



# *The North Texas*

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## Robert Koons at UT Dallas

by John Blanton

Wilston Nkangoh is a senior studying computer science at UT Dallas and his Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness (IDEA) Club at the University has been in operation for over a year. If you guessed its purpose is to discuss (favorably) the concept of “intelligent design” (ID) creationism you might be in line to win the NTS psychic challenge. From the IDEA Club Web site:

The IDEA Club at UTD is an official chapter of the [Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness (IDEA) Center] in San Diego. This club was founded on October 17th, 2002 with the intention of being a forum where faculty, staff, and students can discuss the scientific controversy over human origins, which has surfaced across academia since the early nineties.

Even though the IDEA Club is intended to be an organization for members to discuss origins, the club founder, Wilston, decided to expand its discussion topics. Such topics will include the philosophy of science, the advancement of science, and other interesting issues within the realm of human thought, such as, metaphysics, morality, religion, spirituality, sociology, theology, the theory of knowledge (epistemology), et cetera. See [Faq 7]. Ultimately, IDEA Club members will discuss various ideas pertaining to “origins science” and other “life issues,” throughout the school year.<sup>1</sup>

We learned about the group through an e-mail notifying us of an upcoming lecture by Robert C. Koons, an noted supporter of ID creationism and professor of philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin (UT Austin). Since Greg Aicklen and I are both UT Dallas graduates, we decided to drop in on Professor Koons’ Friday afternoon lecture.

We arrived shortly before the start of the lecture and got a chance to meet Wilston and some others in his group. It was sort of like old home week for the returning alumni. NTS advisor Lakshman Tamil turned out to be well-known, since he is once again teaching there.

Professor Koons was not to be missed, either. He had an excellent slide presentation outlining his view that Darwinism (the theory of biological evolution facilitated

## EVENTS CALENDAR

### April Program

#### Has Science Found God

Saturday, April 17, at 2 p.m.,  
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas,  
(Center for Non-Profit  
Management)

The North Texas Skeptics will present a talk by physicist and author Victor Stenger. Dr. Stenger will discuss his book *Has Science Found God?*

Are scientists close to solving the greatest of all mysteries? Physicist Victor J. Stenger delves into this fascinating question from a skeptical point of view in this lucid and engrossing presentation of the key scientific facts.

Dr. Stenger is Professor  
Emeritus of Physics and

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through natural selection) is insufficient to explain current life forms. Koons equates Darwinism with naturalism, the view that in nature, causes are natural (as opposed to supernatural). Additionally, he emphasized ID is not just another form of creationism.

Although Koons and other ID proponents attempt to distance themselves from the young Earth creationists (YEC) through this disavowal, we are not inclined to be so generous. Therefore, throughout this discussion we will continue to equate ID with creationism. Sorry, guys.

For starters, Koons noted that the burden of proof in the creation/evolution controversy, particularly as it relates to ID, lies with the Darwinists. We thought this curious, because we tend to think “extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.” This is all the slack we cut for the psychics, the faith healers, and the astrologers. However, Professor Koons explained it for us, and he illustrated his point with quotes from ancient scholars, such as the author of the Book of Job, Socrates, and Aristotle. In particular, he quoted Thomas Reid:

In his *Essays on The Intellectual Powers of Man*, 18th century Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid counts among the basic equipment of the human mind the capacity to recognize the signs of intelligent agency.

Without such a basic capacity, it would be mysterious how we recognized one another as intelligent and purposeful – in fact, it would be mysterious how we recognize intelligence even in our own behavior.

When this basic faculty of intelligence-recognition is turned to the machinery of living things, the clear answer it delivers is Yes.<sup>2</sup>

It’s hard to go against the wisdom of an 18th century Scotsman, so we may have to take Professor Koons at his word on this. However, there are some (call them cynics) who think intelligence takes on wonderful disguises and likewise stupidity. These people believe we can’t automatically recognize either for what they are. They call attention to the American political process.

Anyhow, given the burden of proof, how does naturalism stack up? Sorry to say, not very well. Professor Koons listed five stages to the acceptance of Darwinism (naturalism):

**Stage 0:** No, Koons is not a computer scientist. His first stage is numbered 0 to indicate it’s really not one of the hurdles of naturalism. It’s just the ground state, in which we all naively presume design (see Thomas Reid above).

**Stage 1:** You have to come up with an alternative mechanism, e.g., Darwinism.

**Stage 2:** You have to show that a number of “Darwinistic pathways leading to actual adaptive forms are described in sufficient detail and with sufficient understanding of the underlying genetic and developmen-

tal processes so as to make it virtually certain that these pathways represent genuine possibilities.”

**Stage 3:** You have to show some of these pathways were probably taken. Koons requires excellent proof here. Remember: “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.” He puts it this way:

Each step is fully described at the genetic, developmental and morphological level and for each step a hypothetical environment is specified, and the tools of population genetics employed to show that each new step would in fact be selected over its rivals in the hypothetical environment.

**Stage 4:** You have to explain nearly every case of “apparent design” in Darwinian terms. In each of these cases it will be

necessary to provide “an overwhelming body of specific, confirming evidence.”

Professor Koons believes Darwinism may have so far reached stage 1. He also mentioned in his talk the writings of several other creationist authors, including Jonathan Wells and Michael Behe. In particular he touched on Behe’s argument for irreducible complexity as exemplified by the bacterial flagellum. Readers will recall that Behe’s book *Darwin’s Black Box*<sup>3</sup> goes to great lengths to explain that the bacterial flagellum could not have arisen in small steps by Darwinian evolution, because some of the intermediate stages do not provide a selective advantage to the organism. Evolutionary biologists have pointed out possible evolutionary pathways in which components of the flagellum could have, by themselves, provided a selective advantage, and, further, that a complete flagellum, with a definite selective advantage, could have been assembled by co-opting these components. Obviously Profes-

## Background

The Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness (IDEA) Center was formed in 2001 as a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting intelligent design theory and fostering good-spirited discussion and a better understanding over the creation-evolution issue among students, educators, churches, and anyone else interested in creation and evolution.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Robert Koons is a fellow of the International Society for Complexity Information and Design and a professor of philosophy at the University of Texas, where he has been since he earned his doctorate from UCLA in 1987. His research has been in the areas of philosophical logic, artificial intelligence, metaphysics, and the theory of causation and proper function. He has published two books: *Paradoxes of Belief and Strategic Rationality* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), for which he received the Gustave O. Arlt Award in the Humanities from the Council of Graduate Schools, and *Realism Regained: An Exact Theory of Causation, Teleology and the Mind* (Oxford University Press, 2000). He is currently working on the logic of cau-

sation and the metaphysics of life and the mind.<sup>2</sup>

The International Society for Complexity, Information, and Design (ISCID) is a cross-disciplinary professional society that investigates complex systems apart from external programmatic constraints like materialism, naturalism, or reductionism. The society provides a forum for formulating, testing, and disseminating research on complex systems through critique, peer review, and publication. Its aim is to pursue the theoretical development, empirical application, and philosophical implications of information-theoretic and design-theoretic concepts for complex systems.<sup>3</sup>

Executive Director of ISCID is noted creationist William A. Dembski. Dr. Dembski is author of a number of creationists books, including:

*The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions About Intelligent Design* (with Charles W. Colson)

*Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science & Theology* (with Michael J. Behe)

*What Darwin Didn’t Know* (with Geoffrey Simmons)

*No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased Without Intelligence.*

*Uncommon Dissent: Intellectuals Who Find Darwinism Unconvincing* (with John. Wilson)

All these books can be purchased from Amazon.com by linking through the NTS Web site at <http://www.ntskeptics.org/books/books.htm>.

Professor Koons’ talk at UT Dallas was based on his material that will appear in *Uncommon Dissent*, due to be released in June 2004.

## References

- 1 From the IDEA Web site at <http://www.ideacenter.org/>
- 2 From the ISCID Web site at <http://www.iscid.org/robert-koons.php>
- 3 From the ISCID Web site at <http://www.iscid.org/about.php>

sor Koons is not buying any of this. “Show me the money” he seems to be saying.

All this got me to thinking, and when there was an opportunity to pose a question I asked just what it would take to be convincing. Passing by the bacterial flagellum for the time being, I brought up Behe’s example of human blood clotting chemistry (because that appears to me to be the bigger of these two cow cookies for Behe).<sup>4</sup> I asked whether demonstrating feasible pathways to the present human clotting chemistry would sufficiently refute Behe’s whole argument for irreducible complexity.

To recapitulate, human blood clotting chemistry is quite complex (what *isn't* in biochemistry). When a blood vessel is opened, an elaborate chain—a cascade—of chemical reactions is set into motion. If any step in the chain is missing, or is inadequate for the job, blood clots form prematurely, or we bleed excessively, even to death. Think *hemophilia*. How could that assemblage of chemical reactions have come about by mutation combined with natural selection? No single mutation, subsequently fixed through natural selection, could have produced all of the required steps simultaneously. If any of our ancestors lacked even one of the steps, we would not be reading this skeptical rag.

Knowing that biologists have a good lead on possible pathways and an effective refutation of Behe’s blood chemistry argument, I asked how many of Behe’s examples need to be explained before irreducible complexity is dead.

Not just one, Koons surmised. One example does not make for solid proof.

Actually, I was thinking of a bunch of examples. Supposed scientists knocked off a whole slew of Behe’s examples.

That’s not so good either, Koons pointed out. Suppose there were nine thousand examples of irreducible complexity and biologists explained just a few thousand of those. That would leave thousands more unexplained. Plenty of room for ID to hold sway.

I did not have that specific scenario in mind. I had in mind something like Behe’s saying “OK, let’s see you solve this one.” After that was solved he would then say “That was pretty neat, but let’s see you solve this one.” And on and on. How many would it take before Behe was down for the count?

Koons thought about it briefly and finally conceded just thirty or forty examples would suffice. In fact, Darwinism would begin to look pretty good by then.

Thirty or forty! I was impressed. In my imagined scenario I would be asking Behe to “Give us your best shot. Give us something you would bet the farm on.” Behe is the expert (if anybody is) on irreducible complexity. If he can’t put forth a killer challenge, then who can? Do the creationists need to bring in a bigger gun? *Is there a bigger gun? Is the gun even loaded?* When we Skeptics test a psychic or a map dowser we tend to pull the plug after two or three empty runs. “Show us the money,” we say.

So, Koons was being generous to Behe in particular and to ID creationism in general. That’s OK. Generosity is something that’s in short supply these days, and it’s uplifting to see it so freely extended.

Also, during the talk I noticed the word “design” was obtaining a lot of use. So I asked about that, as well. What does Koons mean by “design?” We all know of design as a human activity. People do design. Are we talking about a bunch of biological traits designed by people?

Koons recalled he had not said who had been doing the designing.

Well, then who?

Hmm. Could be nature or even God (did not say which God).

“Nature” I thought. Isn’t that what the Darwinists have been arguing all along? I reminded Professor Koons our experience is that only people do design. I indicated the crowd of people in the lecture hall. Nobody here has any other experience except people doing design.

Koons found my contention a little absurd. Surely there were some present who would not confine the practice of design to the human population. At that point there were some rumblings among the audience, but time was short, and we moved on to other issues. If someone had an alternative to offer it was lost in the shuffle.

I should have mentioned that up front Koons stated the issue in terms of materialism versus teleology. I take *teleology* to mean purpose. Koons posed the following questions:

- Has the Ancient Argument for Design been Refuted?
- How Strong is the Scientific Case for the Darwinian Explanation of Apparent Design?
- Should We Accept “Methodological Naturalism”?

Regarding teleology, he emphasized its worth in the scientific enterprise:

- Teleological principles (in the form of least action principles) have been among the most fundamental and enduring components of our best physical theories for the last three hundred years.

- All of Newton's optics and mechanics can be derived from William Rowen Hamilton's formulation of least action. Both the Schrödinger equations of quantum mechanics and Einstein's equations for general relativity can be derived from simple least action principles.

At the risk of getting a bit off topic, I have pulled in an outside quote to help explain the place of *least action* in the science of physics:

The ancients observed, that nature never does anything without design and for naught, and selects the nearest paths, but they did not prove it. Ptolemy said, the rays of light come to us in straight lines, because that is the shortest path, and he deduced from the [reflection] of light, that light passes from any point in its course before incidence, to any other in its reflected course, by the shortest paths, and in the least time, its velocity being uniform and equal before and after reflection. (s. Arago Biographies translated by Smyth. Powell & Grant, Boston. Ticknor & Fields 1859 Sec. II. p. 189. Note).<sup>5</sup>

Lagrangian dynamics employs the principle of least action, and, in general relativity, least action has appeal in describing the motion of objects along geodesic paths. Furthermore, I think of Newton's first two laws of motion as a statement of the least action principle: If there's no force, don't do anything you wouldn't be doing anyhow.

Greg Aicklen, in particular, questioned the significance of least action in the argument for ID creationism. Least action and particularly teleology can find use as an inspiration for the formulation of hypotheses in the physical sciences. However, teleology (purposefulness) is never incorporated as a final explanation. I gathered from his comments that Koons thinks it should be.

It was earlier noted that ID proponents don't cotton to the term "creationists" when applied to themselves. They really want to put a lot of distance between themselves and the young Earth creationists (YEC) who tell us the Earth is only a few thousand years old. It's curious, then, that the ID creationists carry so much water for the YECs. For example (from our copy of his presentation), Koons stated:

- Evidence for Darwinian macroevolution is far from compelling, except for those with a commitment to materialism.
- Gaps in the fossil record; "transitional forms" are really mosaics.

From experience I know I don't have to go to a lecture at UT Dallas to hear those arguments. I get this kind of stuff all the time at MIOS (Metroplex Institute of Origin Science) meetings. Koons did state, however, (on the very next line):

- No doubt about the reality of "evolution" defined broadly: the gradual unfolding of life. My doubts concern the adequacy of the Darwinian mechanism.

Koons' statements about the nature of the creation/evolution argument also struck a familiar chord. The YECs spend a lot of time running down mainstream scientists and evolutionary biologists in particular. The YECs tell me these scientists are not models of integrity. Their motives are less than exemplary, and their character is less than sterling. Koons has his own way of saying it: Evolutionists (evolutionary biologists) are still muck-ing about, trying to figure out how this whole thing works. Their job is grittier and nastier than that of other natural scientists, and they are not doing it very well. They suffer from "physics envy" and they need some spectacular successes to elevate them in the public esteem. They need a biological Einstein, and they don't even have a biological Newton. And their motives are less than exemplary.

So, are these guys creationists or what? Maybe we should not lean too much on labels. I recall the famous American gangster Al Capone carried a business card, and on that business card it said he was a used furniture dealer. Although that statement may seem odd at first, you need to ask yourself: Would you expect it to say anything else?

## References

- 1 <http://www.utdallas.edu/orgs/idea/>
- 2 Robert C. Koons: "The Future of Darwinism and Design: Philosophical and Historical Perspectives." Presentation given 26 March 2004 at UT Dallas. Unless otherwise stated, all of Professor Koons' quotes are taken from his presentation.
- 3 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/1999/1999november/november1999.htm#behe>
- 4 For example, Kenneth Miller has proposed such a solution: <http://www.millerandlevine.com/km/evol/DI/clot/Clotting.html>
- 5 <http://www.homeoint.org/cazalet/fincke/leastaction.htm>

## Correction

In the February issue I stated that Phillip Johnson's status as a non-scientist was not mentioned in the video "Unlocking the Mystery of Life." A follow-up review of the video confirms he is listed in the video as a former law professor at UC Berkeley. I regret the error, which resulted from not carefully reviewing the video prior to publication.

John Blanton

## What's new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the *What's New* column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

### Busted! The sordid story behind our fabricated interviews

The heat is on. A year ago, when *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair was fired for fabricating interviews, we at WN shrugged it off. It's not like it was the first time a reporter made up a story. *Washington Post* reporter Janet Cooke got a Pulitzer Prize for interviewing people that didn't exist. That was 14 years ago. More recently, Stephen Glass was caught fabricating stories for *New Republic*. We still didn't take it seriously; nobody reads *New Republic* anyway. But *USA Today* is America's most-read paper, and last week, star reporter Jack Kelly was outed for making news up. On top of that, a WN reader googled "veteran NASA astronaut Ann Thropojinic" (WN 12 Mar 04), and came up with zip. Are we about to be exposed? It's time to come clean: WN has fabricated interviews for years. It gives us full control of a story, and it's highly addictive. Having no experience at confession, WN turned to a professional, Mia Culpa, for help. "It's best to be indirect," she mused, "perhaps you could reveal the truth in a whimsical interview with a fictitious expert." Thanks Mia.

### Polygraph: Is telling the truth publicly as bad as lying?

About a year ago the National Academy of Sciences completed a review of scientific evidence on the polygraph, "The Polygraph and Lie Detection." It concluded that the use of polygraph tests for DOE employee security screening was unacceptable because of the high rate of false positives. DOE took the position that a lot of false positives must mean the test is very sensitive, and simply reissued its old polygraph policies without change (WN 18 Apr 03). A nuclear scientist at Sandia National Laboratories, Alan Zelicoff, thought that was pretty dumb, which it was, and he said so publicly. Sandia took disciplinary action, and Zelicoff says he was forced to resign.

### Political science: The administration answers the scientists.

Barely a week after 60 prominent scientists issued a statement charging the Bush administration with manipulating the science advisory process (WN 20 Feb 04), the White House de-

livered an eloquent response – two advocates of stem cell research were abruptly ejected from the Council on Bioethics, and replaced on the panel by three appointees whose opposition to stem cell research is solidly faith-based. Anybody else want to speak up? John Marburger, Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, has apparently been assigned the task of belittling the scientist's statement, but the 60 prominent scientists who signed aren't backing down.

### Bubble fusion: Corpse of "sonofusion" is said to be twitching.

A new claim of desktop fusion from collapsing bubbles is coming out. It's been two years since Taleyarken et al. at Oak Ridge National Laboratory reported in *Science* magazine that they had observed 2.5 MeV neutron peaks correlated with sonoluminescence from collapsing bubbles (WN 01 Mar 02), but others could not confirm their results. By mid summer the bubble had burst (WN 26 Jul 02). That was remarkably similar to the lifetime of cold fusion. But now Taleyarken has new results that some say are more convincing. Perhaps we should wait for independent confirmation. Cold fusion, of course, still has believers, but not much confirmation.

### The hydrogen initiative: What would it take to make it work?

Two years ago, Secretary of Energy Spencer Abraham announced the "Freedom Car" program (WN 18 Jan 02). It was supposed to stimulate development of hydrogen fuel-cell vehicles, freeing us from reliance on foreign oil. The big auto makers pledged their support, but something was missing. A year later, President Bush announced a \$1.2B Hydrogen Initiative to produce Freedom Fuel to run the Freedom Car. The plan calls for competitive use of hydrogen in commercial transportation by 2020. Huge performance gaps in hydrogen engines, production and storage must be overcome for this to happen. It is likely that the early phases of any hydrogen economy will rely on production methods that use fossil fuels (WN 31 Jan 03). On Monday, a report critiquing the Hydrogen Initiative, prepared by the APS Panel on Public Affairs, will be released.

### Cold fusion: True believers see DOE review as "vindication."

(WN 2 April 04) There hasn't been much to celebrate in the 15 years since the University of Utah held a press conference in Salt Lake City to announce the discovery of "cold fusion." Although a brave little band of true believers continued to trumpet cold fusion, the band leader was publishing "Infinite Energy Magazine." That made it pretty hard to take this stuff seriously. Although there was no press release or announcement, DOE has apparently agreed to take a second look. That's not really too

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surprising; not since the Reagan administration has unbridled technological optimism so dominated Washington decision making: missile defense, hydrogen cars, hafnium bombs, manned missions to Mars. How are these other ventures doing? Let's take a look at one.

## The hafnium bomb: The DARPA motto is "high risk, high payoff."

(WN 2 April 04) With DARPA support, a group led by Carl Collins at the U. of Texas at Dallas claimed to be able to trigger energy release from a hafnium-178 isomer using a dental X-ray machine. As What's New reported last October, a group using the Advanced Photon Source at Argonne found no sign of the hafnium-178 isomer-triggering effect (WN 24 Oct 03). We thought that would be the end of it, but Sunday there was a long cover story on the hafnium-178 bomb in the Washington Post Magazine. The people at DARPA seem to have the "high risk" thing down pretty well, but "high payoff" still seems to be a problem.

## Anti-terrorism: Psychic tip prompts bomb search of airliner.

(WN 2 April 04) Last Friday, American Airlines Flight 1304 from Fort

Myers, FL to Dallas was scrubbed. The plane was searched with bomb-sniffing dogs. A self-described psychic had called to say a bomb might be on the plane. Should the psychic be charged with making a false police report? The psychic no doubt acted out of a sense of concern for the lives of innocent passengers. Being crazy is only crazy. The Transportation Security Administration official who acted on the fantasy of a psychic was terminally stupid.

## Managing the news: How Libya's nuclear effort was exaggerated

(WN 2 April 04) By any measure, Libya's unilateral decision to drop its nuclear weapons program was very good news, but spin doctors are never satisfied. Two weeks ago 45 journalists were flown by chartered jet to DOE's Y-12 complex in Oak Ridge to listen to DOE Secretary Abraham, who stood beside a pile of centrifuge components from Libya. Guards with weapons at the ready stood by. The implication was that Libya was close to making a bomb. A week later, the New York Times disclosed that the casings lacked the finely tooled rotors to make them useful. A DOE spokesperson shrugged, "Libya has tons of steel to make rotors." Of

course, and sculpting is just a matter of removing the unnecessary part of the stone.

*Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org*

## Events Calendar continued from page 1

Astronomy, University of Hawaii and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, University of Colorado. He is also president of the Colorado Citizens For Science and is a research fellow for the Center for Inquiry. He is a noted skeptic and is a fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

Dr. Stenger will be available to sign copies of his book following his talk.

This meeting is free and open to the public.

Phone 214-335-9248 for information.  
Additional phone number: 972-306-3187  
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