



The North Texas

Skeptic

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Evolution education update

Recent developments in Kansas and Pennsylvania highlight the critical nature of the creation/evolution controversy. Public schools are increasingly being pressured to either promote creationism or else to cast doubt on the scientific validity of evolution. The National Center for Science Education is the nation's leading organization working against the promotion of creationism in public education. The following is an NCSE news release.

MSTA denounces antievolution legislation; NAS and NSTA deny permission to Kansas; Discovery and Thomas More squabble at AEI event; Kitzmiller coverage continues.

The Michigan Science Teachers Association denounce a recent antievolution bill the National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Teachers Association deny permission for their material to be used in the antievolution version of the Kansas science standards and the Discovery Institute and the Thomas More Law Center squabble in public. . . . And a reminder about sources of information — and misinformation — about the trial in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, which continues to attract journalistic attention across the country and around the world.

MSTA denounces antievolution legislation

The Michigan Science Teachers Association issued a statement denouncing House Bill 5251 in the Michigan legislature, which if enacted would require the state board of education to revise the state science standards to ensure that students will be able to “(a) use the scientific method to critically evaluate scientific theories including, but not limited to, the theories of global warming and evolution [and] (b) Use relevant scientific data to assess the validity of those theories and to formulate arguments for or against those theories.”

In its statement, the MSTTA notes that, because the Michigan state science standards “already require students to ‘use scientific knowledge to make decisions about real-world problems’ and to be ‘able to make informed judgments on statements and debates claiming to have a scientific basis,’” there is apparently “no valid reason for legislative intervention that would modify the existing standards as developed and

EVENTS CALENDAR

Saturday 12 November

2 p.m.

Center for Nonprofit
Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Program to be Announced

Saturday 19 November

NTS Social Dinner and Board
Meeting

7 p.m.

Good Eats Grill
6950 Greenville Ave
Dallas, TX
(214) 691-3287

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 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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 individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the

adopted by the MDOE working in collaboration with Michigan's profes-
 sional science education community."

Additionally, noting that "global warming and evolution are the only
 two theories selected for mandatory 'critical evaluation' in HB 5251,"
 the MSTA statement observes that the proposed revision "may suggest to
 students and the public that these theories are somehow less robust or
 less scientific than are other scientific theories that were not selected for
 mandatory evaluation ... in clear contrast to the preponderance of scien-
 tific evidence supporting both of these theories and would represent a
 dishonest and unprofessional approach to the sciences and science educa-
 tion in Michigan."

For the complete statement, visit:

http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/articles/4027_statements_from_educational_o_9_12_2005.asp

For the MSTA website, visit:

<http://www.msta-mich.org/>

For NCSE's previous coverage of HB 5251, visit:

http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2005/MI/410_antievolution_legislation_in_m_10_4_2005.asp

NAS and NSTA deny permission to Kansas

Anticipating the Kansas state board of education's expected decision
 to adopt a set of science standards in which the scientific status of evolu-
 tion is systematically deprecated, the National Academy of Sciences and
 the National Science Teachers Association have rejected the state depart-
 ment of education's request to use material from the NAS's National Sci-
 ence Education Standards and the NSTA's Pathways to Science
 Standards in the Kansas Science Education Standards.

In a joint statement dated October 27, 2005, the NAS and the NSTA
 wrote, "While there is much in the Kansas Science Education Standards
 that is outstanding and could serve as a model for other states, our pri-
 mary concern is that the draft KSES inappropriately singles out evolution
 as a controversial theory despite the strength of the scientific evidence
 supporting evolution as an explanation for the diversity of life on Earth
 and its acceptance by an overwhelming majority of scientists."

The statement also noted, "[M]any of the statements made in the
 KSES related to the nature of science and evolution also violate the doc-
 ument's mission and vision. Kansas students will not be well-prepared
 for the rigors of higher education or the demands of an increasingly com-
 plex and technologically-driven world if their science education is based
 on these standards. Instead, they will put the students of Kansas at a
 competitive disadvantage as they take their place in the world."

The American Association for the Advancement of Science endorsed the NAS's and the NSTA's decision in a press release issued on October 27, 2005. Alan Leshner said, "We need to protect the integrity of science education if we expect the young people of Kansas to be fully productive members of an increasingly competitive world economy that is driven by science and technology ... We cannot allow young people to be denied an appropriate science education simply on ideological grounds."

A story from the Associated Press (October 27, 2005) explains that "The two groups' positions mean department attorneys must scrutinize any standards the board approves to make sure they do not lift language from the national groups' material" and reports that board chair Steve Abrams (who favors the current draft of the standards) was unsure whether adoption of the standards would be delayed by the refusal to grant permission. The board is expected to discuss the standards at its next meeting, November 8 and 9, 2005.

A later story in the *Washington Post* (October 28, 2005) noted that the refusal to allow copyrighted material to be used in the Kansas science standards is a reprise of 1999, when the NAS, the NSTA, and the AAAS refused to allow their material to be used in a similarly flawed set of standards. (No material from the AAAS is included in the current draft.) The executive director of the NSTA, Gerald F. Wheeler, told the *Post*, "Science is not a dance card or jukebox where you can choose the songs you want."

Also, a story from *The New York Times* (October 28, 2005) added that material from the NAS's and the NSTA's publications appears throughout the draft standards; Steve Case, the chair of the original writing committee, commented, "In some cases it's just a phrase, but in some cases it's extensive ... You try to keep the idea but change the wording around; the writing becomes horrifically bad." Sue Gamble, a member of the board who opposes the current draft of the standards, said of the NAS and the NSTA's decision, "I think it will make a difference next year in the election."

For the joint statement from the NAS and the NSTA, visit:

<http://www.nationalacademies.org/morenews/20051027.html>

http://www.nsta.org/pressroom&news_story_ID=51175

For the AAAS's press release endorsing the joint statement, visit:

<http://www.aaas.org/news/releases/2005/1027kansas.shtml>

For coverage from the Associated Press, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*, visit:

<http://www.kansascity.com/mld/kansascity/news/local/13011305.htm>

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/10/27/AR2005102701999.html>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/10/28/science/sciencespecial2/28kansas.html>

Discovery and Thomas More squabble at AEI event

Representatives of the Discovery Institute (the de facto institutional headquarters of "intelligent design") and the Thomas More Law Center (the law firm representing the defense in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*) squabbled in public at a day-long event — "Science Wars: Should Schools Teach Intelligent Design?" — sponsored by the American Enterprise Institute in Washington DC. The squabble was provoked by a question from moderator Jon Entine to panelist Mark Ryland about the Discovery Institute's role in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*. Ryland answered (in part), "The Discovery Institute never set out to have a school board, schools, get into this issue. We've never encouraged people to do it, we've never promoted it," and noted that the Discovery Institute advised the Dover Area School Board not to adopt the particular policy at issue.

In response, Thompson quoted a Discovery Institute publication as saying, "school boards have the authority to permit, and even encourage, teaching about design theory as an alternative to Darwinian evolution — and this includes the use of textbooks such as *Of Pandas and People* that present evidence for the theory of intelligent design." He added, "you had Discovery Institute people actually encouraging the teaching of intelligent design in public school systems." Thompson also noted that the withdrawal of three expert witnesses for the defense associated with the Discovery Institute was a problem for his legal team: "And I think what was victimized by this strategy was the Dover school board, because we could not present the expert testimony we thought we could present."

Although Kenneth R. Miller, who was a panelist in a different session of the conference, described the exchange as "the most fascinating discussion I've heard all day," the rest of the conference was interesting, too: panelists included the Discovery Institute's Paul Nelson and Brown University's Kenneth R. Miller (a Supporter of NCSE), Father George Coyne of the Vatican Observatory and Michael Novak of AEI, John Calvert of the Intelligent Design Network and Southeastern Louisiana University's Barbara Forrest (a member of NCSE's board of directors), Lawrence Krauss of Case Western Reserve University, and Steven Gey of Florida State University, Richard Thompson of the Thomas More Law Center, and the Discovery Institute's Mark Ryland. A great deal of information about the conference is available on AEI's website.

For a rough transcript of the exchange between Ryland and Thompson, visit:

http://www.ncseweb.org/resources/news/2005/US/98_discovery_institute_and_thomas_10_23_2005.asp

For AEI's page for the conference, visit:

http://www.aei.org/events/eventID.1169,filter.all/event_detail.asp

Kitzmiller coverage continues

The trial in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*, the first legal challenge to the constitutionality of teaching "intelligent design" in the public schools, began in a federal court in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, on September 26, 2005. The media is out in force, so much so that a summary of the extensive coverage is practically impossible. Instead, please browse through the following resources, all of which are replete with links, summaries, and information — or misinformation: caveat lector.

For official information about the trial from the court itself, visit:

<http://www.pamd.uscourts.gov/kitzmiller/kitzmiller.htm>

For information about the case from NCSE, including audio reports from NCSE staff and trial transcripts, visit:

<http://www.ncseweb.org/kitzmiller>

For information about the case from the ACLU and Americans United, visit:

<http://www.aclu.org/evolution>

http://www.au.org/site/PageServer?pagename=issues_evolution

For coverage in the local press, visit:

<http://www.ydr.com/news/doverbiology/>

<http://www.yorkdispatch.com/>

For extensive blog coverage of the trial, visit The Panda's Thumb, the *York Daily Record's* Mike Argento, the ACLU of Pennsylvania, and (with its own distinctive perspective) "Evolution News & Views," hosted by the Discovery Institute:

http://www.pandasthumb.org/archives/2005/09/waterloo_in_dov.html

http://www.yorkblog.com/archives/argentos_front_stoop/index.html

<http://aclupa.blogspot.com/>

<http://www.evolutionnews.org/>

If you wish to subscribe, to the NCSE news service send the following e-mail message:

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Glenn Branch
Deputy Director
National Center for Science Education, Inc.
420 40th Street, Suite 2
Oakland, CA 94609-2509

510-601-7203 x305
fax: 510-601-7204
800-290-6006

branch@ncseweb.org

<http://www.ncseweb.org>

Buy Eugenie C. Scott's *Evolution vs. Creationism* at
<http://www.ncseweb.org/evc>



Skeptic notes

NTS paranormal challenge, skeptics and the press

Adam Hugo sent us an e-mail:

I don't know if you have heard of me. I applied for the challenge with the James Randi Foundation for a million in 1998.

That sounded familiar, but this story differed from anything we had received before. He followed up:

I can prove that clouds can be made to disappear.

I can do this by picking a couple of clouds out the sky to disappear within ten to twenty minutes.

This is paranormal because of you are lucky to be at the right spot at the right time in the first place a cloud would take hours to disappear and only one at a time. I could make several disappear at a time.

Thank you.

Talk about a challenge. How do we test this? We continue to work with Mr. Hugo to see if he has anything to show.

Investigative journalism

We also received contacts from two newspapers. The first concerned an episode involving the Skeptics last year. I hate to be mysterious, but I will have to leave it at that until the story comes out.

Paranormal plots

The second came from the *Beaumont Enterprise*. Their reporter is writing about the slew of TV dramas involving the paranormal. She wanted a skeptical viewpoint and asked what I thought of them.

I told her how much I enjoyed watching *The Twilight Zone* and *The Outer Limits*. “How old are you?” she asked. Ouch. That hurt.

But we did discuss more recent productions. “Medium” came to mind. The most recent promo on TV was an episode involving “medium against medium.” I got into a long-winded discussion of plot devices in literature and drama.

The paranormal is a great plot device, but it can be over-used. The problem with the supernatural is there are almost no limits to what a writer can do with it. Since adherence to natural law is not required, the writer can manipulate the plot arbitrarily, leaving viewers with a loss of coherence.

A device from ancient Greek theater comes to mind. The hero might be rescued from an intractable situation by a god who suddenly appears to make everything right. Sometimes this actor is lowered into the scene by a crane—the “god from out of the machine.”

We discussed the value of reality versus fiction. Mark Twain was noted for saying “Of course reality is stranger than fiction. Fiction, after all, has to make sense.” I concluded that viewers should feel free to enjoy this kind of escapist fare, but they must not confuse entertainment with reality.

Speaking of skeptics and the NTS, she asked “Just why do you do this?”

“Because you don’t,” was my short answer.

Her position was that she had not formed a firm opinion on the matter and did not feel qualified to take a position. How can we skeptics be so sure we are right? I mentioned our \$12,000 challenge. If our position were only a matter of opinion, we would have lost our money a long time ago. The *Beaumont Enterprise* is a news organization, and they need to keep digging until they do get the facts.



What’s new

By Robert Park

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

Intelligent design: Cornell will seek to educate the public.

Last Friday, even as What’s New was being written in Washington, events were taking place elsewhere that must be commented on. In New York, CBS News was releasing its most recent poll on public attitudes toward the theory of evolution. A little further North in Ithaca, Hunter Rawlings, the president of Cornell University, was delivering a courageous State-of-the-University Address, . The CBS poll found that just over half (51%) of Americans believe God created humans in their present form. Clearly, the scientific community has work to do. In his speech, Rawlings went straight to the point, committing Cornell to “venture outside the campus to help the American public sort through the issues [raised by intelligent design].” He described ID as a “political movement seeking to inject religion into state policy and our schools.” The commitment is very much in the tradition of Cornell, whose founders, A.D. White, the first president, and Ezra Cornell saw sectarian strife as the greatest threat to the new university.

Evolution: the Discovery Institute did what science could not.

The question of “how we know” is being asked on the pages of the daily news for the first time since the 1925 Scopes trial, thanks to the Discovery Institute. With the world beset by religious wars, this is an opportunity for people to see that no wars are fought over science. Scientific disputes can be settled only by better evidence. “It’s too complex to see how it could happen without magic” is not going to get you far. Meanwhile, Harvard announced plans to study the hardest question of all, the origin of life. And right at ground-zero, the University of Kansas Natural History Museum will open an evolution exhibit on Nov 1.

Kansas: “You can’t just choose the songs you want to hear.”

Yesterday, the Washington Post reported that the National Academy of Sciences and the National Science Teachers Association had reviewed the latest draft of the Kansas science education standards. They objected that the draft failed to make it

clear that supernatural phenomena have no place in science. As a result, Kansas will not be allowed to use copyrighted science education materials developed by the two organizations. Gerald Wheeler, a physicist and the executive director of the NSTA, pointed out that, “science is not a jukebox.”

Supreme question: right now there’s no one to ask it of.

Don’t relax yet, there will be. This week’s choice came from Dave Clary, who would ask:

“Does legislation aimed at protecting natural resources contravene a Higher Law that says these resources were put here for humans to consume.”

Supreme question: what are the nominee’s views on science?

Our request for questions that should be asked of Supreme Court nominees to elicit their views on science drew a huge response. Traditionally, nominees are not questioned about their religious views on the assumption that an oath to uphold the constitution makes the nominee’s religious views irrelevant. Science, which bases judgments solely on the evidence, is the antithesis of religion and is clearly relevant. The WN staff felt the question that best captured the consensus of our readers’ views in the fewest number of words was from Abi Soffer at SLAC: “How does being descended from a monkey affect your judicial philosophy?” WN will include more suggested questions each week until the confirmation process in the Senate is over.

Supreme irony: should nominees be questioned about science?

After nominating Harriet Miers for a seat on the Supreme Court, President Bush sought to reassure religious conservatives by stressing Miers’ evangelical Christian roots. Bush said it’s part of who she is. He’s right, but traditionally the personal religious views of nominees are not taken up in the confirmation process. If the First Amendment is upheld, it shouldn’t matter. So forget religion. Far more important in the Twenty-First Century is the nominee’s views on science. There are, after all, few cases that come before the courts today that do not have a scientific component. Scientists must construct a list of basic questions that would give some insight into the nominee’s views on science. For example: do all physical events result from earlier physical events, or can they be caused by clapping your hands, bowing your head, and wishing? Send your suggestions to What’s New. WN will print the best of them.

Intelligent astrology: trial focuses on definition of science.

In early August, expecting it might come up in the Dover School Board case, WN copped a definition of science from the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, Eleventh Edition. It mentions the natural world, but not the supernatural. On Tuesday, Michael Behe, the defense’s irreducible-complexity guru, testified in favor of a broader definition. According to a NY Times story, Behe acknowledged that “scientific theory” by his definition would fit astrology as well as intelligent design.

Faith-based government: Senator Brownback(R-KS) hears the call.

Senator Sam Brownback has been more public than other Republican senators in raising questions about the nomination of Harriet Miers. A prayer-group-Republican from Kansas who wants to be President, Brownback has an open mind on the question of religion in politics: it can be either a Protestant conservative, or conservative Catholic. Brownback, now Catholic, has been both.

Jour 101: be careful which raft you take down the canyon.

Balance is a good thing for tour boats, but it makes no sense at all applied to religious explanations of the geology of the Grand Canyon. A story in yesterday’s NY Times by Jodi Wilgoren followed two expeditions down the canyon, one led by a Christian fundamentalist minister, the other by Dr. Eugenie Scott, a geologist and the director of the National Center for Science Education. The story could have been educational. It wasn’t. All a non-scientist could take from the story is that there are two ways to interpret what you see in the canyon.

Jour 102: how will an annular eclipse affect your horoscope?

On Monday, a relatively rare annular eclipse was seen across Spain and Portugal, which happens if the moon is at its apogee and doesn’t quite cover the Sun’s disk. “It’s quite spectacular,” an Associated Press account in the NY Times quoted Dr. Stephen Maran of the American Astrological Society. Yes, it was.

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



Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and
John Blanton. © 2005.
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Paranormal Challenge!

The North Texas Skeptics Paranormal Challenge Instructions
P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794

The persons named below ("challengers") will pay the sum of **\$12,000** ("the challenge prize") to any person ("claimant") who can demonstrate any psychic or paranormal power or ability under scientifically valid observing conditions. Prior to any demonstration or test, challengers and claimant will enter into a complete, written agreement called "the protocol", which will set out what power or ability is to be demonstrated, how it is to be tested, and what test results will constitute success or failure. These instructions and conditions alone are not an offer. No contract to pay the challenge amount is made with any claimant until the claimant and challengers have negotiated and entered into the protocol. The protocol must incorporate the following terms and conditions:

- ↪ Claimant must describe the paranormal or psychic ability or power clearly and precisely. Claims must be specific enough to be scientifically testable. Claims must be clearly psychic or paranormal.
- ↪ Claimant must specifically describe any proposed test procedures which will be used to demonstrate the paranormal or psychic power. Claimant and challengers must agree to the test procedures to be used before any tests are performed.
- ↪ Claimant must describe exactly what test results will constitute success or failure. If success and failure will be described in terms of statistical results, such results must be significantly beyond chance expectation.
- ↪ Claimant and challengers will each be responsible for their respective expenses, such as equipment, travel, accommodations, consultant fees, or other expenses.
- ↪ In the event the claimant is successful under the terms and conditions of the protocol, challengers will immediately deliver the challenge prize to claimant or claimant's designee, in full settlement of all claims.
- ↪ Claimant and challengers waive all claims, damages, and causes of action against each other arising out of the challenge, for any injuries or damages of every kind, whether to person, property, or reputation.
- ↪ All agreements, protocols, correspondence, data, audio or video recordings, photographs or results made or obtained by either party during the challenge or negotiations leading up to the challenge may be used by either party in any way he or she may choose, including publication, and challengers and claimant both waive all exclusive rights to such information.
- ↪ This offer is made by the challengers personally and not on behalf of The North Texas Skeptics or any other agency or organization, although others may be involved in the examination of claims.

After challengers have received claimant's offer to demonstrate a claimed psychic or paranormal ability or power, challengers will promptly enter into negotiations with claimant and attempt to arrive at a written protocol satisfactory to both parties. Neither claimant nor challengers shall have any right of action or damages against the other for failure to enter into the protocol or for failure to conduct any test or demonstration.

Signed: **Gregory H. Aicklen John F. Blanton Prasad N. Golla Mike Selby John A. Thomas**

North Texas Skeptics
P.O. Box 111794
Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794

FIRST CLASS

Address Correction Requested

Application for Membership

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
E-Mail address _____
Home Phone _____ Work Phone _____
Occupation _____
Special expertise and/or interests _____

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership agreement:

Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and pseudoscientific claims from a responsible and scientific point of view, and while I do not endorse the a priori rejection of paranormal phenomena and pseudoscientific claims, I believe that such claims must be subjected to the fair and systematic testing which rational enquiry demands.

Signature _____ Date _____

Indicate your choice:

Member: A voting member and newsletter recipient. Family privileges included. Annual dues \$35.00

Newsletter recipient: No membership privileges. Annual subscription rate \$15.00

Receive a \$5 discount on either of the two newsletter subscription levels above by choosing to receive your newsletter by e-mail only.

Introduce a friend to *The North Texas Skeptic*: Let us send a **FREE** three-month gift subscription of *The Skeptic* to this individual (or institution).

Enclosed is a tax-deductible donation to The North Texas Skeptics in the amount of \$ _____.

Bill me: Please bill me for the choices I have made above.