

Darwinism and Intelligent Design in the Classroom

Scientists have been debating about the origin of life for centuries. Michael Behe elaborates on his biochemical challenge to evolution, intelligent design, in “Darwin’s Black Box.” Stemming from the ideas of irreducible complexity, Behe explains how an “intelligent designer” designs everything to its purest and simplest form due to the fact that no other theory can explain the origin of all organisms and systems. The primary theory that opposes Behe’s is Darwinism, which Alister McGrath explains through evolutionary thought and natural theology in “Darwinism and the Divine.” An important aspect of intelligent design concerns whether Darwinism should be taught in public schools as a theory or worldview. “An ideology can be defined as a set of ‘shared ideas or beliefs that serve to justify the interests of dominant groups’” (McGrath, 35). By exploring the ideology of evolution and intelligent design, it can be determined whether these views are scientific or just theoretical and whether either has a place in the classroom.

The appearance of Darwin’s theory of evolution was a life-changing discovery with numerous repercussions. “Darwinism” is the name of a scientific theory stemming from its designer, Charles Darwin, whose works “set out the theory of descent with modification through natural selection [...] known as the theory of evolution” (McGrath, 28). McGrath goes on to explain that speaking of “‘Darwinism’ – as opposed to ‘evolutionary biology’ – generally use the term to designate a worldview, rather than a provisional scientific theory that has been developed and modified down the decades” (McGrath, 32).

Behe proves that the Darwinian theory does not account for the molecular basis of life due to its absence from scientific literature all together. He accounts for this by proposing that if these things such as blood clotting and vision exist, but could never be evolved in Darwinian fashion, then their existence must have been intelligently designed. The systems of blood clotting and vision are designed irreducibly complex. Behe defines irreducible complexity by,

A single system composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning. [...] It cannot be produced directly by slight, successive modifications of a precursor system, because any precursor to an irreducibly complex system that is missing a part is by definition nonfunctional. (Behe, 39)

A biological system that is irreducibly complex challenges Darwinian evolution in that natural selection only chooses the systems that are already working, and because these cannot be developed by definition, they must have been created as an integrated unit. This is where Behe inserts the intelligent designer. He proposes that these complex biochemical systems were planned, that “the designer knew what the systems would look like when they were completed, then took steps to bring the systems about” (Behe, 193). He then argues the same argument that is the base of all supporting evidence for most theories: “we cannot know that something has *not* been designed” (Behe, 194). This statement severely weakens his argument due to the fact that most things cannot be disproven once proposed, such as the existence of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. However, who in fact is this intelligent designer? Behe only mentions that we can

conclude something was designed independently of knowing the designer, and our inference on design increases with additional complex descriptions and parts.

Once Behe's proposal of intelligent design is comprehended, there is still that one missing piece of the puzzle: the designer. Following his logical points of what seems to be this supernatural being who knows the complexity of blood clotting enough to design a system with so many juxtaposed parts, one is led to believe that this designer must be God. This seems like the obvious point not only because of the evidence, but also because of the public affirmation of the presence and belief in God, shown in the polls that "90 percent of Americans believe in God" (Behe, 233).

When people dedicate their lives to a specific cause, this loyalty can cause a "conflict of interest with the purpose the institution serves" (Behe, 234). Can we base the teachings of a subject on the evidence used to describe or explain it? Of course we can, and we must, as this is what shows us the validity of the argument. Based on this statement, the strength of Behe's intelligent design argument itself can be questioned, due to his multitudinous metaphors as evidence. The sociological and political factors involved in teaching such controversial subjects are complex—"religious freedom, parental rights, government control of education, and state versus federal rights—are made all the more emotional because the fight is over children" (Behe, 236).

The issue of what can be taught in a classroom boils down to who can decide what children are taught, and what is appropriate for children to know. The range of answers to this question is vast, because many parents believe different things. Should it be that taxpayers who determine whether or not to teach evolution? Democratic theorists agree that "'democracy' must involve processes that permit the results of governance to

reflect the will of ordinary citizens” (Berkman-Plutzer, 9). However, in this case, only the well-informed citizens who have access to many sources of information, and who would know the “various policy options and have the capacity to understand the arguments made on behalf of competing proposals” could be trusted to make the right decisions (Berkman-Plutzer, 10). Science is a complex subject and often eludes the understanding of many. After evaluating the Scopes trial, Walter Lippmann suggested that biologists could only determine the question of what should be taught in biology, since guidance from a school can only come from educators. The evidence that can be found in favor of evolution may only be partially understood by citizens who visit museums or watch documentaries, while scientists can point to the published scientific papers that explain the hard evidence. Due to such a controversial subject matter it does not seem prudent to teach either evolution or intelligent design as fact since both are still under consideration by the scientific community. However, there should be nothing that hinders students’ exposure to these ideas so that they could make intelligent and well-informed decisions on which to believe, and this may lead to future scientific discoveries as students have more time to get involved.

Bibliography

“Darwin’s Black Box” Michael J. Behe

“Darwinism and the Divine” Alister E. McGrath

“Evolution, Creationism, and the Battle to Control America’s Classrooms”
Michael Berkman, and Eric Plutzer