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8/21/2009



Why Intelligent Design Is Essential to Mainstream Biology by Tom Gilson

Once upon a time, as fairytales generally begin, it was thought that science was a purely objective search for knowledge, untainted by bias or prejudice. "The instruments do not lie!" The fable, alas, has been revealed for what it is. Scientists are people too. There is no such thing as purely objective scientific research. It is always conditioned by culture, and thus it will always have biases. Its best defense against culturally-conditioned bias is a combination of good philosophical work, honesty in research and reporting (the moral dimension), and cross-cultural challenges to test the reigning cultural biases. These challenges may come through work done by others with different philosophical starting points, and they also come through the passage of time, since cultures change.

This now-widely accepted fact is not widely enough applied to a particular area of science where cross-cultural challenges are actively, even stridently opposed by the majority. It is a field whose practitioners overwhelmingly share one view of reality, a view that ineluctably colors every interpretation of every fact. And it is a field that seeks to drive out opposing fundamental views of reality.

That field is evolution, and the opposing view is intelligent design (ID). Evolutionary science is strongly associated with agnosticism or atheism: more than eighty percent of evolutionary biologists hold those positions. Wherever a group exists with such a monolithic mindset, there is the danger that it will lead its members toward badly skewed interpretations of reality. This is a simple and widely recognized fact of human nature.

In contrast, the majority of ID proponents are theists; and biologists often criticize ID as being strongly influenced by theism. This must be acknowledged: ID researchers are typically biased toward belief in God, and universally biased against philosophical naturalism (roughly, the view that matter, energy, and their interactions are all that exist; that there is no supernatural).

To be biased is not necessarily to be wrong, however. Either there is a theistic God or there isn't; either philosophical naturalism is true or it isn't. One side or the other has a more nearly correct view of reality. Of course, each side naturally thinks its own view is correct. Good philosophical work can (idealistically) help determine which is which; more realistically, it can at least contribute to understanding how to correct for biases. Even with that work being done, though, each side is still likely to emphasize interpretations and findings that support its own preferred view of reality.

Given, therefore, the very real human capacity for bias, a capacity which is multiplied in homogeneous cultures, culturally aware mainstream biologists therefore ought to be encouraging work on ID, just because it might prove to be a corrective to their monolithically shared view of reality.

Let me re-state that in plainer English: Mainstream biologists ought to recognize that they have biases, and that because of those biases they might be wrong. They ought to welcome work done by people with opposing views of reality, because there is a chance that, in case they are wrong they will be successfully corrected. The difficulty with that, of course, is that it requires admitting that one might be wrong.

I direct this advice specifically toward mainstream biologists, not because ID proponents have no biases, but because I don't know of a single ID proponent who would discourage evolutionary science from moving forward the way evolutionists discourage ID. ID does not stand in the way of this cultural correction process. Mainstream biology does.

The dominant culture is always the one most in need of being reminded that it is not necessarily right. This too is a widely recognized fact of human nature.

Welcoming challenges to one's own culturally-reinforced biases is probably more crucial in the study of origins than in any other science. In most other sciences, direct contact with experimental results provides strong corrective power. This direct contact is not generally

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available, however, for historical sciences. Archaeologists may interpret a certain pattern of artifacts as having religious or sexual significance, but if that interpretation is a false one based on the scientists' cultural conditioning, the dead will not rise and tell them their prejudices have led them astray. The science of origins is the ultimate in historical sciences. Correction to biases will not come by watching the universe, life, or the various species appearing anew all over again. It will come through excellent research, good philosophical work, a commitment to honesty in research and reporting, and through cross-cultural challenges.

Such challenges also come through the progress of time. It is very difficult to give up our usual ways of looking at things, but time has a way of forcing that change, in cultures if not always in individuals. Discovering truth is partly a matter of patience as the work proceeds, and partly a matter of holding somewhat loosely to our scientific conclusions, especially those that cannot be tested by experiment. If the goal is to reach truth more quickly, the best way to speed the process is to encourage respectful confrontations between research programs with differing cultural starting points. If biology includes a search for what is really true about origins, biologists ought to be encouraging work on intelligent design.

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