



The North Texas

Skeptic

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Life is but a dream

by John Blanton

The Heaven at the End of Science

By Philip Mereton
Distant Drums Press
438 pages including an index
(paperback)

The real world must not be taken too seriously. What you see and hear, in fact, everything you perceive through your senses is all in your head. Rather, it's all in your mind.

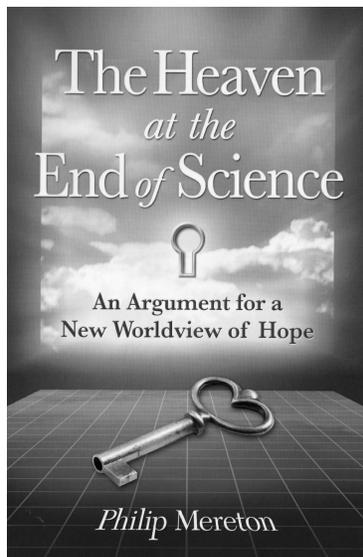
Don't protest too quickly. "I can see it, and I can feel it. When I drop a bowling ball on my toe it really hurts. This can't be imagination." Or can it?

What proof do you actually have of the existence of a world outside your mind? You can't actually get *outside* your mind and have a look around. Unless you are having an out-of-body experience.

Student of philosophy Philip Mereton brings in a cadre of notable philosophers to reinforce his argument that the *dream* world is the actual world, and the world we think we perceive through our senses is really just a dream.

I can imagine a number of arguments against this hypothesis, but Mereton seems to have covered them all.

"If the world around me is nothing but a dream in my head, then why do I need to show up for work every day? Why am I not rich?" Not so fast, says Mereton. Your mind is part of a single collective mind, the mind of God if you will. What you think is your personal dream is really part of a single collective dream that



EVENTS CALENDAR

April Program

Saturday, April 16, 2011
at 2:00 p.m.

Program TBA

We will be attempting to have a Skype presentation.

Board Meeting and Social Dinner

Saturday, April 23, 2011
at 7:00 p.m.

Desperados

4818 Greenville Ave
Dallas, TX

Desperados is probably the best Mexican food place in Texas. Hope you can join us and enjoy a great dinner!

If you plan to attend, please call or use the Web link:
<http://www.meetup.com/North-Texas-Skeptics/>
We sometimes cancel or change these events.

214.335.9248

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encompasses what we mistakenly believe is a universe made of (imaginative) matter and energy. You have to play the hand you are dealt (my interpretation).

To Mereton the worldly interpretation of the physical scientists is a fruitless chase for explanation of things that require no interpretation beyond his central thesis: It's all a dream. In Mereton's view, the deeper scientists dig into their supposed *real* world, the more things need to be explained. To support this, Mereton cites some worldly realities.

Scientists (early philosophers) started off thinking the world consisted of four elements, including fire and water. That was not a sufficient explanation, and scientists began to think about atoms, the world's smallest particles, particles that cannot be cut (atomic). When that proved insufficient, electrons, protons and neutrons were proposed. Then came quarks, basic particles that compose all of these and a "zoo" of other particles. Scientists are still searching.

Not Mereton. His dream world explains what physical science can't.

Mereton's thinking leads him along some paths that parallel a host of modern day pseudo-science. It also leads to some shaky propositions.

Physical science proposes the universe expanded from a single point about 13 billion years ago. This has been called the Big Bang. Astronomer Fred Hoyle had a steady-state interpretation, and he coined the term *Big Bang* to mock the expanding universe. Mereton, like some creationists I can cite, favor Hoyle's mocking interpretation and liken the initial expansion to a bomb explosion. Mereton views such an explosion as a very chaotic event (not far from the truth), and he asks how so much order—galaxies, stars, planets, beautiful sunsets—can come from such chaos.

Mereton tries to have both sides of the issue. The modern cosmological view is that the universe began at a single quantum state, then expanded out uniformly. Mereton then asks rightly how the diversity we see today could have come from such uniformity. Cosmologist Alan Guth proposed over 30 years ago an "inflationary" period during the early expansion of the universe—about 10^{-37} seconds on. This and other tweaks appear to Mereton—and perhaps to others—to be patches on an imperfect concept.

Biological evolution comes under similar scrutiny, and here Mereton echoes the literature of Intelligent Design. Mereton, as do the folks at the Discovery Institute Center for Science and Culture, sees intelligence and design, where mainstream scientists see only natural process at work. A reading of this section of his book leaves the impression that Mereton did not do any original research into the Intelligent Design issue but rather cribbed from the likes of Behe, Dembski and Meyer.

Early in the book Mereton cites paranormal phenomena as evidence of linked minds, and he seems to take as valid some propositions that have been demonstrated to be false:

Adopting naïve realism as a foundation, however, leads material scientists into numerous difficulties. To begin with, many human experiences put into question the notion that the external world stands absolutely detached from the mind. These events include those where the mind projects an external world mistaken for the world at large (night-dreams and hallucinations), where separate minds communicate through no physical means (telepathy) or where the mind alone affects an external object (mind-over-matter) or the body (placebo effect). Material science offers no explanation for these events because it detects no physical connection between the mind and the external world; consequently, it has no theory to

account for so-called paranormal events. Steven Weinberg expresses this viewpoint clearly: “We do not understand everything, but we understand enough to know there is no room in our world for telekinesis [mind-over-matter] or astrology. What possible signal from our brains could move distant objects and yet have no effect on any scientific instruments?”

The quote is from *Dreams of a Final Theory*, 49 (<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0679744088/thenorthtexaske>).

There are those who believe that stating something repeatedly makes it more true. Mereton seems to be one of these. He is so sure that the world is but a dream that he feels he must reassure the reader periodically. For example:

But we are rising slowly to the realization that we can only be here in one way, and that is through a united dream. And it is here where we will find the source of symmetry and beauty in the physical world, not through the misguided theories of material science.

Throughout the book, other material is covered multiple times. Mereton is a meticulous writer with a clean style, but he has taken far too much space to make his point. Reading through *The Heaven at the End of Science* one gets the idea that the book could have been about 1/4 as thick.

The jacket mentions that Mereton is a practicing lawyer and that he obtained a philosophy degree from Beloit College. His philosophical background shows throughout the book with citations from a host of famous others who have addressed the subject. In fact, footnotes comprise a significant fraction of the page space. A careful reader will enjoy following up on pertinent citations.

In a follow-up e-mail to the author I compared his thesis to “Last Wednesdayism.” Last Wednesdayism is a contrived belief system that skeptics use to mock some creationists’ views. It is stated as follows: “The universe and its history were created last Wednesday. We were created along with it with this history already imprinted in our brains.” Any attempt to refute Last Wednesdayism with fossil evidence or written histories will be countered by its proponents by stating that this evidence and these histories were all forged last Wednesday and before that time none of any of it existed.

Mereton recognized the allusion to creationism and he cited an example from mainstream science with a similar flaw:

In John Gribbin's *In Search of the Multiverse*, the author all but argues for the existence of multiple worlds, computer minds, and all sorts of strange things. It seems to me that this speculation is more akin to Wednesdayism than the simple notion that we are dreaming creatures participating in the one mind of God.

Both worldviews may seem strange to the other but the question should be, which one explains more?

Before we begin to doubt that “Life is but a dream,” we should also examine some of our own scientific explanations.



Challenge activity

by John Blanton

For a description of the North Texas Paranormal Challenge, please read the page on our Web site:

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

We receive a number of inquiries each year by e-mail, and every one of these receives a similar response. We remind interested parties of the requirements for participating, and we give them a rough idea of what they will be required to demonstrate. One requirement is that each applicant must provide us with a demonstration of what they expect to show. We do this so we don't go to a lot of trouble setting up a formal procedure when there is no chance of a successful outcome. The problem, of course, is that there will never be a successful outcome, because what applicants are proposing to demonstrate is the impossible.

We received this from Jackson Abide (not his real name):

Monday, March 7, 2011, 4:15 PM

Hi there:

I would like to take your organization's challenge as I have abilities similar to that of telepathy. I can communicate words without the need to speak outloud and without looking at another person. I would like to do this with a partner whom I would bring to the testing site. I am very open as to how you would like to do this. I think telepathy should be thought of as more of a phenomena, not so much something that can become a function of daily life. It would be great if people who are telepathic could live a better lifestyle and not have to live "under the radar" so to speak. In fact, perhaps scientific discovery of such a subject would lead to a way to prevent people from being telepathic.

One question I would like to ask is why your organization offers cash prizes to people with paranormal abilities? What is your advantage to hand out 12,000\$ to someone if they pass the test?

I am also wondering whether or not your group would consider putting out an alias name for m and my partner upon completeion of the challenge? I do not consider this a sticking point in my quest to win this challenge, but rather a plus to it.

Let me know how you would like to test my profound ability.

Sincerely,
Jackson Abide (Alias name)

I immediately responded.

Jackson,

About your alias:

In most places you may choose to call yourself by whatever name you like as long as it is not intended for deception or other illegal activities. If you want to be Jackson Abide, that's fine with us. That's the name that will go on the check. Also, we need to know your city, so we can say something like "We tested Jackson Abide from Kansas City."

We are willing to give out \$12,000 for the demonstration of paranormal abilities because we want to be the first. Nobody has ever demonstrated paranormal abilities before, and we want to be the first to bring such a thing to the world.

You can bring a friend. We will test you like this:

No radios or other forms of conventional communication. If we deem your communication does not rely solely on mental telepathy, then we will inform you that you don't qualify for the prize.

We would separate you and your partner. One of our group would give you a paragraph to transmit, and your partner would have to write down the entire paragraph without any mistakes. If you claim your ability is less than perfect, then you need to tell us up front, and we will design a test to accommodate this.

Before we will agree to test you, you will have to demonstrate to us you have something to show. You will not be compensated in any way for this demonstration, and you will also not receive any compensation for your participation in a formal test. Your only compensation will be the prize, in case you win.

I need to tell you in advance that we have had over a dozen applicants for the prize, and nobody has ever gotten past the demonstration phase. Nobody has ever showed up with anything to test. With that in mind you need to carefully consider whether you have adequately

tested your abilities and have made sure you really can demonstrate something. Else you may find that you have expended considerable expense and time and have gotten nothing in return.

An excellent example would be the case of Rosemary Hunter. She came from Cleveland at her own expense, and was not able to demonstrate any paranormal abilities.

We hope to hear from you again, and we look forward to working with you. Keep in mind that all communications related to the North Texas Paranormal Challenge will be posted on our Web site and published in our newsletter. Also, the Prize is offered by the underwriters only and is not the responsibility of the North Texas Skeptics.

I have heard nothing more from Jackson Abide.



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. These items usually come from our Skeptical News pages at <http://www/ntskeptics.org/news/news.htm>.

—This is a special David Klinghoffer installment

Intelligent Design is not Creationism

Says who? David Klinghoffer, that's who.

Klinghoffer is a Senior Fellow at the creationist Center for Science and Culture, a department of the Discovery Institute. According to the Discovery Institute Web site "He is the author most recently of *How Would God Vote?: Why the Bible Commands You to Be a Conservative.*" However, I am asked to believe he is not a creationist.

The Universe Is Haunted: Reflections on the "Nature of Nature"

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2011-03-20.htm#the>

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2011/03/the_universe_is_haunted_reflec044781.html

In the history of modern propaganda with its technique of the Big Lie, it's hard to think of a brazen untruth more successful in shaping opinion than the one that equates intelligent design with Christian fundamentalist creationism. Almost as influential is the related lie that there is no serious scientific controversy over Darwinism, that main support pillar of contemporary materialist or naturalist doctrine.

I have to agree with Klinghoffer on this one. Intelligent Design is not your grandfather's creationism. It's far more advanced. It's what Christian fundamentalist creationism would be if it had been intelligently designed.

Mention of Christian fundamentalist creationism brings back fond memories. Those were the days when Henry Morris, Duane Gish and other Christian fundamentalists stood before mass audiences and announced the fossil record does not support Darwinian evolution, Earth is much too young (less than 10,000 years) to allow for the slow process of Darwinian evolution and an all-guiding wisdom is responsible for it all.

The modern Christian fundamentalists at the CSC stand before mass audiences and announce the fossil record does not support Darwinian evolution and an all-guiding wisdom is responsible for it all. They leave out the part about Earth being less than 10,000 years old. That's probably because most (not all) of the CSC fellows believe Earth is billions of years old.

Skeptics, be thankful for small gains.

Klinghoffer's post is actually about *The Nature of Nature*, a compendium of essays by notable contributors on science and religion. From Amazon:

The world's leading authorities in the sciences and humanities—dozens of top scholars, including **three Nobel laureates**—join a cultural and intellectual battle that leaves no human life untouched. Is the universe self-existent, self-sufficient, and self-organizing, or is it grounded instead in a reality that transcends space, time, matter, and energy?

Francis Crick is recognized as one of the Nobel laureates. Who the others are is not clear.

What *is* clear is who created *The Nature of Nature*. The editors are listed as William Dembski and Bruce Gordon. These two creationists previously directed the Michael Polanyi Center for Complexity, Information and Design at Baylor University in Texas. The Center was devoted to the study of

Intelligent Design, a factor which ultimately led to its dissolution by Baylor.

Other contributors to *The Nature of Nature* include creationists Douglas Axe, Michael Behe, Guillermo Gonzalez, Robert Marks and Stephen C. Meyer. Marks is not associated with the CSC, but the others are.

Surprise! One contributor is Michael Shermer, editor of *Skeptic* magazine.

If you are not already aware, the big problem Intelligent Design creationists—as well as “Christian fundamentalist creationists”—have is with “naturalism.”

Naturalism is also the standard worldview in academia. That explains the origins of this book in a scandalous act of censorship at Baylor University.

In 2000, the Baylor faculty senate panicked and shut down a brand-new intelligent-design research center on campus. That was just days after the center staged a conference on "The Nature of Nature." The conference allowed believers in Darwinian theory and related forms of naturalism to confront ID advocates and other heretics face to face. *The Nature of Nature* collects many of those original presentations and a wealth of new material.

Klinghoffer concludes:

What, then, about the libel that stamped the faculty of Baylor

University to squash a daring attempt by colleagues to explore the evidence for design in nature? What about the "ID equals creationism" myth, or the "no controversy about evolution" bugaboo?

Say whatever else about it that you will, the way of thought traced here by the critics of naturalism bears no relation to anything honestly called creationism. And the fact that there is a very serious debate going on is simply undeniable. Such malignant clichés, popular with professors and polemicists, are crushed under the scholarly weight of this volume.

I need to get a copy of this book if only to find out who the other two Nobel laureates are.

Klinghoffer also has issues with journalist Lauri Lebo.

NO PEER-REVIEWED I.D. RESEARCH. Just ask Lauri Lebo!

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2011-03-20.htm#lebo>

I have to agree with Klinghoffer on this one. Intelligent Design is not your grandfather's creationism. It's far more advanced. It's what Christian fundamentalist creationism would be if it had been intelligently designed.

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2011/03/no_peer-reviewed_id_research_j044851.html

Six years ago Lauri Lebo covered the *Kitzmiller v. Dover Board of Education* trial for the *York Daily Record* in Pennsylvania. Coverage by Lebo and another local reporter did not earn them a place on the creationists' Christmas card list. Beyond that, Lebo has written *The Devil in Dover*, a book about the case. She continues to pursue the topic of creationism versus science in her blog on the Religion Dispatches Web site.

Lebo's blog posting caught Klinghoffer's attention and inspired his post on the Evolution News blog. Forget the subject line. Klinghoffer spends the bulk of his post commenting on Lebo's writing ability and on her integrity.

No, wait. Don't forget about the subject line. "No peer-reviewed research..?" Yes, Klinghoffer does get around to the subject.

Evolution News & Views does a fine job of covering the literature of peer-reviewed research supporting intelligent design as it comes out. If Ms. Lebo had followed ENV just over the past few months, she would have found numerous recent instances of what she says doesn't exist, as here, and here.

In Klinghoffer's post each "here" is a link to some peer-reviewed research. Links are meant to be followed, so I followed the first one. It took me eventually to a paper in the peer-reviewed scientific journal *International Journal of Design & Nature and Ecodynamics*. The article in Issue 2, Volume 4 is "Evidence Of Design In Bird Feathers And Avian Respiration" by A .C. McIntosh. Here is the abstract:

This paper explores the evidence for design in living systems. In particular, it considers two of the mechanisms used in bird flight. These include feathers and the remarkable counterflow mass exchanger breathing system used in the avian lung system. Both systems are examples of the principle of specified functional complexity, which occurs throughout nature. There is no known recorded example of this developing experimentally where the precursor information or machinery is not already present in embryonic form. Such design features indicate non-evolutionary features being involved.

That sounds impressive. Real research supporting Intelligent Design has been published in a peer-reviewed scientific journal. Maybe the creationists are on to something. Maybe I have been wrong about them all these years.

Oops. Next I read too far, and my dream was shattered. Following the abstract the editors have added a spoiler:

Editor's Note: *This paper presents a different paradigm than the traditional view. It is, in the view of the Journal,*

an exploratory paper that does not give a complete justification for the alternative view. The reader should not assume that the Journal or the reviewers agree with the conclusions of the paper. It is a valuable contribution that challenges the conventional vision that systems can design and organise themselves. The Journal hopes that the paper will promote the exchange of ideas in this important topic. Comments are invited in the form of 'Letters to the Editor'.

Not the kind of thing you would like to have attached to your resume.

This reminds me of an item published in *Nature* a few years back. Jacques Benveniste's paper seemed to support homeopathy, and the journal agreed to publish it if Benveniste would allow editor John Maddox, magician James Randi and fraud expert Walter Stewart to investigate Benveniste's methods. *Nature* had a similar rationale for publishing the homeopathy paper. The editor wanted to raise the issue of homeopathy's controversial claims and to stir up some debate. That goal was met.

OK, skeptics. That's one for one. Maybe the creationists will do better in the long haul. I checked the second "here."

Oops again. The second link leads to this item in the *Bio-Complexity Journal* Volume 2010 Issue 4 Page 4:

The Limits of Complex Adaptation: An Analysis Based on a Simple Model of Structured Bacterial Populations

Douglas D. Axe*

Biologic Institute, Redmond, Washington, USA

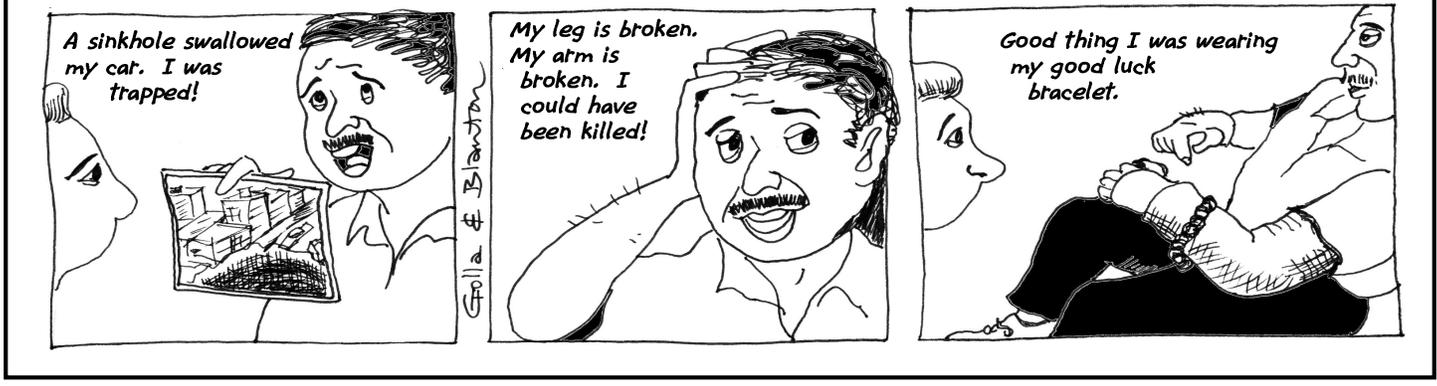
Ouch! Axe heads up Biologic Institute, an Intelligent Design research group funded by Discovery Institute. *Bio-Complexity Journal* is the Biologic Institute's own. Axe has published a peer-reviewed paper in a journal which he controls. I would like to provide additional information on *Bio-Complexity Journal*, but Volume 2010 Issue 4 is the only one I can find on-line.

I am thinking this link-checking business can turn into a cottage industry. There are ten more links to peer-reviewed research that I have not followed. I will leave that for another installment of Web News.

In the mean time, I urge all Skeptics to enjoy the antics of Klinghoffer and the other creationist bloggers on Discovery Institute's Evolution News. With the passing of Henry Morris and the semi-retirement of Duane Gish, there is not much sport left in watching the young-Earth creationists. For now the Discovery Institute is the best show in town.



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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.]

Infinitesimals: excuse me doctor, DNA is calling on line one.

The decades-long dispute between Luc Montagnier of the Pasteur Institute in France and Robert Gallo, then at the National Cancer Institute in the US, has taken on an entirely different complexion following Montagnier's public disclosure last month of far out homeopathic convictions. What's New reviewed homeopathy two weeks ago (<http://bobpark.physics.umd.edu/WN11/wn011411.html>). Often described as treatment with highly dilute medicine, homeopathic dilution typically far exceeds the dilution limit, beyond which not a single molecule of the solute would remain. In homeopathy, less is more. Samuel Hahnemann, the founder of homeopathy, called this The Law of Infinitesimals. Luc Montagnier was awarded the 2008 Nobel Prize in Medicine for his discovery of human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), while Robert Gallo who many thought had a legitimate claim to the discovery was left out in the cold. Interviewed by Martin Enserink for *Science* just a month ago (*Science*, VOL 330, p.1732), Luc Montagnier explained he is leaving France for Shanghai to escape the climate of fear surrounding mention of the electromagnetic waves that he claims emanate from highly diluted DNA of various pathogens, including those responsible for autism and Alzheimers. Jaques Benveniste, who Montagnier calls a "modern Galileo," made similar claims. Others in Europe are afraid to publish similar results according to Montgnier, "because of the intellectual terror from people who don't understand it."

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

The Amaz!ng Meeting – Las Vegas

By David Price

The James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) annual The Amaz!ng Meeting Las Vegas 2011 program has been announced. This year's theme is space science and skepticism and is titled "TAM 9 From Outer Space".

Over 1300 people attended the Amaz!ng Meeting Las Vegas in 2010, and this year will likely be even larger.

The keynote speaker will be Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium and host of the PBS program *Nova ScienceNow*. Other science oriented speakers include, Bill Nye "The Science Guy", Phil Plait, and PZ Myers.

There will be well-known skeptic speakers such as Eugenie Scott, Carol Tavris, Michael Shermer, Steve Novella, Ben Radford, and of course James Randi. The complete list of speakers is at the web site listed below.

Filling the shoes of Hal Bidlack, Master of Ceremonies for all previous TAM's, will be the skeptic musician and entertainer George Hrab. George produces the weekly skeptically themed Geologic Podcast, has released numerous music CDs, and has made a couple visits to the Dallas area in the last several years.

The conference runs from July 14-17 at the South Point Hotel in Las Vegas. Discounted registration runs through April 30. Workshops and special events are extra. All the details can be found at <http://www.amazingmeeting.com/>



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