



The North Texas

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

The dowsing challenge

by John Blanton

As though we don't say this often enough: The North Texas Skeptics hosts a "Paranormal Challenge" to all proponents of astrology, psychic channeling, faith healing, alien abductions, etc. What this means is that anybody who can demonstrate evidence, in a controlled test, of any of a list of paranormal phenomena will be awarded a monetary prize.

Of course, this is a rip-off of the famous prize by magician and noted skeptic James (The Amazing) Randi, but he hasn't sued us yet, so our prize now stands at \$12,000. I am reminded that Randi is currently offering more than a million dollars, but who's counting?

Actually, the James Randi organization recommended Rechey Davidson to us. They routinely do that, because with a million dollars on the table they get a ton of nibbles and can't take the time to screen out the kooks. I guess that's where we come in.

Mr. Davidson tried unsuccessfully to reach us by e-mail at first, but most likely his earlier transmissions got caught in my mail filter along with offers for cheap. Once Mr. Davidson learned the art of e-mail subject lines we began to converse. He wrote:

Briefly, I have been able to dowse maps of people's homes (Or other locations) where they have lost specific items and have been able to tell them where the item is. They have, so far, been able to verify they found the item where I said it was. This has happened even if I have never been to their home. Do I just need to submit more detail and suggest how to test this or what? Thanks. – Rechey Davidson

Of course we wanted to test Mr. Davidson. We have been interested in the matter of map dowsing for over 12 years—ever since the notable dowser Bette Epstein declined our invitation of a test (and hurt our feelings).

However, I didn't have anything that was lost. I know where all my stuff is. So what we agreed on is that Mr. Davidson would dowse for something that was not lost,

EVENTS CALENDAR

October Program

Saturday, 9 October at 2 p.m.
Center for Community
Cooperation,
2900 Live Oak Street, Dallas

WHAT THE #*\$! DO THEY KNOW, ANYWAY?

When Science and Dogma Collide in Popular Culture

Thomas Huxley once declared that "Science commits suicide when it adopts a creed." When scientists team up with psychics and theologians, do they prove Huxley right? NTS President Daniel Barnett will explore some recent attempts to mix dogma and science in today's world - and some of the results produced.

This meeting is free and open to the public.

Phone 214-335-9248 for information.

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 501 (c) (3) scientific and educational organization. All
 members receive the NTS newsletter and may attend
 NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or
 reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings
 on topics of current interest or social events.

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but was merely placed somewhere by me. Since Mr. Davidson said he did not need to be nearby (he lives way outside Dallas), we saw no need for him to be present, so we did the whole thing by e-mail.

I scanned in the builder's floor plan for my house and labeled the major rooms with capital letters. I sent Mr. Davidson a link to the scanned image, and he printed it out. He said he was satisfied with that, and we got started.

The object of our affection was my Nikon digital camera. I chose that because I only have one like it, so Mr. Davidson would not have the problem of dowsing for one of several identical objects.

We got started in early September and finished up two weeks later. Each day or so Mr. Davidson would send me an e-mail telling me in which room the camera was placed, and I would record his score and move, or not move, the camera to a different room. Here is the result:

Test 01: 7 September 2004, Camera placed in B,
 Davidson called E

Test 02: 8 September 2004, Camera placed in A,
 Davidson called G

Test 03: 13 September 2004, Camera placed in D,
 Davidson called L

Test 04: 14 September 2004, Camera placed in D,
 Davidson called F

Test 05: 15 September 2004, Camera placed in F,
 Davidson called H

Test 06: 16 September 2004, Camera placed in J,
 Davidson called E

Test 07: 17 September 2004, Camera placed in G,
 Davidson called B

Test 08: 18 September 2004, Camera placed in A,
 Davidson called B

Test 09: 18 September 2004, Camera placed in F,
 Davidson called E

Test 10: 18 September 2004, Camera placed in E, Davidson
 called J

Test 11: 19 September 2004, Camera placed in E, Davidson
 called B

Test 12: 20 September 2004, Camera placed in E, Davidson
 called D

See a comprehensive posting of the dialog relating to this test at the following URL:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/challenge/davidson/davidson.htm>

Read more about the Challenge here:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/challenge/challeng.htm>

Since there were 12 possible locations for the camera, Davidson had scored about what could be expected by chance alone—namely zero. He had originally claimed he could be 75% accurate—get the right location three times out of four. However, we urged him to be cautious, so he lowered his claim to 50%. Based on the claim of 50% accuracy, a quick calculation shows that missing 12 straight would have a probability of 1/4096. Most likely 50% was not the right number.

On this basis, we have asked Mr. Davidson to reconsider his claimed level of success for any future tests. In this case I would suspect his level of success to be 1/12. By this I mean to say, and I am willing to back this up with my own money, that map dowsing is completely ineffective for finding lost or hidden objects.

Subsequent correspondence with Mr. Davidson indicates he is puzzled by his lack of success. However he is willing to continue to work with us. I have asked him to perform tests on his own similar to this one in order to satisfy himself his abilities are real. If, after these tests, he is still sure of his abilities, we will have Mr. Davidson up to Dallas for additional tests. These tests would be more fair to Mr. Davidson, since if here were present he would not have to trust us to do the scoring honestly.

We continue to remind claimants that our prize is real—the money is there. To get it, all you have to do is the impossible.

The prize money is not drawn from NTS funds, but is underwritten by private individuals. The NTS is not responsible for conducting the tests and is not liable for any consequences of the test. The conduct of the tests and payment of the prize is the sole responsibility of the underwriters. The underwriters are:

Gregory H. Aicklen

John F. Blanton

Prasad N. Golla

Mike Selby

Michael T. Sullivan

John A. Thomas



I am deeply honored

by John Blanton

In a tale related by the American writer Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) a man was tarred and feathered and was being ridden out of town on a rail. It was quite a circumstance for the unfortunate gentleman, but he retained his composure and remarked, “If it wasn’t for the honor of the thing, I had just as soon walk.”

Anyhow, enough of that.

In my vanity I was fishing around on the Internet for my name, and I came across the following, which bore a strong resemblance. Reading through the page I blushed at the high praise being bestowed. Some of my accomplishments mentioned there I did not even recall. I missed the author’s name and e-mail address so I was unable to thank him profusely.

Briefly, the account goes as follows:

Debate between Dr. Don Patton (scientist, Christian) and John Blanton, (atheist, evolutionist, humanist, Bible skeptic)

OK, I seem to recall that.

Review of Debate:

Dr. Patton affirmed that the facts of geology are more compatible with creation than evolution. His presentation was as scientific as it was precise, John Blanton (affirming the opposite) rambled irrelevantly off topic by discussing the Bible, while Patton only discussed science. The few times John Blanton did in fact discuss science in his lectures, he was so ill informed that even one of his fellow-atheist/evolutionist colleagues admitted to Dr. Patton privately, that Patton won the debate hands down.

In all honesty, I disremember that part. My fan continues:

John Blanton falsely accused Patton of misquoting most of his scientific references. (This statement by one of John Blanton’s colleagues, who remained an evolutionist after the debate, but admitted Don Patton won the debate, is another excellent example of the “hostile witness” approach.) Patton clearly refuted the ridiculous charge of misquoting, by first pointing out that Blanton was so ill prepared to debate Patton, that he didn’t even understand the concept of the “hostile witness”. When Patton challenged Blanton for a single ex-

ample of misquoting the original sources, Blanton, typical of his style, merely restated the charge while offering no proof in an effort to create slur and slander against Patton. Blanton lives by the rule, "If you say something false enough times, people will begin to believe it." We find this as dishonest as it is unprofessional.

Blanton also stated that Patton has no formal training in geology and accused Patton of having a fake degree. When he was later directed to our page that details Dr. Patton's credentials, he called Patton a liar. When the authentic original documents were presented to Blanton, he accused Patton of forging these documents to support, "his phony degree". Blanton actually contacted Jan Williamson, believing this person to be as fictitious as the letter. To Blanton's horror, Jan Williamson verified the letter was authentic as well as the accreditation of the school where Patton earned his Ph. D. Rather than withdraw the charge as false and unsubstantiated, John Blanton, continues to this day with his slanderous accusations. Again, Blanton lives by the rule, "If you say something false enough times, people will begin to believe it." Or "throw enough mud and people will look dirty."

In the end, it was an unfair debate because Blanton admitted he had no formal scientific training in Geology or the fossil record, while Patton is a University trained Geologist who has earned a living working around the world as a consulting Geologist.

I did all that? All I can say is "Gee, thanks." I feel so underserving.

However, before we leave this topic, let me set some things straight. If I have offended Mr. Patton in any way or misstated him with respect to the debate, I take this opportunity to apologize and ask for forgiveness. I am sure in the heat of the debate I must have pointed out to my audience that Mr. Patton was truly wrong on a number of points, but I got the idea at the time that he took no offense.

Also, I was hoping the word of my status as a scientist would not get out. Maybe I should ask my employer to delete that term from my business cards in the future.

In particular, I want to set the record straight about Mr. Patton's Ph.D. Let's put aside, for the moment, the word "phony." It has such negative connotations. In the great state

of Texas and elsewhere there are a number of reputable colleges and universities with first rate geology departments. I am sure if Mr. Patton took his degree to any of these establishments and had it examined by the learned geologists working there, they would all agree that it is printed on the very finest paper.

All kidding aside, Mr. Patton's academic accomplishments are not to be sneezed at. Disbelieving the rumors that he did not possess even a bachelor's or master's degree, I approached him in person to set the record straight. I was impressed when he informed me he had been able to bypass these way stops and obtain a Ph.D. directly. Lest you consider this a minor accomplishment, I make this observation: Although I do not, myself, possess a Ph.D., I work with a number of very bright people who do. And do you know what? Not one of them has been able to accomplish that standing without first obtaining a bachelor's plus a master's. What do you think of that?

Anyhow, the debate was a lot of fun, and it was great reading about it from one of my (secret) admirers. Given the choice, however, I think I would just as soon walk.



References

Check out the following:

<http://www.bible.ca/tracks/patton-debate-john-blanton-fossil-record.htm>

Other accounts of the debate can be found here:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/issues/debate/debate.htm>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/2002/2002april/april2002.htm#debate>

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/2002/2002april/april2002.htm#getit>

See also:

<http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/paluxy/degrees.html>

<http://www.talkorigins.org/faqs/credentials.html>

Meyer's Hopeless Monster

Wesley R. Elsberry has posted a response to creationist Stephen C. Meyer on The Panda's Thumb blog. Here is part of it:

<http://www.pandasthumb.org/pt-archives/000430.html>

Posted by Wesley R. Elsberry on August 24, 2004 05:56 PM

Review of Meyer, Stephen C. 2004. *The origin of biological information and the higher taxonomic categories*. *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington* 117(2):213-239.

by Alan Gishlick, Nick Matzke, and Wesley R. Elsberry

[The views and statements expressed here are our own and not necessarily those of NCSE or its supporters.]

“Intelligent design” (ID) advocate Stephen C. Meyer has produced a “review article” that folds the various lines of “intelligent design” antievolutionary argumentation into one lump. The article is published in the journal *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*. We congratulate ID on finally getting an article in a peer-reviewed biology journal, a mere fifteen years after the publication of the 1989 ID textbook *Of Pandas and People*, a textbook aimed at inserting ID into public schools. It is gratifying to see the ID movement *finally* attempt to make their case to the only scientifically relevant group, professional biologists. This is therefore the beginning (not the end) of the review process for ID. Perhaps one day the scientific community will be convinced that ID is worthwhile. Only through this route — convincing the scientific community, a route already taken by plate tectonics, endosymbiosis, and other revolutionary scientific ideas — can ID earn a legitimate place in textbooks.

Unfortunately, the ID movement will likely ignore the above considerations about how scientific review actually works, and instead trumpet the paper from coast to coast as proving the scientific legitimacy of ID. Therefore, we would like to do our part in the review process by providing a preliminary evaluation of the claims made in Meyer's paper. Given the scientific stakes, we may assume that Meyer, Program Director of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, the major organization promoting ID, has put forward the best case that ID has to offer. Discouragingly, it appears that ID's best case is not very good. We cannot review every problem with Meyer's article in this initial post, but we would like to highlight some of the most serious mistakes. These include errors in facts and reasoning. Even more seriously, Meyer's paper omits discussion or even citation of vast amounts of directly relevant work available in the scientific literature.

Summary of the paper

Meyer's paper predictably follows the same pattern that has characterized “intelligent design” since its inception: deny the sufficiency of evolutionary processes to account for life's history and diversity, then assert that an “intelligent designer” provides a better explanation. Although ID is discussed in the concluding section of the paper, there is no positive account of “intelligent design” presented, just as in all previous work on “intelligent design”. Just as a detective doesn't have a case against someone without motive, means, and opportunity, ID doesn't stand a scientific chance without some kind of model of what happened, how, and why. Only a reasonably detailed model could provide explanatory hypotheses that can be empirically tested. “An unknown intelligent designer did something, somewhere, somehow, for no apparent reason” is not a model.

Meyer's paper, therefore, is almost entirely based on negative argument. He focuses upon the Cambrian explosion as an event he thinks that evolutionary biology is unable to account for. Meyer asserts that the Cambrian explosion represented an actual sudden origin of higher taxa; that these taxa (such as phyla) are “real” and not an artifact of human retrospective classification; and that morphological disparity coincides with phyletic categories. Meyer then argues that the origin of these phyla would require dramatic increases in biological “information,” namely new proteins and new genes (and some vaguer forms of “information” at higher levels of biological organization). He argues that genes/proteins are highly “complex” and “specified,” and that therefore the evolutionary origin of new genes is so improbable as to be effectively impossible. Meyer briefly considers and rejects several theories proposed within evolutionary biology that deal with macroevolutionary phenomena. Having rejected these, Meyer argues that ID is a better alternative explanation for the emergence of new taxa in the Cambrian explosion, based solely upon an analogy between “designs” in biology and the designs of human designers observed in everyday experience.

The mistakes and omissions in Meyer's work are many and varied, and often layered on top of each other. Not every aspect of Meyer's work can be addressed in this initial review, so we have chosen several of Meyer's major claims to assess. Among these, we will take up the Cambrian explosion and its relation to paleontology and systematics. We will examine Meyer's negative arguments concerning evolutionary theories and the origin of biological “information” in the form of genes.

An expanded critique of this paper is in preparation.



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.]

MISSILE DEFENSE: YOU ARE TWICE AS SAFE AS YOU WERE LAST MONTH

(From WN 17 Sep 04) A second interceptor missile has been lowered into its silo in Fort Greely, AK. Meanwhile, the flight test scheduled for late September has been postponed another two months. It will then be two years since the last flight test. It will also be after the election. I called on General Persi-flage at the Missile Defense Agency. "Shouldn't we wait to see if the system will work?" I asked. "It's already working," the general shrugged. "Our goal is to keep America safe. We put the first interceptor in its silo in July, and there hasn't been a missile attack since." He had me there. I still felt a little uneasy, but before I could ask another question, workmen came in carrying a huge banner. "Where do you want us to hang this, General?" They unfurled the banner, which read simply "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED."

NSF: BEMENT NOMINATION MAY BE A BRILLIANT MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

(From WN 17 Sep 04) Or maybe not. Earlier this year, when Rita Colwell left NSF before the end of her 6-year term, it was expected that someone would be nominated quickly to fill the job. In the meantime an acting director was named. That sort of thing happens all the time, but the person picked as acting director was Arden Bement, Jr., who already had a job as director of NIST. Bement stayed on as director of NIST, moonlighting as NSF acting director, with a nominee for NSF Director expected momentarily. Under the 1998 Federal Vacancies Reform Act, Presidential appointments to acting positions are limited to 210 days. That's so "acting" can't be used to duck confirmation hearings. Time ran out on Saturday with no nominee for NSF Director in sight, so Bush nominated Bement. Here it gets a little confusing. In his announcement to the NIST staff, Bement said he will remain as NIST Director until he is confirmed by the Senate as NSF Director. Maybe it's an experiment to see if they can get by with half as many directors as agencies. Meanwhile, NIST Deputy Director Hratch Semerjian becomes something. NIST may have both a director and an acting director. We're glad we could clear this matter up for readers.

ETHICS: NIH BANS MOONLIGHTING WITH PHARMACEUTICAL COMPANIES

(From WN 24 Sep 04) In a major policy shift, the National Institutes of Health has declared a one year moratorium on private consulting arrangements of NIH scientists. Considering the potential for abuse, how could it have been allowed in the first place? In fact, Zerhouni saw it as a way to attract good people from private companies <http://www.aps.org/WN/WN04/wn070904.cfm>, but embarrassing media reports finally made it clear that the change was necessary.

OPEN ACCESS: MEDICAL JOURNALS LAY IT OUT FOR DRUG COMPANIES

(From WN 17 Sep 04) Several leading medical journals will refuse to publish results of clinical trials that haven't been registered publicly. This follows disclosure that drug makers withheld information about suicidal thoughts in children and adolescents on antidepressants.

COLD FUSION: DOE REVIEW IS HIDDEN BEHIND A CLOAK OF SECRECY

(From WN 17 Sep 04) Believers see DOE's review as vindication after 15 rough years (WN 2 Apr 04). But watchers are puzzled by how little is known about the process. Who are the reviewers? Who are they talking to? WN hears that DOE is claiming anonymous peer review. That shouldn't please anyone. The controversy will simply continue.

SUPPLEMENTS: ANCIENT CHINESE WISDOM - OR A DEADLY HERBAL SCAM?

(From WN 10 Sep 04) Two years ago WN related the tale of PC-SPEs, a mixture of seven Chinese herbs sold by Botanic Labs to promote "prostate health" www.aps.org/WN/WN02/wn090602.cfm. WN learned about it from Paul Goldberg, editor of the Cancer Letter, a Washington publication. Sunday's Washington Post carried a front-page account of the PC-SPEs disaster with new details. Thanks to the Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act of 1994, PC-SPEs was marketed without testing, since no claim was made that it could cure any disease www.aps.org/WN/WN04/wn040904.cfm. But it seemed to work as well as prescription drugs for prostate cancer. That's because the mish-mash of herbs was laced with prescription drugs. Patients were grateful to have a "natural" product. At least they were until their penis shrank and their breasts grew. It seems PC-SPEs included a synthetic estrogen. There was also a problem with blood clots, but Botanic fixed that by add-

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2004.
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ing warfarin, a blood thinner widely used as rat poison. We'll come back to passage of the 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act.

CLIMATE CHANGE: THE CONFERENCE BOARD STARTS PAYING ATTENTION

(From WN 10 Sep 04) A non-profit organization of some 2,000 major corporations from around the world, the Conference Board is best known for monthly surveys of consumer confidence and economic indicators. But on Tuesday, it issued a report *Climate Change: Clear Trajectory Haze in the Details*, warning that "businesses that ignore the debate over climate change do so at their peril." The report concludes: "The Earth - for whatever the exact reasons - is on a trajectory toward an ever warmer climate. This cannot be avoided at this point, but the trajectory can be jiggled and potential risks associated with the warming can be mitigated. Ultimately the trajectory could be reversed." The political climate for acknowledging warming is improved. Just two weeks ago, the U.S. Climate Change Program submitted its report to Congress, putting the blame squarely on increased greenhouse gases (WN 27 Aug 04).

NASA: HURRICANES ON THE CAPE AND A ROUGH LANDING IN UTAH

(From WN 10 Sep 04) The shuttle fleet, it seems, is not safe even in its hanger on Earth. The Genesis mission was to be the first sample return since Apollo 17. It had been collecting solar wind particles for three years, but its parachute failed to deploy and it crashed in the Utah desert. Whether any data can be salvaged is not clear.

NIH: FREE PUBLIC ACCESS TO AGENCY FUNDED RESEARCH IS PROPOSED

(From WN 10 Sep 04) The move could drive some journals out of business and bankrupt scientific societies that depend on

journal profits. But given society's rising expectations of access, change seems inevitable.

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community, the media, and the public. It also promotes science and scientific inquiry, critical thinking, science education, and the use of reason in examining important issues.

The Skeptical Inquirer

is published bimonthly by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. Subscriptions should be addressed to SKEPTICAL INQUIRER, Box 703, Amherst, NY 14226-0703. Or call toll-free 1-800-634-1610. Subscription prices: one year (six issues), \$35; two years, \$60; three years, \$84. Single issue, \$4.95. You may also visit the CSICOP Web site at <http://www.csicop.org> for more information.

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FIRST CLASS

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