

Intelligent Design and the Public Schools: Pro

By Ross S. Olson MD

"Should intelligent design be taught alongside evolution in biology classes in Minnesota's public schools? Why or why not? What policies, if any, should local school boards or the state legislature enact? What role, if any, should elected officials' religious beliefs play as they consider this issue?"

This is a huge topic involving science, philosophy and law. I am not an academic in any of these subjects but a pediatrician, trained in the 1960s at the University of Minnesota and indoctrinated to believe that evolution was proven beyond any doubt. But about 30 years ago I began to question that premise, to research the subject and discuss it with people of all opinions. In the process, I discovered that much of the disagreement is philosophical. Let me try to give a quick overview.

But first, I want to commend you for reading partisan articles like this because by it you imply a belief that there are right answers to the questions that have been posed. This means that you do not blindly follow the post-modern view that there is no truth, or that every person can have his or her own truth, or that arguments are only attempts to exercise power over others.

Second, I commend you for looking at a topic that some might feel has already been decided by Judge John Jones of Pennsylvania. But in case you think that judicial decisions are the last word on any subject, let me take you back about 150 years ago to the 1857 Dred Scott decision of the US Supreme Court, when the Court threw out the case of a slave who had lived in free territories and was suing for his freedom. They ruled that a slave is property and not entitled to the rights of a citizen. It was "the law of the land!"

Is anyone here willing to say that the Supreme Court of 1857 had the final word on that subject? (Be careful because you may be implying that you are judging by a standard higher than the Supreme Court!) The Dred Scott decision galvanized the abolition movement – which sought to end slavery – and eventually hastened the bloody Civil War. It was a very controversial subject, with the power and prestige of the government apparently on the side of slavery. Also, most of the abolitionists had a religious motivation – they believed that all people really were created equal. That would have caused them to fail the so called "Lemon Test" used by courts today to determine if a point of view affecting public policy or judicial decisions violates the constitutional provision against "establishing religion."

But, of course, it can be fairly stated that the Court of 1857 was a creature of its age, and I agree. I maintain that it is the same today. Abolitionists of that day knew that they were right and the Court was wrong. I claim that the Court of today is wrong again and its errors need to be exposed.

You might say though, it is not just judges who reject Intelligent Design (ID) but scientists, who really ought to know. Yet the opposition I have seen from scientists is most often based on exclusion of the supernatural from science by definition.

So you can see that the problem rests on definitions. What is science? What is the establishment of religion? What is education? And those definitions flow out of their underlying philosophies.

Science in its root meaning is knowledge, and has come to mean that kind of knowledge gained by observation and repeatable experimentation, which, by the way, does not apply to past non-repeatable events, like origins. Methodological naturalism is the idea that science looks for natural mechanisms to answer its questions, which is reasonable. But philosophical naturalism goes far beyond that to say that natural mechanisms are all there are! Now first of all, that is not a scientific statement but a philosophical assumption. And it is not even logical. Actually to say it with assurance, a person would have to be omniscient – knowing everything – otherwise the supernatural could exist outside of his or her knowledge. (That person would thus be God and we would have the strange situation of God being an atheist.)

When there is no natural explanation and not even a plausible natural explanation anywhere on the horizon, is it permissible to postulate a supernatural one? For example, if a certifiably dead person came alive again and this was confirmed with rigorous assurance, is it not logical to suppose that a miracle had taken place? Or must one say that the only acceptable explanation is that physiological processes just might reverse themselves by chance?

And if the structure of living things is found to be so complex and interrelated that no plausible natural mechanism can be found to explain it, is it not permissible to state that, at least as a working hypothesis an Intelligent Designer was involved?

What are some typical objections to the concept of ID? One is that the argument from design is invalid and we only recognize design when we know of the designer. But I maintain that if you were a visitor from some distant galaxy you would still recognize a low tech object like an arrowhead as being designed and be able to pick it out of a pile of pebbles. We do this by comparing what we see with what we know happens naturally and can tell the difference. Think about it, if the letters in your alphabet soup began arranging themselves to write the entire Encyclopedia Britannica, you would suspect that something was messing with your soup – or with your mind. And by the way, if to recognize design we must know of concrete examples, look at computerized information storage and retrieval systems. We DO know that intelligent human beings can design hardware and software to do this. And the DNA system is far more miniaturized and sophisticated than anything that humans have designed!

Secondly, some think that it is a false dichotomy to say that a weakness of evolution is a point for ID. But let's look at logic for a moment. Either there is a natural mechanism for something or there is not. If there is no natural mechanism, then the mechanism must be outside of nature – supernatural. You might say you want to keep looking for natural mechanisms and that is fine, but at the moment, you have to admit that the working hypothesis is a supernatural one.

Thirdly, some say that ID has no predictive value. Of course they have already rejected, with a wave of the hand, the significance of finding irreducibly complex structures – ones that cannot be made by adding pieces one at a time. Yet living things are full of them.

Evolutionists have come up with all sorts of very speculative solutions to this problem – the parts could have been used for some other purpose in the cell before coming together in the new structure, or the conditions were different in the past or there was some sort of “simpler” life form in which this was all possible. They do not do the math on any of these proposals, however, because if they did, it would be obvious that the chance of any favorable mutation is vanishingly small, even over billions of years. These fanciful and highly speculative solutions are only plausible if you already believe that evolution must have taken place.

But ID also predicts that structures of unknown significance will be found to have functions, and this has come true. A century ago there was a long list of “vestigial organs” which evolution predicted were junk left over from the evolutionary past, useless structures “on the way out.” Even though some textbooks still list them, they are all scientifically known to be useful. The same thing is happening with so called “junk DNA.” Evolutionists thought that DNA that does not code for genes was debris from ruined genes and only useful as a pile of spare parts that might mutate into something useful. Yet new functions are being discovered constantly, including embryological development and regulation.

Does ID “stop science” as some claim? No, in fact it is evolution that has sometimes slowed the search for functions. And also, many of the great names in science could be labeled as ID advocates, such as Isaac Newton, James Clerk Maxwell and Louis Pasteur.

But, you might say, if all this is so obvious, why do not more scientists accept it? Why are the refereed journals not full of it? Can you believe that there could be persecution? Investigate what happened to Dr. Dean Kenyon, distinguished professor at San Francisco State University, removed from teaching introductory biology when he expressed doubts about Darwin. Or consider Forrest Mims, science writer of impeccable credentials, fired after being hired to write “The Amateur Scientist” column for Scientific American when it was discovered that he did not accept evolution, even though that concept never came up in the columns. Thomas Kuhn got at part of the reason for this sort of behavior in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. A ruling paradigm tends to oppose change and there is a tremendous herd instinct in science. You don’t get tenure and grant money by disproving your chairman’s life work.

And, for the sake of illustration, let us suppose that there really is an Intelligent Designer and that there really are features of life that cannot be explained naturally. The people who refuse to consider supernatural causes will never be able to discover the truth! They will continue to propose mechanisms and patiently wait for what they consider confirmation. But because they are desperate, they accept things such as finding some parts of one molecular machine – little literal machines that fill living cells – used in another. That is no proof of evolution because even human designers do that.

And if evolutionists are so confident of their case, why do they oppose airing it out for all to see? Why do they so rarely debate Intelligent Design advocates? Why do they not let the evidence for both sides be available to students so they can learn to think critically? Why have they consistently opposed the very minimal step of allowing the weaknesses in evolutionary theory to be taught? Why do they use character assassination and intimidation as weapons? For example, Dr. P.Z. Myers proposed “firing and public humiliation” for advocates of ID. Rather than education, evolutionists seem to want indoctrination.

Actually, abiogenesis, the origin of the first living things would require so many incredibly improbable events, that most evolutionists no longer even claim to have a theory on the topic. Origin of life would have to happen without the benefit of natural selection to weed out the losers – since natural selection only works with a living, reproducing organism. There is actually not enough matter and time in the universe to come up with one simple protein molecule, much less a living cell. And they then pretend that they do not need a theory and will just patiently wait for science to come up with some new law that creates information out of chaos. This turns science on its head, with theory trumping evidence! It essentially calls for a naturalistic miracle!

If you want to do a calculation you can try to construct a 100 unit protein molecule from a primordial soup of the 20 different amino acids used in life. Even if you allow them to all be the left handed isomers instead of the mixture that would occur naturally, there is only one chance in 10^{130} of getting it right. And there are only about 10^{80} atoms in the universe and 10^{18} seconds in 30 billion years. And the simplest cell needs at least 230 proteins with their controlling DNA, all put together in the proper configuration to function. It is an incredible assumption to say that it could all happen by natural mechanisms. And deceptively, evolutionists try to pretend that natural selection somehow reduces the odds when the truth is that natural selection only selects, it does not create and the creating in evolution must be done by random mechanisms.

But what of “establishing religion?” This subject would take another hour to develop but let me try to whet your appetite. I think the Founders of this nation would be flabbergasted at the spin put on that phrase – without precedent – by our courts beginning about the middle of the last century. Think about it, the whole structure of the government from chaplains in the legislature to the Ten Commandments on the wall of the Supreme Court building and the use of the Bible in taking oaths all give very strong clues that religion, specifically the Christian religion, was understood to be foundational. Looking at the writings of the Founders, something rarely done today, confirms this. They did not, however, want to have a national church as so many European nations did. They wanted the people to be free to practice any or no religion, which is what the Constitution said.

Yet even a conservative judge, a church-going man, such as Judge Jones, in his decision mentioned “the Constitutional separation of church and state.” Actually that phrase is not in the Constitution but in a letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Baptist Association of Danbury stating that the government would not interfere in the affairs of the church. Yet the current view grows naturally out of a philosophical assumption that religion is a matter of personal preference, like taste in art, for which there is no right or wrong answer. If so, it has no place in public policy. Yet if there *is* objective evidence for the existence of a Supreme Being, to whom we may all be responsible, this will be very confusing and disturbing to people who thought they had isolated religion to the private life of believers.

And look at the rational rabbit hole you fall down if you accept the current take on the subject. Even if there is evidence for an Intelligent Designer, it could not be taught in the public schools, certainly not by people who believe it, because it might cause the students to believe in God, which would establish religion and thus be unconstitutional.

Incredibly, Judge Jones even said it was unconstitutional for teachers to tell students that they could research the topic in the library!

Is there a religious side to this issue? Indeed there is – on both sides. As Richard Dawkins said, “Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.” It is true, atheism cannot live without evolution, or some other natural mechanism to account for life – and indeed, the entire universe. Religion can live with evolution, to be sure. But if the evidence says that evolution could not have happened, then atheism changes from a dispassionate search for truth to a rebellion against the conclusion.

A person will necessarily bring his or her own religious bias to public issues, whether it is belief in a supreme being, a belief in no supreme being, or the belief that religion should not influence “real life.” And many evolutionists have an anti-religious bias, such as Dr. P. Z. Myers who has stated that he wishes he could go back in a time machine and assassinate Abraham, or Dr. Richard Dawkins who says religion is like smallpox, but harder to eradicate.

In summary, there is a strong intellectual case for Intelligent Design. It cannot be excluded from science by philosophical fiat and to withhold the evidence from students is a betrayal of education. I agree with the Discovery Institute that Intelligent Design should not be mandated, but as a start it should at least be permitted. Certainly teachers who do discuss it should not be punished.

And finally, the current understanding of “establishment of religion” needs to be re-examined by going back to where the Supreme Court got off the constitutional track. Otherwise it leads to the absurdity of denying potential truth, and because by forbidding everything else, the courts have now established atheism as the national religion.

Resources:

On the Founders: WallBuilders www.wallbuilders.org

On Intelligent Design: Discovery Institute www.discovery.org

I am very happy to discuss these matters in further detail ross@rossolson.org