



The North Texas

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How much evolution do you really believe in?

By John Brandt

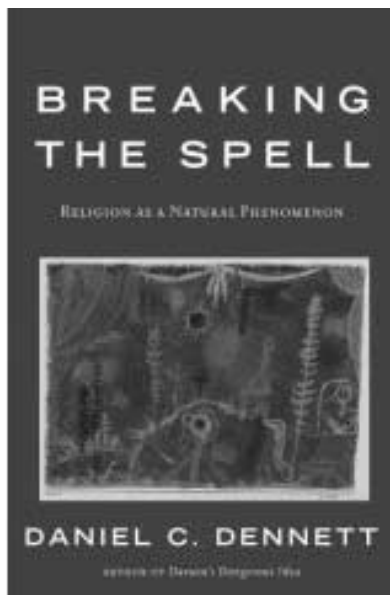
Daniel C. Dennett has written a new book which will likely be of interest to many skeptics: *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, in which he puts forth his views on how religious belief, well, evolved. As soon as I've had a chance to read it, I'll provide a review.

But for now, I have something else on my mind. I learned of Dennett's new book by way of a surprisingly negative review published in the *New York Times*. The reviewer the *Times* chose was Leon Wieseltier, who is *The New Republic's* literary editor. Let me quote the review's very first paragraph:

Review by LEON WIESELTIER

Published: February 19, 2006

THE question of the place of science in human life is not a scientific question. It is a philosophical question. *Scientism*, the view that science can explain all human conditions and expressions, mental as well as physical, is a superstition, *one of the dominant superstitions of our day*; and it is not an insult to science to say so. For a sorry instance of present-day scientism, it would be hard to improve on Daniel C. Dennett's book. "Breaking the Spell" is a work of considerable historical interest, because it is a merry anthology of contemporary superstitions.¹ [Emphasis added.]



EVENTS CALENDAR

Saturday 11 March 2006

2 p.m.
Center for Nonprofit
Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Health Scares, Disasters, and Doomsday Scenarios

For the March meeting, John Brandt will present a talk on disasters, ranging from the plausible (avian flu and the possibility of a pandemic) to the ridiculously unlikely (a black hole sucking in the Earth!).

Board of Directors/Social Meeting

Saturday — 25 March
7 p.m. at:
Good Eats
6950 Greenville Ave.
Dallas

We sometimes cancel or change these events. Check the **NTS Hotline** at 214-335-9248.

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Now any time I encounter the word “scientism,” an alarm goes off in my head. Creationists use that word to push their claim that science (or at least, science they don’t like, such as evolution) is just another religion, and therefore that teaching it in public schools, without also teaching *their* beliefs, is “religious discrimination.” (It’s akin to the postmodern view that all “belief systems” are equally valid – even if one lets you treat diabetics with genetically engineered insulin, while another keeps you locked in the Dark Ages for a millennium or so.)

And frankly, Wieseltier’s claim that “the view that science can explain all human conditions ... is a superstition” is just silly. As Brian Lieter responded on his blog:

[T]he view that science can explain all human conditions and expressions, mental as well as physical" is not a "superstition," but a reasonable methodological posture to adopt based on the actual evidence, that is, based on the actual, expanding success of the sciences, and especially, the [social] sciences, during the last hundred years.²

So, is Wieseltier a creationist? Well, he certainly sounds like one at times. Consider the following passages:

“Breaking the Spell” is a fairy tale told by evolutionary biology. There is no scientific foundation for its scientific narrative.³

There’s another form of that word – “scientistic” this time. This one’s not even in my spell checker!

Dennett surmises that “all our ‘intrinsic’ values started out as instrumental values,” and that this conviction about the primacy of the instrumental is a solemn requirement of science. He remarks that the question *cui bono?* — Who benefits? — “is even more central in evolutionary biology than in the law,” and so we must seek the biological utilities of what might otherwise seem like “a gratuitous outlay.” An anxiety about *the reality of nonbiological meanings* troubles Dennett’s every page. But it is very hard to envisage the biological utilities of such gratuitous outlays as “The Embarkation for Cythera” and Fermat’s theorem and the “Missa Solemnis.”⁴ [Emphasis added.]

“Reality of nonbiological meanings?” How does Wieseltier *know* our sense of “meaning” is “nonbiological?” What’s his justification for that belief?

The rest of that quote is an old creationist argument: Because some traits (human behaviors, in this case) are not obviously geared towards survival and reproduction, creationists presume evolution cannot have shaped those behaviors – therefore, they must have come from elsewhere. (Guess where?)

This argument ignores two things: first, just because a (say) behavior is adaptive on the average, it doesn’t follow that it’s adaptive *in every situation*. For example, our ability to recognize patterns is clearly adap-

tive when it lets us see a snake camouflaged in the grass; but it also lets us understand and enjoy mathematics.

Second, it's well known that some evolutionary forces, particularly sexual selection, can result in traits that are "adaptive" in the sense that organisms bearing them will get more mates, and therefore produce more offspring; but which are clearly non-adaptive or even maladaptive when viewed outside the light of mate selection. The peacock's tail is the classic example.

It's clear that Wieseltier's big problem with Dennett's book is Dennett's annoying (to Wieseltier) tendency to explain human behavior in evolutionary terms. But wait – there's more:

Dennett's natural history does not deny reason; it animalizes reason. It portrays reason in service to natural selection, and as a product of natural selection. But if reason is a product of natural selection, then how much confidence can we have in a rational argument for natural selection? The power of reason is owed to the independence of reason, and to nothing else. (In this respect, *rationalism is closer to mysticism than it is to materialism.*) *Evolutionary biology cannot invoke the power of reason even as it destroys it.* ⁵ [Emphasis added.]

Nonsense. Reliance on reason and science is amply justified by their ability to explain an astounding variety of natural phenomena, and the small and continually shrinking number of phenomena they haven't explained. That was true even before Darwin and Wallace came along, and things have only gotten better for reason and science since. The fact that Darwin was able to extend those explanations to the origin of reasoning human beings themselves in no way undermines that fact.

No, really, this is just more "scientism" BS. Being "rational" is just another belief system, no more "correct" than religious ones – and therefore, no more deserving of being taught in public schools.

So, Wieseltier certainly sounds like a creationist. But the real surprise is that he doesn't consider himself one at all! He's even attacked Intelligent Design in The New Republic, saying "Philosophically speaking, I do not see that [ID proponents] have demonstrated what they congratulate themselves for demonstrating," ⁶ and "Intelligent design is an expression of sentiment, not an exercise of reason. It is a psalm, not a proof."⁷

I couldn't agree more. But apparently, for Wieseltier, evolution only goes so far. When it comes to human behavior, clearly *that* cannot have "merely" evolved. For him, *that* must be where God came into the picture.

Well, maybe. But science isn't a buffet – you can't pick and choose only the parts that appeal to you. Everything fits together – if you throw out even a little because it makes you uncomfortable, you can't help but undermine the foundation for a lot of other parts. The arguments Wieseltier uses to attempt to exempt human psychology from evolution are the same arguments creationists use to attempt to exempt evolution from science itself! If he were right, then they'd be right too.

You may believe in a God who directed our evolution. That's fine. But when you insist that God *couldn't* have shaped us through evolution – that at some point, He had to intervene with a miracle – you need to back up your claim with real evidence, not philosophical hand-waving. Otherwise, the "evolution" you believe in is no more scientific than Intelligent Design. □

References

- 1 http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/19/books/review/19wieseltier.html?incamp=article_popular_3
- 2 http://leiterreports.typepad.com/blog/2006/02/why_review_a_bo.html
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 <http://www.tnr.com/doc.mhtml?i=20050822&s=diarist082205>
(subscription required for complete article)
- 7 Ibid.

Future Meeting Dates

March 11, 2006	August 12, 2006
April 8, 2006	September 9, 2006
May 13, 2006	October 14, 2006
June 10, 2006	November 11, 2006
July 8, 2006	December 9, 2006

Visit our Web site at www.ntskeptics.org
for more information.

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.]

Dietary supplements: two-more popular supplements strike out.

Last week, saw palmetto, used by 2.5 million American men to treat prostate problems, was found to be ineffective. This week, the New England Journal of Medicine published the eagerly-awaited results of a trial of glucosamine/chondroitin, used by about 5.2 million Americans for arthritis pain at a cost of \$30 to \$50 a month. In 2004 alone, sales were \$730M. The NIH sponsored study cost taxpayers \$12.5M.

Glucosamine/chondroitin, like saw palmetto, was found to be ineffective. Both are marketed under the 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act (DSHEA), which allows natural supplements to be sold without proof of safety or efficacy. After Stephen Strauss became director, the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine at NIH began in-depth studies of the most popular supplements.

It takes time, and it's expensive, but let's look at the score: echinacea doesn't ward off colds or flu, St. Johns Wort doesn't relieve depression, ginkgo biloba doesn't improve memory, ephedra aids athletic performance but kills people, and is the only supplement to be banned. A year ago, the Institute of Medicine called for revision of DSHEA to require all treatments to meet the same standards (WN 14 Jan 05). Congress has done nothing, but I guess they've been busy.

EMF again: Canadian university bans wireless internet access.

The President of Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario has decided to keep the school isolated. "The jury is still out on the impact that electromagnetic forces have on human physiology," he told a university meeting. How isolated can you get? WN has followed the EMF/cancer issue for more than 20 years. It almost died after an epidemiological study by NIH in 1997, but there are always people who overslept. It last came up 4 years ago in California (WN 31 May 02).

Water with intention: the "vitamin O" scam has mutated again.

Several years ago USA Today had a full page ad for "Vitamin O" (WN 27 Nov 98). It was ordinary salt water that sold for \$40 an ounce. Then there was Oxy1'Eau, which played a key role in the Stanley Cup finals (WN 23 Jul 99). The latest variation on that scam is water from a spring in the San Diego Mountains that is "infused with the power of intention through words, thought and music" <http://www.h2omwater.com/home.html>. Why would you drink ordinary water?

Dover effect: has Intelligent Design suffered a mortal wound?

The Ohio Board of Education voted 11 to 4 on Tuesday to scrap a requirement that "critical analysis of evolution" be taught in biology classes. Ohio's "critical analysis" ploy for teaching intelligent design had been hailed by The Discovery Institute as a model for the entire nation. Rejection by the Education Board came as a direct consequence of the Dover ruling by U.S. District Court Judge John E. Jones III: teaching ID is unconstitutional (WN 23 Dec 05). A Discovery Institute spokesman publicly scoffed that the Dover ruling was not binding elsewhere, but Judge Jones expanded the blast radius by awarding damages to the parents who brought suit. That got the attention of school boards. The Discovery Institute has bet the farm on selling ID as science, but the Dover effect has blunted it in California, Indiana and Wisconsin, and now Ohio.

Evolution Sunday: Christian churches honoring Charles Darwin?

Go on! Yes, Sunday was the 197th birthday of Charles Darwin. At 450 churches around the nation it was celebrated with sermons and programs that mingle biological evolution and faith. Something is happening. The public is getting an unprecedented exposure to evolution in books, museum exhibits, and news programs. Coming soon to a theater near you is Flock of Dodos. Film maker and marine biologist Randy Olsen has made a movie about evolution and intelligent design <http://www.flockofdodos.com>. It has what fundamentalists all lack a sense of humor. And we owe it all to the Discovery Institute and intelligent design.

Melting: glaciers in Greenland are rapidly becoming ocean.

New data from satellite imagery show the glaciers to be melting twice as fast as they were a decade ago, according to a report in today's Science. The study focused on the rate of glacial ice flow. Meanwhile, NASA's budget is focused on finish-

ing the ISS, which everyone now seems to agree is pointless, and preparations for the Moon/Mars, which is equally pointless and won't happen anyway. NASA's Deep Space Climate Observatory, which was waiting to be launched and would have given unique insight into global warming, is terminated because it had Al Gore's Initials on it (WN 6 Jan 06).

Global warming: maybe scientific openness is "only a theory."

Last week, WN reported that top NASA climate scientist James Hansen was under pressure to cool it on global warming. The pressure, we have since learned, was coming from 24-year old White House appointee George Deutsch, who had been an intern in the Bush-Cheney re-election campaign. Earlier, Deutsch had informed a NASA contractor that the word "theory" had to be added to every mention of the Big Bang. "This is more than a science issue," he declared, "it is a religious issue." On Friday, NASA chief Michael Griffin made it clear to all NASA employees that it's not the job of public affairs to "alter, filter or adjust" material from the technical staff. Wednesday, Deutsch resigned. What was he doing in a sensitive position in the first place? Although his job at NASA was a reward for work in the re-election campaign, he did have a journalism degree from Texas A&M, didn't he? Well, actually no. He lied about that. Deutsch was right about one thing: science issues can also be religious issues.

Journalism? Petroleum geologists move to the alternate world.

The American Association of Petroleum Geologists is presenting its annual journalism award to novelist Michael Crichton for "State of Fear," a fictional story in which global warming is not for real. AAPG was presumably unable to find a journalist sufficiently divorced from reality to meet oil company standards.

Shh! Top climate scientist says NASA tried to silence him.

Physicist James Hansen, director of the NASA Goddard Institute for Space Studies told the New York Times that since he gave a talk at the American Geophysical Union meeting on 6 Dec 05, NASA has screened his coming talks and requests from journalists for interviews. In his AGU talk, Hansen had argued that an increase in automotive fuel efficiency standards would significantly cut emissions. The administration policy is to rely on voluntary measures. Sherwood Boehlert (R-NY), Science Committee Chairman, admonished NASA Administrator Griffin and pledged to investigate. It's not the first time Boehlert has leaped to the defense of climate scientists. Last July, Boehlert objected to harassment of climate scientists by Joe Barton (R-TX), Energy Committee Chairman (WN 8 Jul 05).

WN would suggest that Mr. Boehlert might also want to look into NASA's termination of the Deep Space Climate Observatory.

Junk reporting: Fox news columnist is available for hire.

Steven Milloy, who writes the "Junk Science" column for Fox News, praised Rep. Barton for his investigation of Michael Mann, a Penn State scientist whose research showed global temperatures sharply rising in the last century, after hundreds of years with little change. According to an article by Paul Thacker in today's New Republic, Boehlert accused Barton of attempting to intimidate a prominent scientist and "have Congress put its thumb on the scales of a scientific debate." Barton and Milloy have much in common. Both are recipients of huge oil company "donations." Milloy has also ridiculed the dangers of second-hand smoke, while on the payroll of Philip Morris and other tobacco companies.

Blasphemy: the "Intelligent Design" dispute is so yesterday.

Muslims are waving guns in the air and boycotting Danish pastry, while in Italy, an Italian judge has ordered a priest to appear in court this month to prove Jesus Christ existed. The Muslims are outraged by publication in Danish papers of political cartoons depicting Muhammad. In Viterbo, north of Rome, Luigi Cascioli accused Father Enrico Righi of "abuse of popular credulity," an offense under the Italian penal code. The claim that Jesus is a fabrication is not new. What Father Righi might offer as proof of Christ's existence is not clear.

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

Special Announcement: February 9th, 2006

UPDATE: Thank you for the flood of good wishes flowing in for James Randi's speedy recovery. Randi is hanging in there, and while his recovery is very slow, it is proceeding well. We're expecting a complete comeback, but it may take several months before he's back to his usual self. In the meantime, look for some special guest commentators in the Swift commentary, and business as usual for the JREF.

For those who feel a need to help, please consider donating blood at your local Red Cross or Community Blood Center. Cards may be sent to Randi in care of JREF, 201 SE 12 Street, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33316.

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.

Tough all over

How do you know it's getting tough to sell creationism? How about when it stinks even in Utah. Redder than Kansas, Utah retains some sanity. From *The New York Times*:

Anti-Darwin Bill Fails in Utah

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-03-02.htm#utah>

http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/28/national/28utah.html?_r=1&oref=slogin

By **KIRK JOHNSON**

In a defeat for critics of Darwin, the Utah House of Representatives on Monday voted down a bill intended to challenge the theory of evolution in high school science classes.

The bill had been viewed nationally, by people on each side of the science education debate, as an important proposal because Utah is such a conservative state, with a Legislature dominated by members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

But the bill died on a 46-to-28 vote in the Republican-controlled House after being amended by the majority whip, Stephen H. Urquhart, a Mormon who said he thought God did not have an argument with science. The amendment stripped out most of the bill's language, leaving only that the state board of education "shall establish curriculum requirements relating to scientific instruction."

The Discovery Institute is Intelligent Design's most ardent fan, and they were sorely disappointed. Spokesman Casey Luskin called the vote "a loss for scientific education." He would know.

Meanwhile, the Ohio Board of Education has turned down the lights on creationism in that state. Keith Pennock is a former analyst for the Discovery institute. He posted his observations on Discovery's Web site:

Wise's Darwinian Double-Speak

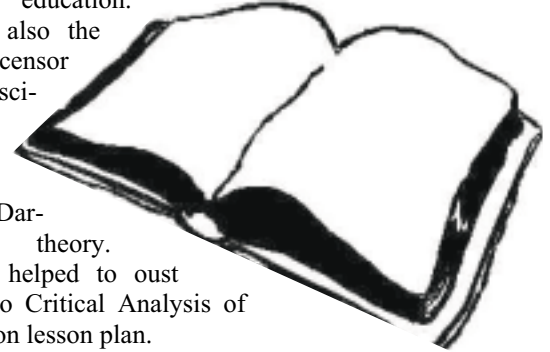
<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2006-03-02.htm#ohio>

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2006/02/wises_darwinian_doublespeak.html

Martha Wise is a member of the Ohio Board of Education. She cannot stand anything that is not conclusively and absolutely pro-Darwinian in science education.

She is also the chief censor of any scientific criticisms of neo-Darwinian theory.

Martha helped to oust the Ohio Critical Analysis of Evolution lesson plan.



Her op-ed in the *Cincinnati Enquirer* is a wonderful celebration of Orwellian double-speak in the service of Darwin-only science indoctrination: She insists she is a creationist, but she opposes creationism. The science standards explicitly disclaim the mandating of ID, but the standards (she claims) mandate ID. In Dover everyone acknowledged they were teaching ID but in OH they are not—except that Martha says that in Ohio they somehow were by stealth, even though the NCSE originally proclaimed victory with the passage of the critical analysis benchmark. "Critical analysis" doesn't mean "critical analysis." People with religious motivations are barred from proposing the lesson plan, but Wise's religious motivations for stopping the lesson plan are in bounds. And feminist philosophers of science count as "evolutionary biologists."

(See

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2006/02/all_the_news_that_fits_the_nyt.html.)

Also, the public records request by Americans United that she mentions took place a long time ago. If she and the other Darwinists thought there was a snowball's chance in you-know-where, they would've filed a lawsuit way back when. She just banked on scaring the other Board members with an over-expansive extrapolation from Judge Jones' awful opinion in *Kitzmiller v. Dover*. Unfortunately she succeeded.

Martha claimed in the March '04 Board meeting that she opposed the Ohio Critical Analysis of Evolution (purely optional) lesson plan because she said she real-

Skeptic Ink

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ized it was religion and that God was giving her the strength to stop it. I'm not kidding. Her performance at that Board meeting was not only silly but one of the most transparently scripted things I had ever seen. When Florida law professor Steven Gey gave his testimony repeating Barara Forrest talking points, Martha responded "I have ten questions for this witness." (Most people testifying were asked no questions or one or two at most.) She thought Gey was the greatest thing since sliced bread. Judge that one for yourself:

<http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/index.php?command=view&id=1864>.

The op-ed says she is running for the Ohio Senate. I hope she gets a solid primary challenger. I would like to send a check to her opponent. Attached to my check would be a note asking her opponent, upon election, to propose a Senate resolution calling upon Martha to change her last name to ANYTHING but "Wise."



Creationism's Henry M. Morris, dead at 87.

The following excerpt is from the online Baptist Press, at <http://www.bpnews.net/bpnews.asp?ID=22739>

EL CAJON, Calif. (BP)—Henry M. Morris, widely regarded as the founder of the modern creationist movement, died Feb. 25 at the age of 87.

Morris' 1961 book, "The Genesis Flood," subtitled, "The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications," was a cornerstone of the movement. Morris coauthored the book while serving as head of Virginia Tech's civil engineering department; Old Testament scholar John C. Whitcomb was the book's coauthor.

In 1970, Morris founded the Institute for Creation Research, which continues to be a leading creationist force, now headed by his sons, John and Henry III.



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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.

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