines. It is significant that anatomical homologies are common and appear in patterns that confirm the trees of life assembled independently from both fossils and genetics, because if the data were otherwise, common descent would be untenable as a hypothesis. By “common design” the IDers envision an intelligent designer producing animals based on some limited set of blueprints. Unless they can tell us how the designer’s actions manifest themselves in nature (so that we could collect the requisite data and test the theory), common design cannot be considered a scientific hypothesis. If they wish us to distinguish common design from common descent, they will have to tell us what counts as evidence against design.

Wells said: “However, these same biologists typically do not question common ancestry, they accept it as a given. And the reason this writer [Gee] accepts it is not because of fossils...” Wells completed this sentence by presenting a second quotation from Gee: “Common ancestry is not in dispute, not because of fossils, but because of features we share thanks to our common evolutionary birthright.”

This was meant to imply that Gee, sensible enough to reject fossil evidence for evolution, lapses into confusion on the subject of homology. But this second quotation is out of context as well. Gee’s argument is that while fossils cannot be used to infer specific lines of descent, homologies can provide evidence for relative relatedness:

The problem is that Fred [Gee’s cat] and I cannot place our common ancestor in time and space unless we are able to discover our complete pedigrees all the way back to that point of ancestral convergence. To do this, as we know, is impossible, given that the fossil record is so discontinuous. All we know is that she existed-sometime, we know not when; somewhere, we know not where. It is conceivable that we could dig up the fossil remains of our latest common ancestor. But even if we did, we could never know that we had done so. But we can still get some idea of what our latest common ancestor was like, even without fossil evidence.

The evidence of evolution is everywhere around us, in the signs that diverse organisms share a common morphological heritage. That Fred and I have a common ancestor is not in dispute, not because of fossils, but because of features we share thanks to our common evolutionary birthright. (Gee, *In Search of Deep Time*, pp. 34-35).

Note that Wells altered Gee's sentence by cutting off its first clause. Gee's statements dealt with the specific example of inferring the common ancestry of humans and cats; Wells presented it as a statement regarding common descent generally.

Having convinced the audience that distinguishing common descent from common design is a question of great import, Wells said the following (on the screen behind him was a picture of four different models of Corvette):

How do we distinguish between common ancestry and common design. Well here's another attempt. This is redrawn from a book put out about ten years ago. It was a defense of Darwinian theory and a critique of creationism as it turns out, by an Ohio State biologist and he used a series of Corvette automobiles. And he wrote "If you compare a 1953 and a 1954 Corvette, side by side, then a 1954 and a 1955 model and so on, the descent with modification is overwhelmingly obvious." Well, sort of. But it's also obvious that these are products of design.

The biologist in question was Tim Berra, but his statement was not about distinguishing common descent from common design. Wells simply made that up. Berra was observing that if you only see the starting and ending point of a long sequence, you might be impressed by how different they seem. But if you could see the intermediates between them, the differences don't look quite so great. Here's the full quotation:

If you look at a 1953 Corvette and compare it to the latest model, only the most general resemblances are evident, but if you compare a 1953 and a 1954 Corvette, side by side, then a 1954 and 1955 model and so on, the descent with modification is overwhelmingly obvious. (Berra, *Evolution and the Myth of Creationism*, p. 117)

Incidentally, all these examples came from the first fifteen minutes of the talk. It only got worse from there.

4. PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE

When it comes to rank, brazen dishonesty, Wells is an amateur compared with Biola University philosophy professor J. P. Moreland. While speaking on certain obscure issues in the philosophy of science, Moreland unleashed the following against Florida State University philosophy professor Michael Ruse and his role as an expert witness in the 1981 Arkansas creationism trial:

Ruse testified in that trial by claiming that creation science, which is what he called it at that time, failed to come up to the necessary and sufficient conditions for science, it was religion masquerading as science, and it shouldn't be allowed in school classes. About eight or nine years later, he gave a lecture and it was taped, to a group of science educators. He admitted he had lied at that trial and that he knew darn well that ID theory was a perfectly scientific theory, he knew it, but he lied because there weren't any other experts there that could check him. The reason he ended up having to fess up is that in the literature after the Little Rock trial he was hammered to death by other philosophers of science.

In this trial Ruse offered five necessary and sufficient conditions for a theory to be considered scientific-among them that the theory be naturalistic-and argued that creation science failed to meet any of the criteria.

In assessing Moreland's statement we should consider first that Ruse stands by his testimony in that trial to this day. He never made any such admission as Moreland describes. When I asked Ruse about this, he explained: "The sad thing is that I am the one dyed-in-the-wool Darwinian who tries to relate in a serious and non-hostile fashion with the ID people, and they return the favor with sneers and stories."

We could stop here and dismiss Moreland as a lying hack. But other portions of his statement merit comment as well. First, "creation science" was not Ruse's term; it was used in the law under consideration in the trial (where it was offered as a contrast to "evolution science"). Nor was the creation science about which Ruse testified an early form of ID. The Arkansas law listed six specific claims that constituted the core of creation science. Among these were a recent creation of the Earth and its subsequent destruction by a single global flood. It was precisely the sort of veiled biblical literalism that ID theorists are at pains to reject. The term "ID theory" did not become popular until

well into the 1990s, so there is no way Ruse could have referred to it a mere nine years after the trial.

As for the hammering Ruse received after the trial, it took the form of two other philosophers who, while wanting nothing to do with creation science themselves, did not agree with the criteria Ruse laid out in his testimony. When Ruse subsequently edited an anthology addressing the philosophical issues in the evolution/creationism debate, he gave both critics ample space to make their points, even going so far as to give them the last word. In rebuttal essays, Ruse offered his reasons for rejecting the claims of his critics. These are hardly the actions of a man who has been “hammered to death.”

5. CONCLUSIONS

All of the presentations at the conference suffered from the distortions described here. People who have good arguments to make in defense of their views do not argue in so dishonest a fashion. The behavior of the leaders of the ID movement strongly suggests that their intentions have little science, and much to do with promoting a religious agenda.

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