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Intellectual incest

by John Blanton

Natural selection tends to avoid incest. Incest—more properly, inbreeding—allows recessive genetic traits to accumulate, often to the detriment of affected individuals. If a child gets a bad gene (doesn't make a needed protein) from one parent, it's best if the other parent doesn't also contribute the bad gene.

Popular literature suggests wild populations, such as wolves, seek mates from outside their own packs. Also, primitive peoples may raid neighboring clans for wives, and friendly exchanges of eligible women between ruling European families provided genetic diversity while maintaining royal status.

Cultural and intellectual incest is a problem of a slightly different nature. Lack of cultural diversity can deprive a nation of the benefits of innovation and can also result in the development and retention of perverse cultural traits. Open

societies are the fix. Honor killings within some European societies have lost fashion as a result of the cultural dilution that resulted from advances in communications and exchange of populations in the twentieth century.

Science deflects intellectual incest through a well-considered program of peer review. A small group of scientists working in isolation can develop wrong-headed theories through self-deception or an undeserved sense of self worth. Banging unworkable theories against contrary opinions and knowledge will often bring light and a better understanding of the true nature of things.



Image from the CSC Web site at <http://www.discovery.org/csc/>

EVENTS CALENDAR

August program

Saturday, 21 August at 2 p.m.
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Grass Roots Skepticism

Feeling skeptical recently, Bunky? Don't be alone. Get organized. David Price attended the session of Grass Roots Skepticism at The Amazing Meeting in Las Vegas. At the August meeting he will share the good advice to grass roots organizations like the NTS.

NTS board meeting and social dinner

Saturday 28 August 2010,
at 7 p.m.

The Island Spot
2661 Midway Rd., Ste 106
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If you plan to attend, please call. We sometimes cancel or change these events.

214.335.9248

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Cold fusion is one area where this process did not work well. The original developers of the idea shortly isolated themselves from scientific interchange and scrutiny and remained locked into a dead-end path to the ends of their careers.

Then there is Intelligent Design

If ever there was a “theory” that was self-named, it is Intelligent Design. That is because Intelligent Design was intelligently designed.

Intelligent Design grew from a special need. The need was to keep alive the idea that supernatural forces control the world we live in. Especially, the idea that the existence of people—our species—is the result of a thought process. The founder of this thought process cannot, for political reasons, be identified by proponents. However, the thought process, itself, is likened to the thought process enjoyed by people, ourselves.

Young-Earth creationism (YEC) initially filled the need for supernatural explanations. YEC was and still is promoted heavily in many religious organizations. When modern science falsified YEC absolutely, it still found refuge in churches. Not so much so in the public schools.

Once it lost any factual credibility, YEC became unwelcome in publicly-financed education. A short phrase in the first constitutional amendment states that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...” Since teaching YEC is strictly religious, with no other reason for being, the courts eventually abolished it from all education that obtained financing through the power of the American government.

The religious-minded scientists and scholars who founded the Discovery Institute Center for Science and Culture (CSC) do not necessarily espouse YEC, but they do have a problem with the rejection by modern science of a supernatural basis. Especially, they object to the teaching in public schools the Darwinian theory of evolution, which holds that the development of modern life forms is the result of a purely natural process. In particular, they object to public institutions teaching young children about a science that does not involve God.

The CSC resurrected the old idea of Intelligent Design in order to provide a plausible vehicle for the supernatural. By *supernatural* the predisposed student was expected to infer *God*. And not just any god, but Yahweh, the god of Abraham. The CSC fellows likely had the idea that even students who were not predisposed would catch on to the idea, and so much the worse for those who did not catch on. They would by their actions be singled out.

Law professor Phillip Johnson published *Darwin on Trial* to get the idea going—not specifically Intelligent Design, but that something was wrong with purely natural explanations. Johnson’s inspiration quickly coalesced like thinkers, and thus began the formulation of Intelligent Design as a substitute for science.

The problem manifested early on was the nasty matter of peer review. What peer review there was of Intelligent Design was, itself, nasty.

Scientist Stephen J. Gould wrote a stinging review of *Darwin on Trial* for *Scientific American*. The rest of the scientific community for the most part ignored it.¹

But the movement was growing, and other books followed.

Professor of biochemistry Michael Behe wrote *Darwin's Black Box*, explaining that certain life processes were irreducibly complex and could not have developed by random mutation and natural selection. They must have been designed.

Jonathan Wells does not do any science, but he does have a Ph.D. in molecular and cell biology. He wrote *Icons of Evolution*, in which he attempted to shoot down what he perceived were ten icons representing the science associated with the theory of evolution.

William Dembski has a Ph.D. in mathematics, but he does not appear to do any scientific research. Dembski has put forward the idea that science can detect the presence of design in nature by observing *specified complexity*. Dembski uses his expertise in mathematical statistics to bolster his claims.

Through all of this there persists the problem of peer review, or lack of it. The CSC fellows have put forward their ideas about Intelligent Design, but they have not published them in any *legitimate* peer-reviewed scientific journals.

The word *legitimate* is highlighted in the above, because, strictly speaking, some papers promoting Intelligent Design have been published. You only have to ask.

I went to the page on the CSC's Web site that discusses peer review related to Intelligent Design. The content is enlightening.²

There is a long list of "peer reviewed" publications, some of which are already familiar.

In 2004, from all appearances, CSC founder Stephen C. Meyer engaged CSC fellow Richard Sternberg to publish his paper "The Origin of Biological Information and the Higher Taxonomic Categories" in *Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington*, a peer-reviewed scientific journal of which Sternberg was editor. Sternberg allowed publication of the paper after bypassing regular review by other editors of the journal. The standard process does not reveal the names of those who review a paper, so it is not possible to determine whether peer review included CSC fellows. Having like-minded creationists perform the peer review would make this a classic case of intellectual incest.

Regardless of who performed the peer review, the Meyer paper does not present any scientific research into Intelligent Design. This has not kept the CSC from claiming a goal in the game of peer review soccer.³

I looked down the list of publications claiming peer review and found this one. Tracking it down revealed some details:

Jonathan Wells published "Do Centrioles Generate a Polar Ejection Force?" in *Rivista di Biologia*. Sidestepping the peculiar nature of the publication venue, the reader should skip down to the *Conclusions* section of the paper. Typically this section will summarize what the paper purports to show. This section is significant for what it does not say. It does not make any claim for Intelligent Design or for a supernatural cause of any kind. After 18 pages of elaborate explanation of some very nice biological processes, Wells concludes by summarizing:⁴

The polar ejection force that plays an important role in dividing animal cells could be generated by centrioles. In the hypothesis presented here, these organelles are literally tiny turbines that pump fluid through their triplet microtubule blades with a dynein-powered Archimedes' screw located in their proximal lumens. A mother centriole would rotate about its long axis within a bearing of subdistal appendages, held in place by a flange of distal appendages. A daughter centriole, projecting at a right angle from the mother, would not rotate about its own axis but would revolve around the latter inside the capsule formed by the centromatrix. The daughter would also function as a turbine, however, generating a torque that introduces an eccentricity or "wobble" into the revolutions of the mother-daughter pair.

Another writer familiar with the matter has this to say:⁵

First, the journal, *Rivista di Biologia*, is utterly insignificant, and is prone to publishing articles that are clearly on the edge of scientific respectability. Its editor is (reportedly) a creationist and is affiliated with the Discovery Institute. Second, the paper is not a primary research report. It outlines a hypothesis, accompanied by a literature review, but describes no new experiments and reports no new findings.

Intellectual incest can take multiple forms, and publishing under a reviewer sympathetic to Intelligent Design, as in this case, would be one of them. Most odd of all is why Wells didn't take this opportunity to publish something favorable to Intelligent Design.

Odder still is the CSC's continued insistence that *Darwin's Black Box* was peer-reviewed. It's odd in the first instance, because a popular book like *DBB* doesn't need to be peer-reviewed. You just write the book, find a publisher, and

collect the royalties. And what kind of peer review did *DBB* receive?

In his book about the *Kitzmilller* trial, Edward Humes describes the cross examination of author Michael Behe. Behe had claimed the *DBB* was peer-reviewed. On cross examination attorney Eric Rothschild asked Behe about reviewer Michael Atchison. Then Rothschild recounted the story behind Atchison's review of *DBB*.

The book's editor told his wife about the book. The wife was a student of Atchison's, and she suggested that Atchison talk to the editor. Atchison had a ten-minute phone conversation with the editor and got a description of the book. Atchison suggested the book would be good reading. And that was the peer review.⁶

It is not as though peer review will do any good for Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design gets lots of peer review, and all of it is bad. Not surprising, peer review of Intelligent Design does not have the effect of correcting the problems with Intelligent Design.

Under cross examination at the *Kitzmilller* trial, Behe was confronted with a stack of peer-reviewed research and published books dealing with the very science Behe used to promote irreducible complexity in *DBB*. This was material Behe had claimed did not exist. He made these claims in *DBB* and afterwards, and he continued to make these claims after they were refuted during *Kitzmilller*.

Apparently the matter of peer review has scraped a nerve at the CSC. The CSC has set up the Biologic Institute to conduct *scientific research* related to Intelligent Design.⁷

Biologic Institute brings together scientists with diverse expertise, unified by the realization that a revolution in biology—with far reaching implications—is well under way. Like many revolutionary ideas, this one is powerful in its simplicity:

The more we learn about the organization of life, the more clearly it reveals design.

That's good enough for an Intelligent Design research center. But there is still the matter of peer review. For every problem there is a solution. The CSC's solution is its own journal:⁸

BIO-Complexity is a peer-reviewed scientific journal with a unique goal. It aims to be the leading forum for testing the scientific merit of the claim that intelligent design (ID) is a credible explanation for life. Because questions having to do with the role and origin of information in living systems are at the heart of the scientific controversy over ID, these topics—viewed from all angles and perspectives—are central to the journal's scope.

With this, the CSC has neatly tied up the problem of peer-reviewed publication. Peer review, perhaps, but not the problem of intellectual incest.

Therein is the real core of Intelligent Design. Intelligent Design cannot exist except in isolation. It needs to be supported by a determined cadre of rogue scientists and scholars, who cite each others' research and tell themselves what they want to hear. CSC fellows say they are doing breakthrough research, and that research will lead the way toward an understanding of life's origins. Reality is somewhat different.

I do a little writing, and I find my style becomes stale after a while. Some say it's after a short while. Reading the works of good writers keeps me from getting into a terminal rut.

I also do some photography. Pulling out a *National Geographic* or even a *Science* magazine cover reminds me of what good photography looks like.

The CSC will never do this, and their incestuous intellectual environment is not likely to ever produce any novel or useful thinking. In my way of thinking that was never their intent.

References

- 1 http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/gould_darwin-on-trial.html
- 2 <http://www.discovery.org/a/2640>
- 3 You can read the Meyer paper on the CSC Web site.
- 4 <http://www.discovery.org/a/2680>
- 5 <http://sfmatheson.blogspot.com/2007/11/do-id-theorists-generate-data.html>
- 6 Edward Humes, *Monkey Girl*. pp 302-303. Harper, 2007.
- 7 <http://www.biologicinstitute.org/>
- 8 <http://bio-complexity.org/ojs/index.php/main/about/editorialPolicies#purposeAndScope>

Future Meeting Dates

- 21 August (NTS program meeting)
- 28 August (NTS social dinner)
- 18 September (NTS program meeting)
- 25 September (NTS social dinner)
- 16 October (NTS program meeting)
- 23 October (NTS social dinner)
- 13 November (NTS program meeting)
- 20 November (NTS social dinner)

Book Review

by John Blanton

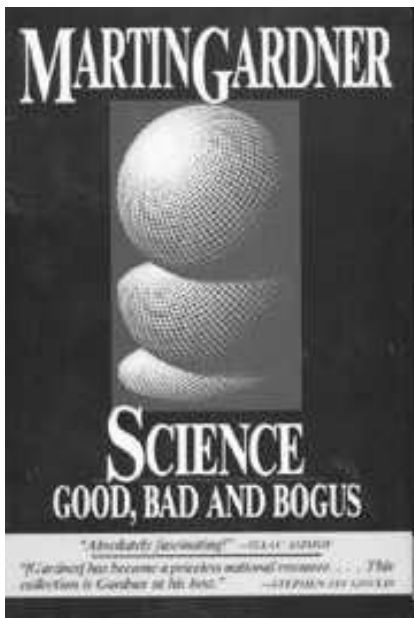
Good, bad and ugly

Science, Good, Bad and Bogus

Martin Gardner

Prometheus Books 1989, 412 pages
including index (paperback)

The *Good, the Bad and the Ugly* was a film starring Clint Eastwood, and I can't help but believe somebody had this in mind when naming the book. Gardner died this past May, even while I was reading again his entertaining collection of essays on fraud, pseudo science and various other mental lapses.



Gardner had previously written *Fads and Fallacies in the Name of Science*. In *Science, Good, Bad and Bogus (GBB)* he continues the narrative. He does not set out to explain good, bad and bogus science in story form. Instead, the book comprises a selection of essays, separately written.

The writings derive from a number of popular sources, including *Science* (the journal of the American Association for the Advancement of Science),

Scientific American, *Yale Review*, *Stranger than Fact* and *Technology Review*. The collection also includes an excerpt from Gardner's own *Logic Machines and Diagrams*, a copy of which I happily own, having purchased it as a teenager. But largely the essays come from the *New York Review of Books (NYR)*, to which he was a prodigious contributor.

Regarding the latter, it would seem that every time the *NYR* editors came across a choice piece of mental dead meat they would nod their collective heads. "We need to give this one to Gardner."

Gardner must have shortly in his life become stunned and appalled at the intellectual vacuum that pervades modern society. In an age of enormous scientific advancements from relativity and quantum mechanics to exploration of the Solar System, there remains an undercurrent of crass stupidity that assails the sensibilities of thinking people. He shows no compassion for writers and speakers who blather nonsense in the face of hard facts. Reactions to his scathing reviews are like the squeals of rodents caught in the beam of a spotlight.

Charles Tart was a "parapsychologist" doing research at the University of California at Davis. He used a machine called a "Ten-Choice Trainer" (TCT) to help people with psychic ability improve their scores on tests for same. The test worked like this:

A sender in one room viewed a panel with ten playing cards, ace through ten. A randomizing mechanism would select one of the ten cards and would activate a light next to the card. The sender would then push a button, causing a signal to be sent to the receiver. This told the receiver that the sender was now looking at the selected card. The receiver would then turn a dial to select the correct card. The dial position was fed back to the sender in real time, allowing the sender to mentally direct the receiver to the correct card. Finally the receiver would select a card by pushing a button next to the card. If the receiver's choice was correct, a chime would sound. This would provide positive reinforcement and would help the receiver to learn and to sharpen his extrasensory perception (ESP) skills.

Tart wrote a book describing his work, *Learning to Use Extrasensory Perception*, published by Chicago Press in 1976. In the book he claimed scores considerably better than could be expected by chance. He heralded his results a "breakthrough" in ESP research.

Came time for Gardner to review the book in 1977 for *NYR*, and he, as was his practice, went beyond checking for spelling and grammar. As Gardner reports, three of Tart's colleagues at UC Davis wrote a critique of Tart's experimental method. They had read Tart's book and asked to see the raw data. Reviewing the data they realized, for one, the randomizer was not exactly random. They likened Tart's protocol to a chemist using a dirty test tube and obtaining anomalous results, and they suggested that Tart repeat his experiments after fixing the problem of the non-random random number device.

Gardner saw an additional flaw in Tart's technique. If the sender, subconsciously or deliberately, delayed sending his signal to the receiver, the receiver might pick up on this idiosyn-

crazy, and this could become a signaling path from the sender to the receiver. The receiver could pick cards depending on the amount of delay and could improve his score above chance.

Gardner also points out a finding by the mathematicians who examined the data. There is an unexplained absence of doublets. Not so many 2, 2 and 7, 7 sequences, for example, as one should expect. The TCT recorded only the receiver's score, not the entire sequence of random numbers. This led to the possibility that the sender was hitting the send button a second time whenever the new number was the same as the previous number. The receiver could significantly increase his score by never choosing the same card twice in a row.

Wait, there's more. The sender and receiver were in nearby office cubicles, and one sender, Gaines Thomas, revealed he would sometimes orally coax his own display of the receiver's actions as he monitored them on his display. He would curse when the sender appeared about to stop on the wrong card. Whether the receiver was ever cued by these sounds coming from the sender's cube is not known.

In response to the criticism, Tart revised his technique and repeated his experiments. He published his results as "Effects of Immediate Feedback on ESP Performance: A Second Study" in the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*.¹ Gardner tellingly quotes a significant statement in the paper: "There is no evidence that more percipients scored significantly above chance than would be expected if no ESP were operating."

Rather than admit the initial results were due to his own faulty technique, Tart, as Gardner reports, attempted to explain away this lack of success. Principally, there was a lack of ESP talent for the follow-up experiment. "In the last year or two, students have become more serious, more competitive, more achievement-oriented than they were at the time of the first experiment." And more.

Tart asserted the results of the first experiment were so significant they could not be ignored. As Gardner comments, Tart could not reconcile that the first experiment demonstrated his failure as a scientist. Rather, his earlier results put the results of the second experiment into doubt. Gardner, and the reader, are dumfounded at the audacity. Not speaking for Gardner, I would add I am not in the least surprised by Tart's reasoning.

Tart responded to Gardner's critique in 1981. His approach is telling:²

I see that Martin Gardner is again using this popular literary journal as a vehicle to attack my scientific research that was reported in my *Learning to Use Extrasensory Perception* (University of Chicago Press, 1976) [*NYR*, May 15]. As a working scientist, I am committed to reporting and dealing with all of

the facts in my studies, whether they agree with my cherished beliefs or not. Data is primary. Gardner, by contrast, apparently knows what's true and false in some absolute way, so when inconvenient facts run counter to his beliefs he suppresses them or rationalizes them away. He knows that ESP is impossible, so when he is presented with evidence for it, he imagines some way in which the experimenters are fools, frauds, or both. Mr. Gardner doesn't need actual evidence for this, his suspicions are sufficient. Most people would consider his casual and unsupported accusation of fraud against one of my more successful experimenters, Gaines Thomas (now a professional psychologist), as malicious libel, but I suppose Mr. Gardner believes he's just protecting us gullible people from ourselves.

Without belaboring the deficiencies of Tart's response, a small highlight will illustrate. Tart mentions "accusations of fraud" and "malicious libel" with respect to experimenter Gaines Thomas. In his review, Gardner did not accuse Thomas of fraud. He merely pointed out a source of possible failure of the test protocol (swearing audibly when the receiver was straying from the correct choice). Lacking a basis for rebuttal, Tart elevated these comments beyond any reasonable interpretation in an attempted misdirection of the reader.

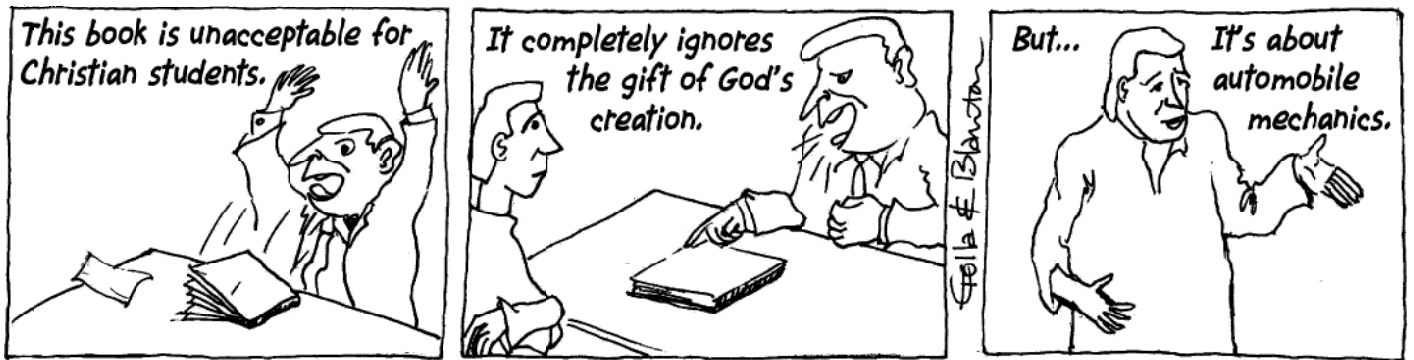
GBB is replete with such examples. Gardner reviews a lame or outlandish piece of work and provides the reader with an exhaustive background against which to view it. And he is merciless in his lack of praise, especially when dealing with a writer who has little appreciation for the truth. Reading the review is fun enough, but the subsequent exchange between Gardner and the subject is often more telling. It's a comical aspect of human nature that a groundless proponent will only dig a deeper hole when dealing with exposure.

The book would have been entertaining enough if Gardner had stuck to failed pseudo science such as Tart's ESP escapades. However, in *GBB* the reader's cup does run over. Gardner leads us through the full spectrum of pseudo science, fools and quackery. His topics include "Hermit Scientists," "The Irrelevance of Conan Doyle," "Geller, Gulls, and Nitinol," "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" and "Two books on Talking Apes." Thirty-eight episodes flesh out this excursion into modern, and not so, silliness.

Gardner's review of *The Preachers* by James Morris (1974) gives us an insight into the excesses of religious fervor. Gardner is from Tulsa, Oklahoma, also the home of Oral Roberts' high octane ministry and also the "one-man denomination" of Billy James Hargis.

Roberts discovered the power of godly healing when a deacon of his Georgia church suffered an accident involving his foot and a heavy motor. More miracles followed. Also more

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money. Subsequently his Tulsa-based Healing Waters, Inc., employed 287 workers, mostly “to open envelopes and count the cash.” Morris reports an estimated annual take of fifteen million dollars (approximately the year 1973).

There were minor problems. Roberts healed a woman with diabetes. She stopped taking her medication and died. He healed a woman with cancer. She gave testimony about her miraculous cure shortly before she died.

Hargis did not do any healing, but he did fight communism. And no wonder. I am certain the communists would have cast a baleful eye on Hargis’ half million-dollar mansion in Tulsa. That mansion with ninety phone outlets. This was about 1974, a few years before the advent of cell phones.

Billy Graham escapes the scorn heaped on others by holding to the line of the true faith. A minor embarrassment was his close association with Richard Nixon. Graham was particularly shocked by the red-blooded language that emanated from the now-famous tape recordings.

Near the end *GBB* is an item titled “Broca’s Brain.” Carl Sagan published this collection of his own essays in 1979, and Gardner’s review is an insight into Sagan’s survey of intellectual foolishness. The reader will be recommended on this title, as well.³

The unfortunate thing about *GBB* is that many of the subjects of his review are now dated. Where is Uri Geller now? And whatever happened to Oral Roberts? *GBB* touches on Lyall Watson without reference to *Lifetide*, which introduced us to the Hundredth Monkey syndrome. Apparently *NYR* never picked up on the title.

The good thing about *GBB* is that you can take many of his subjects, exchange anachronistic names for more pertinent ones, and the story will read about the same. If one thing has changed

since the publication of *GBB* that thing has not been the failure of human sensibility.

By our good fortune, the *New York Review of Books* has seen fit to publish its archives on line. You should be able to pick up many of Gardner’s fascinating pieces, including humorous exchanges with his review subjects on their Web site.⁴

Readers of Martin Gardner often assumed he held advanced degrees in mathematics and science. In fact he had a bachelor’s degree in philosophy from the University of Chicago and a deep understanding of these topics gained through tireless research for his writing. Gardner fans could do well reading only *GBB*. They can do even better by also looking into any other of his 50 or so works. Our Web site lists links to some of the available titles. When you purchase from Amazon through our link the NTS earns a commission.⁵



References

- 1 *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research* (1979, 73, 151-165)
- 2 See the full response here:
<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/1981/feb/19/claims-for-esp/>
- 3 <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0345336895/thenorthtexaske>
- 4 Start here to search or to find archives by date:
<http://www.nybooks.com/>
- 5 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/books/gardner.htm>

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