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Scientific Babelism

By John Blanton

According to Ruel A. Macaraeg “Babelism and Creationism are isomorphisms based on a certain set of assumptions, and that understanding how this set works (which is clearer in Babelism) is helpful to understanding the Creationist debate.”

Mr. Macaraeg presented his take on *scientific babelism* at the May meeting. He says “These assumptions have to do with re-framing the debates (creation/evolution, babelism/linguistics) around the concepts of origin and design instead of diversity and guided probability.”

NTS technical advisor Tim Gorski had previously written about *scientific babelism* as a spoof on *scientific creationism*. He likened historical linguistics to the scientific tyranny the creationists have complained about for years. Spoofing the creationists, he demanded that *scientific babelism* be given equal treatment in schools.¹

My own take is that babelism parallels the literal acceptance of the story of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament. For the unread, the story goes that long ago people began to construct a huge tower as a shortcut to Heaven. God got wind of this scheme and turned the tables on the people. He scrambled their tongues, giving different groups disparate languages, stifling their ability to communicate and therefore their efforts to complete the tower. We have lived with this legacy ever since.

Historical linguistics, on the other hand, holds that languages have evolved much as biological populations have evolved. New languages split off from common ancestors, producing a language tree much like the our biological tree of life.

It’s easy, some would say fun, to draw the analogy between *scientific babelism* and *scientific creationism*.

It’s not all sport, however, because *Babelism* is a real issue in the creation/evolution debate. The creationists I know embrace *babelism* along with *creationism*. Don Patton occasionally touches on the subject at meetings of MIOS, the Metroplex Institute of Origin Science, even though the term *babelism* is not used.

EVENTS CALENDAR

June Program

Saturday, June 11, at 2 p.m.
Center for Community
Cooperation,
2900 Live Oak Street, Dallas

Program topic will be announced later...

Check the NTS Hotline or our Web site for more information.

June Board of Directors/Social Meeting

Time and place to be announced later...

Send e-mail to mselfby@ntskeptics.org, or phone 214-335-9248 for time and location.

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Mr. Macaraeg makes the following, additional points:

The methodology of Babelism and Creationism is derived from ad hoc examples, which fail to produce scientific theories and thus disqualify them both as science. Yet skeptics and evolutionists in general are at fault for not bearing this out, and trying instead to debate ad hoc evidence point for point. This failure to keep the debate at the theoretical level accounts for much of the continuing difficulty in generating public support for evolution.

Aside from its relevance to Creationism, Babelist-type arguments are also used to support a variety of other pseudohistoriographic and New Age theories, including



Ruel A. Macaraeg discusses scientific babelism at the May meeting.

Photo by Mike Selby

Atlantean, Paleoindian, and Polynesian origins. Most of these arguments can be refuted by a skeptic acquainted with only a minimal exposure to linguistics, and it's thus worthwhile to be familiarized with basic linguistic concepts.

Babelism is an example of how Creationists keep the initiative by being innovative and proactive with their arguments. My hope is that skeptics will be the ones to be innovative and proactive in the future, by anticipating such arguments as they are forming (as Babelism is) and nipping them in the bud. □

References and Notes

1 <http://www.str.com.br/English/Humor/babelism.htm>

Web news

by John Blanton

The World Wide Web is a wonderful source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.

Monkey Trial or Kangaroo Court?

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-05-19.htm#court>

<http://www.alternet.org/story/22042/>

By Stan Cox, AlterNet. Posted May 19, 2005.

Creationists wanted to put science on trial in Kansas. The scientists were having none of it and chose not to show up for court. You can't debate science on religious terms, they said. Witness:

In three days of testimony in Kansas, witnesses painted a picture of evolutionary biology as a tyrannical discipline that can be salvaged only by admitting the bright light of the supernatural.

The hours passed, and the chilling phrases kept on coming: "security police," "fear and tension," "significant personal sanctions," "enforcement of the Rule," "suppression of evidence," "conflict of conscience," "trampling on those who believe man is purposed."

The man on the stage might well have been talking about life in a totalitarian state, but John Calvert, a lawyer who directs the Intelligent Design Network of Shawnee Mission, Kan., was describing the state of science education in America.

For three days in May, in a cramped auditorium across the street from the Kansas Capitol building, Calvert and his 22 witnesses — scientists, philosophers, teachers, and other scholars — painted a picture of evolutionary biology as a tyrannical, "naturalistic" discipline that can be salvaged only by letting the bright light of the supernatural shine in.

The consequences of ignoring the supernatural are onerous, as some witnesses related:

Witness Nancy Bryson told the story of how she lost her position as head of the Department of Science and Mathematics at Mississippi University for Women after she spoke out against evolution in 2003. After that, she said, other faculty members would slip into her of-

fice after hours to talk with her about the situation, saying that it was "not safe" to talk openly.

I have always considered there is more than one way to make yourself look foolish and unfit for unemployment. Promoting creationism would be one way. Flashing yourself in front of the student body would be another.

California high school teacher Roger DeHart testified that administrators reassigned him from biology to earth science because he had been telling students about what he called the "misrepresentation" of evolution as an explanation for life. When the controversy eventually forced DeHart to move to a different school, he was warned by one of his new colleagues, "I'll be keeping an eye on you."

Of course, this kind of thing, rather that portion that is true, stinks of McCarthyism. It's obvious, to true believers, that political bullying is the only thing keeping "Darwinism" afloat. Either that or else the fact that, at its base, evolution is true.

For a brief period between 1999 and 2001, Kansas science teachers had labored under state standards that de-emphasized evolution. In 2004, voters once more gave conservative religious members a majority on the state's Board of Education; as a result, science standards are to be rewritten yet again, in a way that deprecates evolution and permits discussion of intelligent design.

"ID," as it's often called, is the idea that natural processes cannot account for the appearance of new species of plants and animals throughout the earth's history—that although genetic diversity may shift around a lot within species, the species themselves were designed by an entity outside of nature.

Mainstream scientists are nearly unanimous in rejecting ID, which they say is just a reincarnation of old-fashioned biblical creationism, carefully articulated to avoid going afoul of the Constitution.

In March, a 26-member writing committee assigned by the Board submitted a new draft of science standards that was, well, standard stuff. But eight dissenters on the committee submitted an alternative version that included anti-evolution language. Board members who liked the alternative version decided to schedule hearings for early May in Topeka, to weigh the relative merits of the competing drafts.

Calvert's witnesses turned out in force. Their side was coming off a big win in Ohio, where, in 2002, they had fought for and gotten a change in school science standards. They knew that Kansas, with a newly elected, pro-creation majority on its school board, would be an easy mark.

But Kansas's mainstream biologists boycotted the hearings, comparing them to the 1925 Scopes "Monkey Trial." They said the outcome was already decided anyway, and that to defend evolution in what they called a "kangaroo court" would only give the proceedings a veneer of respectability they didn't deserve.

Creationists, on the other hand, believe they have a good product to sell.

At the hearings, witness after witness spoke of gaping holes in evolutionary theory, the power of ID to fill those holes, and ID's potential to give students the complete and exciting science education they deserve.

Ohio biology teacher Bryan Leonard testified that he helped write a state lesson plan called "Critical Analysis of Evolution." He said he knows it's a "good product" because of the overwhelmingly positive reaction from students: "The key is to find out what students want and teach toward their interests."

Give the students what they want. Now, that's an idea I can connect with. Of course, when I was a teenage boy taking high school biology, I knew what I wanted, and it had little to do with Darwinism. Is it too late for me to go back?

This homeopathic hokum does nobody any good

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-05-19.htm#hokum>

<http://news.scotsman.com/opinion.cfm?id=540312005>

Paul Stokes

I hope this writer is right, because otherwise a lot of people are in serious trouble.

ONE good thing that can be said about homeopathic medicine is that no-one ever died from taking an overdose. You could swallow a whole health shop of homeopathic tablets and you would not suffer a single side effect from the supposedly active ingredient. That is not because they are "natural" and therefore safe. It is because the "active" ingredient isn't. There is no medicine in the medicine. There are no side effects, because there are no effects.

It's not just creationism, folks. Other forms of public idiocy are under assault from the scientific oligarchy.

Greater Glasgow NHS Board caved in yesterday to a well organised campaign against its plans to close the in-patient ward of the Glasgow Homeopathic Hospital and redirect the savings into modernising other areas of its service. Its decision has been greeted with universal praise as another victory for people power over the faceless bureaucrats. The plucky patients have seen off the so-called experts to retain a service that is unique in Scotland and, indeed, the whole of the UK. Good for them.

Unfortunately, their gain comes at great loss to the rest of us, and I do not just mean the £300,000 a year that goes into running these beds. The success of this campaign is a triumph for the forces of unreason, and anything that boosts them will ultimately damage us all. Homeopathy is hokum and should be treated as such.

It was invented some 200 years ago by the German physician Samuel Hahnemann as an alternative to the unsavoury conventional medicine of his time, which included purges and bloodletting among its treatments. Its core belief - one that contradicts all known physical laws - is that less equals more, that the smaller the amount of active ingredient in the medicine, the more effective it is.

Over-the-counter homeopathic remedies are diluted to the extent that they do not contain even a single molecule of the substance that is supposed to cure you. As the physicist Robert Park has pointed out, a patient would need to drink 7,874 gallons of such a solution to ingest their first molecule of medicine. Attempting to do this would result in a fatal overdose, but it would be the water that killed you, not the homeopathic remedy.

The reason you can't test for the effects of homeopathy is because there is nothing there to test.

So, if you can't test it, it must be all right. Right?

Discredited doctor's 'cure' for Aids ignites life-and-death struggle in South Africa

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-05-19.htm#aids>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,,1483792,00.html>

Sarah Boseley

Saturday May 14, 2005

The Guardian

We're well into the 21st century, and for a large number of people the previous 100-years of advances in medical science never even happened.

Patricia Masinga, 36, had known she had HIV for about 10 years. She worked for an Aids organisation, so when, inevitably, she began to get sick, she was well placed to get treatment, and her youth and two children gave her every reason to fight to stay alive.

But even among educated, professional women such as Patricia, uncertainty and confusion about the safety of Aids drugs has started to take hold in South Africa.

She opted for a diet of garlic and lemon instead. A month ago, she died.

What goes on inside our bodies remains the darkest of mysteries to the vast majority of us. It may as well be the back side of the moon, except that place may be more easy to comprehend. Where that is mystery and a lack of understanding, there is room for doubt, and there is a place for superstition and fraud.

Doctors and campaigners who have been struggling to increase the availability of Aids drugs to the 5 million HIV-infected people in South Africa are dismayed by the activities of a German-born doctor, Matthias Rath, who has reignited a life-and-death struggle in South Africa.

Dr Rath denounces Aids drugs and claims that all those who promote them are the paid lackeys of western drug companies. Vitamins, not drugs, are the cure for Aids - and cancer and diabetes too for that matter - he says, and there are those in the South African government who appear to give him credence.

He has appeared with the health minister, Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, who has made it clear she favours the healthy properties of garlic, lemon, beetroot and olive oil and will not back the use of the antiretrovirals which have stopped the death toll in the west.

Dr Rath's proclamations in full-page advertisements in the New York Times and International Herald Tribune, as well as the widely read Sowetan in South Africa, claim that Aids drugs are toxic and potentially deadly. Although the medical establishment denies his claims, the uncertainty they are creating has been deepened by the equivocal attitude of the government.

I also notice that a few years back in the U.S. we effectively discarded the safety provisions of the Pure Food and Drug act by allowing any pharmaceutical to be sold almost without restriction, as long as it is touted as a food supplement. What's the saying about "what goes around...?"

Science vs. science

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-05-19.htm#science>

<http://www.worldmag.com/subscriber/displayarticle.cfm?id=3565>

It goes on, people. Here is a take on the creationism controversy from the other side.

The debate over the teaching of evolution isn't just in Kansas anymore, as other states take up the issue. While these battles make headlines, they are the fruit of a scholarly movement that has shaken up the scientific establishment. WORLD talked to four "Intelligent Design" revolutionaries who are fighting Darwinists on their own terms | by Lynn Vincent

It would appear supporters of science are fighting a rear guard action, even as they score victories in minor skirmishes:

The evolution debate reignited this month as Oklahoma Attorney General Drew Edmondson ruled that Oklahoma's State Textbook Committee doesn't have the authority to require that biology textbooks carry a disclaimer that calls Darwinism a "controversial theory." (Committee members plan to challenge the ruling.)

Meanwhile, in Louisiana, the Tangipahoa School Board voted 5-4 against taking a defense of a similar disclaimer to the U.S. Supreme Court after an appeals court declared that the disclaimer is unconstitutional.

While none of this is good news for those who question Darwinism, one thing is clear: Darwinists are being forced to play defense. A major reason why is the emergence over the last few years of the Intelligent Design movement—a group of scholars and writers who argue that the world and its creatures show evidence of design. Who are some of the authors behind this movement? WORLD spoke with four of them.

The four are Phillip Johnson, Michael Behe, William Dembski, and Stephen Meyer. All are all connected in some way with the religious-based Center for Science and Culture of the Discovery Institute.

Phillip Johnson is considered by many the grandfather of the Intelligent Design movement, have gotten the ball rolling with his book *Darwin on Trial*. Behe is the real-life Ph.D. professor of biochemistry who champions creationism and has written the book *Darwin's Black Box*, in which he claims life is too complex to have evolved without help. William Dembski is the Ph.D. mathematician who has long sought to convince people, using mathematics, that he can spot design when he sees it. Ste-

phen Meyer is the Ph.D. in history and philosophy who heads up the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture.

In 1987, when UC Berkeley law professor Phillip Johnson asked God what he should do with the rest of his life, he didn't know he'd wind up playing Toto to the ersatz wizards of Darwinism. But a fateful trip by a London bookstore hooked Mr. Johnson on a comparative study of evolutionary theory. And by 1993, Mr. Johnson's book *Darwin on Trial* had begun peeling back the thin curtain of science that shielded evolution to reveal what lay behind: Darwinian philosophers churning out a powerful scientific mirage.

Michael Behe got his inspiration from Michael Denton's *Evolution: A Theory In Crisis*.

The reeducation of Michael Behe began in a green recliner. On a chill fall night in the same year Mr. Johnson was seeking direction from God, Mr. Behe, a professor of biochemistry at Pennsylvania's Lehigh University, sat at home in that recliner, transfixed by a book that shook the very foundations of his own understanding of science. It was three in the morning before he finished Michael Denton's book, *Evolution: A Theory in Crisis*, and turned out the lights. Nine years later, Mr. Behe himself published a book that began turning out the lights on the theory of evolution.

William Dembski is called "God's Mathematician."

It's easy to imagine what William Dembski's wife finds in the dryer lint trap after washing her husband's pants: equations. Long, elegant equations replete with tangents, vectors, and permutations tangled unceremoniously with tissue shreds in the lint trap. When Mr. Dembski speaks, equations come out. When he writes, equations come out. Surely he must keep a few spare equations in his pockets.

Stephen Meyer intends to make it perfectly clear.

"I've found that most people, even scientists, don't mind having ideas made clear," said Mr. Meyer, a philosopher of science and a professor at Whitworth College in Spokane. "In intelligent design, making ideas clear is all to our advantage because the case for Darwinism really depends a lot on obfuscation. So, if [Darwinists] can conceal that with lots of difficult jargon and technical terminology, they can keep everybody but the experts out."

It's another way of saying "How can we convince these scientists of anything if they insist on using all these technical terms."



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.]

Ephedra: federal judge in Utah lifts the FDA ban on ephedra.

In 1998 WN exposed "Vitamin O" as ordinary salt water. The FDA was barred from taking action because salt water is a "natural" supplement. Later that year a UCSF study reported serious side effects from ephedra (WN 27 Nov 98). Sold on the web as "herbal ecstasy," the FDA said ephedra, was also protected by the Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act (DSHEA). It's estimated that there are more adverse reactions to ephedra than all other herbal supplements combined, but not until a young major league pitcher became a victim did the FDA ban it (WN 02 Jan 04). Ephedra was the only supplement banned since passage of DSHEA. Now there are none. The judge lifted the ban because the FDA had not determined a safe level. The FDA had not determined a safe level because it would be unethical to test a substance on people if it's known to be harmful. Once again there are calls to change DSHEA.

2005 Trotter Prize: an award for overlapping the magisteria.

In February (WN 25 Feb 05), WN commented on a session at this year's AAAS meeting in Washington DC devoted to the proposition that science and religion are "non-overlapping magisteria." But at Texas A&M they see it a little differently: the Trotter Prize is awarded for "illuminating the connection between science and religion." How better to illustrate the overlap than to give the award this year to one of the nation's top pseudo scientists, Dr. William Dembski, a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute, often regarded as the leading intelligent-design theorist. The Intelligent-Design movement seeks to portray intelligent-design as science. However, by resorting to a supernatural explanation it clearly belongs in some other magisteria.

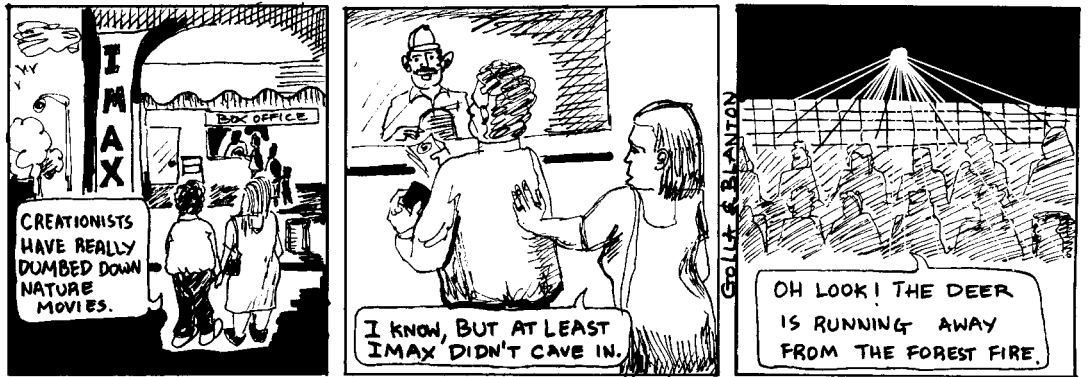
[Note: See the Ide Trotter photo in last month's issue.]

Miracles? I don't think so. NBC Dateline is not so sure.

Dateline's investigative reporters traveled around the world exploring claims of divine intervention, and Wednesday night they shared their findings with us in a program called "Mira-

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2005.
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cle.” It was an hour program, but it seemed much longer. I thought a trip to the bathroom might help. It took a few minutes after I got back before I realized “Miracles” had ended. Who could tell? It was now “Revelations” – something about an astrophysicist and a cute nun trying to prevent “the end of days.” Oh well, I didn’t miss anything important. *Dateline* found that there are things that no one has explained. Amazing! What have those scientists been doing? Viewers were in front of their TVs ready to learn something, and there was something terribly important for them to learn. But they weren’t told that not a single miracle has ever been verified. They were left to believe that the existence of miracles is an open scientific question. Has NBC no shame?

Kansas: is “intelligent design” science? define “science.”

The plan was to sell ID as science. Nobody bought it. So now there’s a move on the Kansas School Board to redefine “science” as “a systematic method of continuing investigation.” Yes, I know. But it won’t help anyway. Courts have ruled that ID is religion. So what Kansas needs is a new definition of religion. How about: “A way of explaining why it wasn’t really your fault.”

Acupuncture: or maybe you could just eat a jalapeno pepper.

JAMA, May 4, reports a randomized, controlled trial comparing the effectiveness of acupuncture with sham acupuncture in treating migraine. There were 302 patients in the study. Acupuncture is widely touted for treating migraine, but in 12 sessions over 8 weeks, sham acupuncture, in which the needles are inserted in the “wrong” points, was just as effective as inserting them in the “correct” points. This should greatly simplify the training of acupuncture specialists. Just stick the damn needles anywhere.

Scopes II: evolution isn’t on trial, civilization is on trial.

State Board of Education Hearings on teaching evolution in Kansas schools began yesterday in Topeka. A string of PhD witnesses proved that a PhD is not an inoculation against foolishness. One of the first was Jonathan Wells, a senior fellow of the Discovery Institute. A graduate of Unification Theological Seminary, Wells was “chosen” by Sun Myung Moon to enter a PhD program. He was inspired to, “devote my life to destroying Darwinism.” Wells went on to earn a PhD in Theology from Yale and a PhD in Biology from UC Berkeley. Another witness against evolution is Mustafa Akyol, the spokesman for a fundamentalist Muslim organization in Istanbul that intimidates teachers into giving the Genesis account of creation. Jack Krebs, vice president of Kansas Citizens for Science, one of the science organizations boycotting the hearings, complained that, “they are trying to make science stand for atheism.” Of course that’s what they’re trying to do, but it’s also true that many scientists are atheists. After all, we assume that events have natural causes. As we learn more about causes, God’s domain keeps shrinking, or at least moving, like God’s Little Acre in the Erskine Calwell novel. I leave the extrapolation to the reader.

Table-top fusion: small neutron generator is far from record.

Newspapers around the country reported the amazing result that a UCLA team had demonstrated fusion of deuterium to form helium in a table-top device. They were, of course, scooped - by Ernest Rutherford, 71 years ago. Fusion is easy. A self-sustaining reaction is not. The unique feature of the UCLA device is to get the accelerating voltage from a pyroelectric crystal, which makes it quite compact. Unfortunately for civilization, there are thousands of fusion devices in the world not much bigger than a walnut. They are in every nuclear weapon to produce a pulse of neutrons at just the right time. □

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

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