

Unintelligent Design

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BY ART HOBSON

The evolution wars continue. One recent skirmish was in Pennsylvania, where 11 parents brought suit against the Dover Area School District after its school board became the first in the country to instruct teachers to inform students of “gaps and problems in Darwin’s theory” and to teach “other theories of evolution including intelligent design.” The trial opened in federal court on September 26, 2005, and ended on December 20, 2005, with a victory for evolution education.

A former school board member’s testimony provides insight into intelligent design (ID) ideology. She described the board meetings where the new policy was adopted as similar to a revival. Scripture was quoted, speakers told people how to accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior, and attendees muttered frequent amens. The new policy was adopted by a vote of six to three. Dissenters were called atheists, asked if they were “born again,” and told they were “going to hell.”

ID is the latest strategy in a campaign to compel science teachers to teach religious dogma in science classrooms. The previous creationist approach was based on a literal reading of Genesis and insisted that Earth was only a few thousand years old and that all biological species were separately created by God. ID dresses creationism up in new clothing, arguing that living things are “irreducibly complex” in the sense that if one vital part is removed they won’t work at all, and that such structures must have been “intelligently designed.”

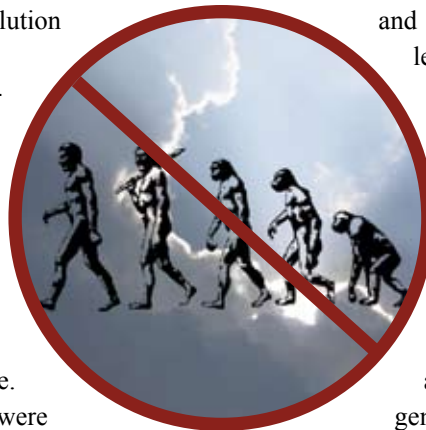
Creationists have labored for decades to portray evolution as a “theory in crisis,” and they’ve had considerable success in persuading Americans that there is indeed a real debate here and that it’s only fair to teach “both sides.” I’m all in favor of teaching both sides whenever two sides actually exist, but teaching the ID “theory” of biology is like teaching the stork theory of childbirth.

There is no scientific controversy here. Evolution is supported by literally millions of experiments and has been settled science for over a century. Nobody supports creationist notions in science journals or at meetings, despite scientists’ natural tendency to search for weaknesses in established theories.

The evidence for human evolution is especially impressive.

The fossil evidence stretches back over six million years and includes some 20 different species of two-legged human ancestors since we branched off from the apes, leading gradually from ape-like creatures to *Homo sapiens*. Genetic dating methods that trace the genetic similarities between humans and apes also point to a divergence about six million years ago. Specific human genes are known to be currently evolving under the influence of Darwinian natural selection. Two of these are genes that act on the human brain. One of these variant genes emerged about 37,000 years ago and is now present in 70 percent of humans, and the other arose only within the past six thousand years and is now present in 30 percent of humans.

ID is one of those so-called scientific theories that are “not right” and “not even wrong.” ID is certainly not right. For example, one of the favorite creationist challenges is the development of the eye. Only an intelligent designer, they argue, could have created such a brilliant and complex arrangement. But the eye betrays its evolutionary origin with a tell-tale flaw: The retina is inside out. The nerve fibers that carry signals from the retina’s light-sensing cells lie on top of those cells and have to plunge through a large hole in the retina to get to the brain, creating the eye’s blind spot. Any intelligent designer would be offended by such a clumsy arrangement. The human eye was not designed; it was inherited as the result of long-term evolutionary development. The eyes of all vertebrate animals are linked with



our invertebrate relatives that have only simple eyes that detect light but can't form an image. In fact, molecular studies have recently found a direct link between the genetic structures that control primitive invertebrate light sensors and those that control sophisticated mammalian lens structures.

ID is "not even wrong" because it's not a scientific theory at all. In the first place, whenever the theory comes up against a structure that's difficult to explain, it claims that the "designer" made it. Ascribing some phenomena to supernatural forces puts ID entirely outside the realm of science. Although science neither denies nor affirms God, the foundation of the scientific age is the use of reason and natural causes to explain natural phenomena, in contrast to the pre-scientific view that natural phenomena are caused by gods and demons. If we admit supernatural causes into science, we can kiss science goodbye.

Furthermore, ID has no positive content. There is no ID theory, no ID evidence, there is only a collection of spurious objections to evolution. ID offers no opposing scientific explanation for the diversity of life, except to say "the designer did it" in certain cases.

Creationists are a puzzle. They presumably believe that God created the universe. Why then can't they accept the beautiful

evidence that is written in the fossils, in our genes, and indeed in the heavens, evidence that is observed daily by scientists everywhere? Our highest natural faculties, namely our brains, attest to the theories that this evidence inspires. Surely, this evidence and these theories concur with whatever design God might have for life on Earth. Thus if the universe is created by God then creationism, by trying too hard to squeeze the universe into its own narrow orthodoxy, might be the ultimate heresy. Δ

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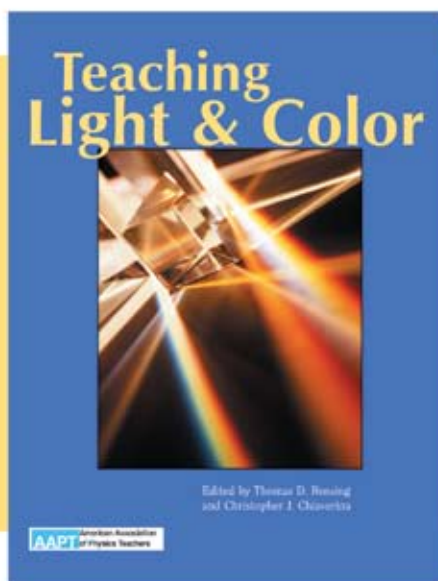
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