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Panicked Evolutionists: The Stephen Meyer Controversy

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The latest evidence of this panic comes in a controversy that followed a highly specialized article published in an even more specialized scientific journal. Stephen C. Meyer, Director of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, wrote an article accepted for publication in Proceedings of the Biological Society of Washington. The article, entitled "The Origin of Biological Information and the Higher Taxonomic Categories," was published after three independent judges deemed it worthy and ready for publication. The use of such judges is standard operating procedure among "peer-reviewed" academic journals, and is considered the gold standard for academic publication.

The readership for such a journal is incredibly small, and the Biological Society of Washington does not commonly come to the attention of the nation's journalists and the general public. Nevertheless, soon after Dr. Meyer's article appeared, the self-appointed protectors of Darwinism went into full apoplexy. Internet websites and scientific newsletters came alive with outrage and embarrassment, for Dr. Meyer's article suggested that evolution just might not be the best explanation for the development of life forms. The ensuing controversy was greater than might be expected if Dr. Meyer had argued that the world is flat or that hot is cold.

Eugenie C. Scott, Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education, told The Scientist that Dr. Meyer's article came to her attention when members of the Biological Society of Washington contacted her office. "Many members of the society were stunned about the article," she told The Scientist, and she described the article as "recycled material quite common in the intelligent design community." Dr. Scott, a well known and ardent defender of evolutionary theory, called Dr. Meyer's article "substandard science" and argued that the article should never have been published in any scientific journal.

Within days, the Biological Society of Washington, intimidated by the response of the evolutionary defenders, released a statement apologizing for the publication of the article. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, the society's governing council claimed that the article "was published without the prior knowledge of the council." The statement went on to declare: "We have met and determined that all of us would have deemed this paper inappropriate for the pages of the Proceedings." The society's president, Roy W. McDiarmid, a scientist at the U.S. Geological Survey, blamed the article's publication on the journal's previous editor, Richard Sternberg, who now serves as a fellow at the National Center for Biotechnology Information at the National Institute of Health. "My conclusion on this," McDiarmid said, "was that it was a really bad judgment call on the editor's part."

What is it about Dr. Stephen Meyer's paper that has caused such an uproar? Meyer, who holds a Ph.D. from Cambridge University, argued in his paper that the contemporary form of evolutionary theory now dominant in the academy, known as "Neo-Darwinism," fails to account for the development of higher life forms and the complexity of living organisms. Pointing to what evolutionists identify as the "Cambrian explosion," Meyer argued that "the

geologically sudden appearance of many new animal body plans” cannot be accounted for by Darwinian theory, “neo” or otherwise.

Accepting the scientific claim that the Cambrian explosion took place “about 530 million years ago,” Meyer went on to explain that the “remarkable jump in the specified complexity or ‘complex specified information’ [CSI] of the biological world” cannot be explained by evolutionary theory.

The heart of Dr. Meyer’s argument is found in this scientifically-loaded passage: “Neo-Darwinism seeks to explain the origin of new information, form, and structure as a result of selection acting on randomly arising variation at a very low level within the biological hierarchy, mainly, within the genetic text. Yet the major morphological innovations depend on a specificity of arrangement at a much higher level of the organizational hierarchy, a level that DNA alone does not determine. Yet if DNA is not wholly responsible for body plan morphogenesis, then DNA sequences can mutate indefinitely, without regard to realistic probabilistic limits, and still not produce a new body plan. Thus, the mechanism of natural selection acting on random mutations in DNA cannot in principle generate novel body plans, including those that first arose in the Cambrian explosion.”

In simpler terms, the mechanism of natural selection, central to evolutionary theory, cannot possibly account for the development of so many varied and complex life forms simply by mutations in DNA. Rather, some conscious design –thus requiring a Designer–is necessary to explain the emergence of these life forms.

In the remainder of his paper, Meyer attacks the intellectual inadequacies of evolutionary theory and argues for what is now known as the “design Hypothesis.” As he argued, “Conscious and rational agents have, as a part of their powers of purposive intelligence, the capacity to design information-rich parts and to organize those parts into functional information-rich systems and hierarchies.” As he went on to assert, “We know of no other causal entity or process that has this capacity.” In other words, the development of the multitude of higher life forms found on the planet can be explained only by the guidance of a rational agent—a Designer—whose plan is evident in the design.

Meyer’s article was enough to cause hysteria in the evolutionists’ camp. Knowing that their theory lacks intellectual credibility, the evolutionists respond by raising the volume, offering the equivalent of scientific shrieks and screams whenever their cherished theory is criticized—much less in one of their own cherished journals. As Dr. John West, Associate Director of the Discovery Institute explained, “Instead of addressing the paper’s argument or inviting counterarguments or rebuttal, the society has resorted to affirming what amounts to a doctrinal statement in an effort to stifle scientific debate. They’re trying to stop scientific discussion before it even starts.”

When the Biological Society of Washington issued its embarrassing apology for publishing the paper, the organization pledged that arguments for Intelligent Design “will not be addressed in future issues of the Proceedings,” regardless of whether the paper passes peer review.

From the perspective of panicked evolutionists, the Intelligent Design movement represents a formidable adversary and a constant irritant. The defenders of Intelligent Design are undermining evolutionary theory at multiple levels, and they refuse to go away. The panicked evolutionists respond with name-calling, labeling Intelligent Design proponents as “creationists,” thereby hoping to prevent any scientific debate before it starts.

Intelligent Design is not tantamount to the biblical doctrine of creation. Theologically, Intelligent Design falls far short of requiring any affirmation of the doctrine of creation as revealed in the Bible. Nevertheless, it is a useful and important intellectual tool, and a scientific movement with great promise. The real significance of Intelligent Design theory and its related movement is the success with which it undermines the materialistic and naturalistic worldview central to the theory of evolution.

For the Christian believer, the Bible presents the compelling and authoritative case for God’s creation of the cosmos. Specifically, the Bible provides us with the ultimate truth concerning human origins and the special creation of human beings as the creatures made in God’s own image. Thus, though we believe in more than Intelligent Design, we certainly do not believe in less. We should celebrate the confusion and consternation now so evident among the evolutionists. Dr. Stephen Meyer’s article—and the controversy it has spawned—has caught evolutionary scientists with their intellectual pants down.

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