

THE ATHEIST

Newsletter of the Atheist Community of Austin, a Nonprophet Organization
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Social committee plans fun, fabulous Fall

by Virginia Glasser

Greetings ACA members and friends. The Social committee has been conjuring up some new activities for us all to enjoy, and here is what is going on so far.

The **Renaissance Festival** is near and we plan to meet there in the morning on the 11th of October. If you wish to be a part of the fun, please contact Virginia Glasser at virginia@apollowebworks.com or at 335-5862, for details on when and where we will meet up. This is one of the biggest Ren Fests in the country, with a wonderful village setting that has much to offer in way of shops and food. People who like to people watch, will certainly find much entertainment there. Also, if you like to watch comedy shows, there are plenty of skits and hilarity happening on various stages throughout the festival. You can go to the Ren Fest's home page to get details on ticket information. <http://www.texrenfest.com/>

We are now having a monthly **ACA Potluck** which will begin in November on the third Saturday, and will be the third Saturday of each month thereafter, unless otherwise noted. We will start out having the potlucks at the home of the Glassers, until someone else volunteers to host also. So our first potluck will be November the 15th at the Glasser house. Please bring your favorite dish and come join in on some good food, and great company.

Don't miss out on a great **Halloween Party** at the Glasser house. There will be food and drinks, but if you wish to bring snacks and drinks, that would be most welcome. Be sure to dress up for the occasion too, because you might win a door prize for best costume! The fun will begin around dusk with a food drive. Prior to the party we will be "**Trick or Canning**" to collect food for the needy. We will be knocking on doors and announcing we are from the Atheist Community of Austin. All food collected will be given to a local food bank. Please come to the Glasser house about 6 pm for the food drive. After "Trick or Canning" the official party will begin around 7 pm.

We will be announcing more activities in the near future, so be sure to check each newsletter for new events!

Mark Your Calendar...

Sunday, October 5, 12:30 PM: ACA Business Meeting and Member Appreciation Day, Austin History Center, Mayor's Room (9th and Guadalupe)

Saturday, October 11, (time TBA): meet at Texas Renaissance Festival, Plantersville, Texas. See article at left for more details.

Sunday, October 19, 12:30 PM: Special lecture meeting with speaker D.J. Grothe from the Center for Inquiry, Austin History Center, Mayor's Room.

Friday, October 31, 6:00, Trick-or-Canning Food Drive and 7:00, Halloween Party, at the home of Russell and Virginia Glasser. See article at left for details.

Sunday, November 2, 12:30 PM, Lecture by James Dee, topic to be announced. Austin History Center, Mayor's Room. See article below for more details.

Saturday, November 15, (time TBA), First Monthly ACA Potluck Dinner at the home of Russell and Virginia Glasser. See article at left for details.

Lecture Meeting News - Special Events This Month

There are two special meetings planned for the month of October. On **October 5**, we will hold a general business meeting and member appreciation day. We will discuss the general direction of the ACA and any ideas or concerns brought up by members. A light breakfast of coffee, juice and pastries will be provided.

On **October 19**, we will have a special lecture meeting instead of the regular bagel shop meeting. Mr. D.J. Grothe of the Center for Inquiry in New York will address the group (topic to be announced). This meeting will take place at the usual time and place for lecture meetings (12:30 PM at the Austin History Center.)

On **November 2**, Dr. James Dee will speak. He is a retired classics professor and writes frequent editorials appearing in the *Austin American-Statesman*.

Don't Mess With Texas Textbooks! ACA members participate in State Board of Education textbook hearings

by Russell Glasser

On Wednesday, September 10, several members of the Atheist Community of Austin attended a hearing at the State Board of Education to discuss science books. It was an educational experience on what creationists are doing these days. Since it's been a busy month for me, I decided to skip writing a new installment of "The Art of Recreational Debating" and instead submit an abridged version of my report on the hearings.

Besides myself, there were six other people from the Atheist Community of Austin. Five were there to speak. In order they were: Michelle Gadush, Russell Glasser, Don Baker, Steve Elliott, and Martin Wagner. Two were just there to watch and lend moral support: Jeff Jones and Don Lawrence.

Creationists and evolutionists alike flocked in from all over the state, and many even came from around the country. The Discovery Institute, a creationist think tank, featured prominently in the hearings. One member of the school board, Terri Leo, had a strategy meeting with some Discovery Institute members before the hearings and came away with a list of questions and topics to bring up. Discovery Institute speakers included William Dembski (author of *Intelligent Design*); Michael Behe (*Darwin's Black Box*) and Jonathan Wells (*Icons of Evolution*).

On the other side, we had Samantha Smoot and other representatives of the Texas Freedom Network; Nobel Laureate physicist Steven Weinberg; Eugenie Scott and Alan Gishlick from the National Center for Science Education; and Robert Pennock, Philosophy of Science professor and author of *Tower of Babel* and *Intelligent Design and its Critics*.

In all, 160 people registered to speak at the hearings. Although many were absent and each person only got three minutes, the hearings lasted from 1:00 PM to 1:30 AM. ACA members spoke on a variety of subjects, such as the importance of peer review and the scientific method, creationist deception and the so-called "Wedge Strategy", evolutionary programming, and a detailed history of the school board decision in Kansas.

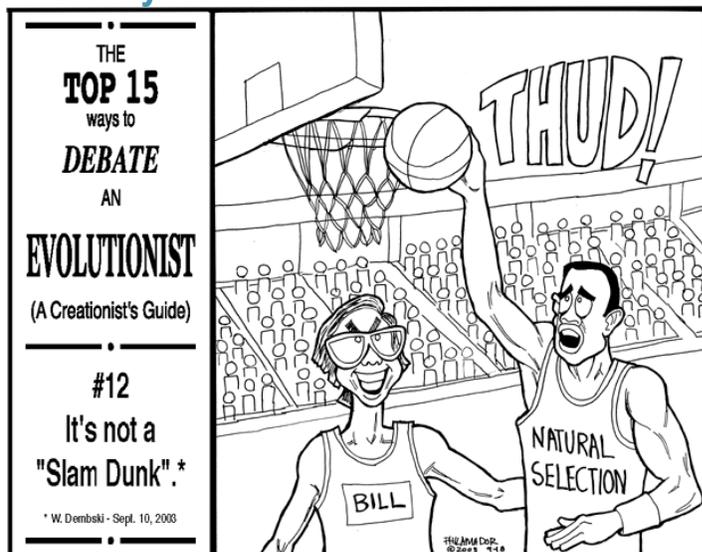
I was particularly interested in meeting Robert Pennock, whose books I enjoyed greatly. I had a conversation with him about the changing face of creationism at the end of the night.

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Photos, clockwise from top: 1) National Center for Science Education press conference; 2) Dr. William Dembski of the Discovery Institute speaks in favor of including the "weaknesses of Neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory" in textbooks; 3) ACA members observe the proceedings at the textbook hearing; 4) ACA co-chair Michelle Gadush addresses the State Board of Education. - Photos by Jeff Jones

Cartoon by Phil Amador



Textbook hearings *(continued from p. 2)*

Creationism is evolving. The creationists have changed continuously since the Scopes trial. First they wanted to ban evolution from being taught. Then they wanted to require Biblical creationism to be taught on equal footing. Then they started changing it to “Scientific Creationism” so that it wouldn’t sound so much like religion. Then, just within the last ten years, it morphed into “Intelligent Design”, where they don’t even talk about the so-called creator anymore.

But that night, I think we observed something that we’ve never seen before. The Intelligent Design position is now so firmly identified with creationists that they’ve even started to back away from that position too. Now they don’t claim to be trying to slip ID into textbooks; they won’t even admit that their agenda is promoting ID. Instead, they are reduced to nitpicking evolution and nothing more.

Yes, there were some bumpkin creationists last night, who argued about the impossibility of an old earth and how “belief in” evolution causes teen suicide, nihilism, gout, and slow internet connections. But by and large, the great majority of those testifying against evolution had a very different strategy. They weren’t trying to get ID put in the books. They weren’t trying to remove evolution from the books. They were trying to introduce “errors” in the evolutionary sections. They spoke often about teaching the “strengths and weaknesses” of evolution, but what they trotted out again and again were discredited criticisms that almost no practicing biologists agreed with.

As Alan Gishlick eloquently pointed out in one of the last speeches of the night: “If these examples that we’ve talked about endlessly tonight are as flawed as some critics have claimed, then why don’t they ask that they be removed [from the textbooks entirely]? Instead they’re asking you to leave them in, and then criticize them. This would have the effect of teachers saying ‘Well, we’ve just made you learn this and now we’re going to tell you it’s wrong.’”

That’s really what the Discovery Institute members were there for. They wanted to stick in their misleading examples of how evolution is bad science. It’s easy to see that this is the first step in a long term strategy. After trying to make school kids absorb this idea that evolution is full of holes, the next step is to claim “Oh, evolution is just not working; guess the only alternative is ID.” And then, in the longer term, they hope to abolish evolution entirely and bring back Biblical Creationism. This is no big mystery. It’s easy to find places where they’ve publicly said as much to a sympathetic audience. But in front of school boards, they lie about their motives, and they continually try not to be associated with their own deeply held beliefs.

I asked Dr. Pennock, “Robert, how much further does he think creationism will evolve?” And his reply was: “I don’t think they can go much farther. If they back away from their positions any more, they won’t have anything left to talk about.”

For a more complete write-up of the hearings, including audio downloads of the speeches, please visit the ACA events page at <http://www.atheist-community.org/events.htm>.

Regularly Scheduled ACA Events:

Saturdays:

“**The Non-Prophets**” Internet radio show airs biweekly from 2:00 - 3:30 PM at www.atheistnetwork.com. Archives can be played at www.atheist-community.org.

Sundays:

Bagel Shop Meetings take place every Sunday except the first Sunday of the month at 10:30 AM at the Hot Jumbo Bagelry (307 W. 5th Street).

Monthly Lecture Meetings take place the first Sunday of every month at 12:30 PM in the Mayor’s Room of the Austin History Center, which is located at 9th Street and Guadalupe. Some members usually gather around 11:00 for a pre-lecture brunch at Dario’s Mexican Food Restaurant, 1800 E. Sixth Street.

“**The Atheist Experience**” Live Call-in TV Show: 4:30 - 6:00 PM, on Austin Access Channel 10.

Mondays: Godless Gamers takes place at 7:00 PM at the home of Russell and Ginny Glasser. Contact Russell (rglasser@apollowebworks.com) for directions.

Tuesdays: “The Atheist Experience” is replayed from 4:30 - 6:00 PM on Austin Access Channel 10.

Thursdays: Atheist Happy Hour takes place at 7:30 PM at Antonio’s Tex-Mex restaurant near the intersection of IH 35 and US 183.

E-Mail Discussion/Announcement Lists: Lists include a general discussion list, an “ask an atheist” list, a gamers’ list, a social announcements list, and a singles’ list www.atheist-community.org/email.htm

Intelligent Design: an Introduction

by Stephen Miller

Intelligent Design is in the news again. In July and September of this year, the Texas State Board of Education (SBOE) held hearings to discuss textbook adoption. This year, biology textbooks are up for adoption, and any chosen textbooks will be in place for the next eight years.

Textbook adoption in Texas is no small matter — nationwide it's a \$500 million business, and the books that Texas chooses have a great deal of influence when other states pick their books. Although the SBOE does not have the power it once did, largely thanks to the Texas legislature initiating the TEKS curriculum and stripping the SBOE of much of its power for textbook choice, these hearings have become something of a media event, a public relations contest where the usual suspects hold forth on the strengths and weaknesses of evolution and creationism.

Oops. I forgot, “creationism” doesn't exist any more. Since a series of court cases (McLean v. Arkansas in 1982, and Edwards v. Aguillard in 1987) have stated that creationism is not science, that word went away – at least among its proponents. The replacement phrase is intelligent design (ID).

What is ID? ID is one of the “arguments from design.” As this relates to biology, ID maintains that some biological systems are too complex to have occurred naturally.

Some biological structures and processes are simply too complex to have come about by the standard evolutionary mechanisms of mutation and natural selection. And since these biological structures and processes do not have natural causes, “intelligent causes are necessary to explain the complex, information-rich structures of biology”. [1]

In a nutshell, ID proposes that an outside cause, an intelligent designer, has had a hand in the development of living organisms.

William Paley and his Watch: This view that “nature shows evidence of design” has been around for quite some time. Indeed, the English philosopher and theologian William Paley (1743-1805) put forward a well-known version with his watch analogy:

“In crossing a heath, suppose I pitched my foot against a stone, and were asked how the stone came to be there, I might possibly answer, that ... it had lain there forever ... But suppose I had found a watch upon the ground ...” [2]

Paley argues that items as complex as watches are obviously not natural objects. There is no mistaking the difference in

origin between a rock and a watch. Watches don't just happen; they have a maker.

“And since the human body is much more complicated than a watch, by analogy we must have a maker also.” [3]

Paley wrote his words two centuries ago. And we're still debating the issue!

The ID Movement: The modern ID movement found its legs in the mid 1990s, due to several events:

- Michael Behe, a biochemist at Lehigh University, published Darwin's Black Box [4]. People took notice because Behe was the real thing — a working scientist with a PhD at a reputable institution. And his arguments were grounded in molecular biology, not philosophical abstractions.
- The Discovery Institute [5] established the Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture. The center spends a lot of money (an estimated \$1-million a year) to advocate ID and support various publications, speaking tours, and conferences.
- Phillip Johnson, a law professor at UC-Berkeley, published Darwin on Trial. [6] Johnson is very concerned with the philosophical underpinnings of evolutionary theory and claims that evolution has a built-in bias that refuses to consider any ideas other than naturalistic explanations.

Irreducible Complexity: Behe's contribution to ID is his idea of irreducible complexity. Biological systems, especially at the molecular level (which happens to be his specialty), are “irreducibly complex” if you can remove any one of the parts and cause the system to fail:

“An irreducibly complex system cannot be produced directly (that is, by continuously improving the initial function, which continues to work by the same mechanism) by slight, successive modifications of a precursor system, because any precursor to an irreducibly complex system that is missing a part is by definition nonfunctional.” [4]

Behe's analogy is the mousetrap. Consider an old fashioned mousetrap with five parts: a base, a metal hammer, a spring, a catch that releases under pressure, and a metal bar that holds the hammer back. Remove any one part and you no longer have a working mousetrap.

More importantly though, there is no way to construct a mousetrap by incrementally adding to its parts. Any simpler version with just four parts won't work and would be useless. Either it's all there and it works, or it's incomplete and doesn't work.

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Intelligent Design *(continued from p. 4)*

Behe extends his analogy of the mousetrap to such biological reactions of the immune system and blood clotting, and to biological structures such as the eye and bacteria flagella. Each of these, Behe believes, is irreducibly complex and could not have been produced by the step-by-step model of change suggested by evolution. And if evolution could not have produced them, some other force must be at work.

ID Today: So is ID a new paradigm for science? A new way of casting off the restrictions of a materialist philosophy? Robert Bork thinks so [7]. So do many conservatives, who have seized on these “new” arguments to fuel attacks on any belief system involving a secular naturalism that has no need for any religious foundation. In other words, our current educational system.

Or (cynic alert!) is ID a Trojan Horse — a ploy to inject a new type of creationism into the public debate? My own feeling is that ID is bad science, and has no place in any science curriculum. The remainder of this article discusses why ID is bad science.

Problems:

- As a philosophy, ID is the opposite of science. Science investigates the world, and when science uncovers things that are not understandable, we dig in and keep looking. Instead, ID just throws up its (figurative) hands, and declares that since we don’t understand something, we must then assume supernatural interference. Unsolved mysteries are deemed proof of a deity. But this is a flawed approach with unwarranted assumptions. With science, adopting the position that “we don’t know yet” is more productive than invoking supernatural entities.

- As a scientific explanation, ID ignores Occam’s Razor. Instead of providing an answer that builds on well-known evolutionary processes, ID injects a new element (and a hypothetical magical entity, at that!) into the equation. Instead of simplifying, their explanation adds variables to the equation. Furthermore, this proposed entity is entirely outside the scope of human knowledge or reason. The idea of natural evolution is more parsimonious than the design hypothesis.

- As an area of scientific investigation, ID is terribly skimpy on the details. ID has no answers, or even tentative hypotheses, about those nagging details that underlie a real scientific hypothesis. ID says very little about the most basic “who, what, when, and where” of its subject:

- How did the “designer” implement these physiological changes?

- What exactly did the designer DO? And how?
- If the designer is fiddling with our cells, did this occur once in the long-ago past? Is this still going on today?
- What is the nature of the designer? Is there more than one? (Perhaps it’s a committee effort?) ID proponents have been somewhat hypocritical in this area. When speaking to school boards, they’re very careful to not mention God in order to maintain the fiction of keeping religion out of science. But when they’re speaking to like-minded believers, the “designer” is readily identified as the God of the Christian Bible.

- All of Behe’s examples occur in molecular biology. Are there other examples at other levels of scale? Is the designer altering muscles or trees or clouds or iron ore? How can we tell?

- As an area of active research, ID is nonexistent. Literally. Gilchrist [8] performed a literature search to try and answer the question “Is intelligent design theory actually used by scientists?” He searched five different databases of the peer-reviewed scientific literature between 1991 and 1997 for the phrase “intelligent design” — and literally found no relevant hits (oddly enough, it did show up in the literature on welding!). The peer-reviewed journals are where the ideas of science are communicated. That there is no discussion of ID in the literature is a telling symptom that there is no science there.

- A central problem with Behe’s IC is the observed fact that complex biological systems often come about by the addition of parts that, while initially just advantageous, later become essential. As Allen Orr states:

“The logic is very simple. Some part (A) initially does some job (and not very well, perhaps). Another part (B) later gets added because it helps A. This new part isn’t essential, it merely improves things. But later on, A (or something else) may change in such a way that B now becomes indispensable. This process continues as further parts get folded into the system. And at the end of the day, many parts may all be required.” [9]

And it turns out that we see this procedure in the development of lungs, the Krebs cycle, and HOX genes. In fact, biology is full of examples where the components of a larger system initially had other functions. Behe’s mistake is assuming that the current usefulness of a structure explains “why” the structure originally evolved.

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Intelligent Design *(continued from p. 5)*

- A central problem with ID (in general) is the observed fact that biological structures often seem to be built on top of earlier plans. It's as if the "designer" always chooses to modify an existing system, rather than strike out afresh with a new design. Which leads to some god-awful (excuse the pun) weird body plans.

To make a bat's wing, why would an omnipotent designer modify an arm by deleting the digits and adding a skin flap and a claw to the elbow? Wouldn't it make more sense to just design a good wing to do its job? Why not make a well-designed wing to start with rather than "make do" with the legacy of mammal forelimb features?

The examples of this kind of "modify a previous design" fill the fossil record. During the evolution from reptiles to mammals, reptilian lower jaw bones gradually moved into the middle ear, forming the tiny bony structures that carry vibrations into the inner ears of present-day mammals. A working system (the jaw) was gradually refashioned and adapted for an altogether different purpose.

- If complex design is evidence of a designer, what does bad design imply? Although "bad design" is open to interpretation, on several levels the human body seems to be a cobbled-together collection of parts that barely work. We can choke to death while eating, our internal organs are not served well by an upright posture, and don't get me started on what can go wrong with the prostate!

As an example of bad (or at a minimum, very "odd") design on the genetic level, consider Vitamin C production. Most mammals produce an enzyme protein that allows them to synthesize their own Vitamin C. But humans and chimps lack this ability and must regularly eat foods that contain vitamin C. If you don't, you get scurvy.

Oddly enough, the gene that codes for this protein exists in humans and chimps, but it's broken — it's been damaged by a single nucleotide deletion, rendering the entire gene not functional. Sometime in the past, a common ancestor of humans and chimps suffered a mutation that stopped its ability to produce Vitamin C.

Aside from providing strong evidence that both humans and chimps share a common ancestor, it's hard to recognize any principle of "good design" from this mess. If humans and chimps weren't meant to synthesize Vitamin C, why supply them with the broken remains of a once-working gene?

Conclusion: In most respects, ID is a tempest in a teacup. The number of proponents is small, and their efforts are almost

totally ignored by working scientists. Their grandiose claims just don't have the supporting evidence demanded by such an earth-shaking theory. And yet, ID-ers been somewhat successful in promoting their claims that evolution is a "theory in crises," and that the theory of evolution has gaping holes and is on the verge of collapse. Their lack of success in the arena of real science has prompted them to take their case directly to school boards and state boards of education.

My own view is that ID is simply the latest version of creationism, dressed up to avoid legal challenges, and offering absolutely nothing of scientific value. And because the ID movement is trying very hard to influence school boards, legislators, and the general public, we need to keep abreast of their efforts and counter their claims with a few facts. Otherwise, biology textbooks are going to be influenced by a small cadre of religious zealots. Stay tuned: the results of the September 10 Texas SBOE meeting will hit the fan soon.

Notes:

[1] Dembski, William A., *Intelligent Design*, InterVarsity 1999, p. 106.

[2] Paley, William, *Natural Theology* (1802).

[3] Paley's idea of the "watchmaker" provides the title of Richard Dawkins' book *The Blind Watchmaker* Dawkins proposes that natural selection is the responsible "watchmaker" for biological organisms.

[4] Behe M.J., *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*. New York: Free Press; 1996

[5] See www.discovery.org

[6] Johnson, Phillip. *Darwin on Trial*. Washington DC: Regnery Gateway; 1991.

[7] Bork, Robert, *Slouching Towards Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline*, Regan Books, 1996.

[8] Gilchrist, George W, "The Elusive Scientific Basis of Intelligent Design Theory" (2001), online at www.ncseweb.org/resources/articles/2083_the_elusive_scientific_basis_o_3_16_2001.asp

[9] Orr, H. Allen, Darwin v. "Intelligent Design (Again)", *Boston Review*, December 1996/ January 1997, online at <http://bostonreview.mit.edu/br21.6/orr.html>