

PE1530/K

Response to the Petition 1530 (Creationism in Schools) submission from Dr Alastair Noble and his Centre for Intelligent Design (C4ID)

10/11/14

Keith Gilmour, Director, Centre for Unintelligent Design:

To begin with, I would like to agree with Dr Noble and C4ID that a clear distinction must be made between Creationism and Intelligent Design. It would, however, be useful to know if Dr Noble subscribes to both. The two are not, as far as I can work out, mutually exclusive.

In his C4ID submission, Dr Noble makes repeated reference to “origins” without stating which origins he is referring to. The origins of the universe? The origins of life? The origins of species?

His C4ID submission states that “Intelligent Design, properly understood, is a minimal commitment to intelligent causation in nature...” Notice that it’s an “in” here, rather than an ‘of’! Intelligent Design (ID) is an attempt to shoehorn an Intelligent Designer into certain scientific enquiries – a ‘God of the gaps’ as opposed to (or as well as) a ‘God of the whole show.’ Notice also that it starts with an unjustified “commitment.” A thought experiment should highlight the problem with this. Imagine I were to walk into an artist’s studio. Lying on the floor is a large canvas covered in splashes of paint. Was this ‘intelligently designed’ by the artist? Or has a nearby shelf collapsed and sent paint tins flying? If I am thinking like a scientist, I start with an open mind ‘not’ with a prior “commitment to intelligent causation.” Just a few lines into the C4ID submission and already we have a clue that Intelligent Design is not science.

Further, God may well be “a legitimate inference from scientific data” (as many scientists believe) but Intelligent Design is neither God nor science. Intelligent Design is a pseudoscientific conspiracy theory. ‘That’ is the reason it should be “discounted in science education.”

C4ID claim that the petition imposes “on science education a philosophical position which excludes, in the exploration of the origin and development of life, any process beyond what is vaguely described as ‘natural’” but then science does look for (and expects) natural explanations. This is also true of history, geography, etc. A non-natural ‘Intelligent Designer’ may well cause floods and take sides in wars but, as there is no evidence for this, History teachers and Geography teachers tend not to waste their pupils’ time on what some may want to call “legitimate inferences.” Is this “viewpoint discrimination and worldview indoctrination”, ‘brainwashing’ and/or ‘intellectual arrogance/intolerance’? Does it ‘limit debate’ and ‘stifle legitimate discourse’?

Also, please note that, according to the C4ID interpretation of the European Code of Human Rights, ‘Creationism’ could and should be taught in our schools as “parents

have the right to have their children educated in line with their religious and philosophical views.” How could this C4ID interpretation exclude the view that the universe was created in six 24-hour days, that the earth is between 6,000 and 10,000 years old, and that humans walked with dinosaurs?

A universe that can pop out of nothing, assemble itself in a way that allows stars and planets to form and “genetic information and conscious life” to emerge on at least one planet may well call for an explanation beyond what is natural but science is looking for natural explanations ‘within’ that universe. Speculations about the non-natural and the supernatural are explored in RME/RMPS – arguments for and against a designer, a first cause, and so on.

Which gaps in our natural world knowledge are C4ID using an ‘Intelligent Designer’ to plug? And what about an Intelligent Planner, Supplier, Provider, Manufacturer, Builder, Distributor, Developer, Engineer, and etc?

The C4ID distinction between “micro” and “macro” evolution is absurd. It is a notion that asks us to believe that tiny variations can add ‘up and up’ but not ‘up and up and up and up’! Darwin was not trying to explain the origin of variation, he was trying to explain the origin of species. When enough tiny differences have added up through many generations, a new species can be said to have emerged. Do C4ID imagine a non-natural or supernatural explanation is required to explain the origin of finches? Would they be happy for children to be told, by their Science teachers, that one “legitimate inference from scientific data” may be that ‘Finches exist because an Intelligent Designer decided to intervene and create them’? In what sense is this not “an alternative to evolution”?

The origin of a particular species is not mere speculation, as the C4ID submission implies. In each case, scientists look for genetic, geological, biological, paleontological, bio-geographical and anatomical evidence.

“Ironically, Intelligent Design is the position which gave rise to modern science in the first place because it gave a basis for the conviction that rational and systematic investigation of nature is a reliable and productive pursuit.”

Not true. Belief in God provided that basis for many scientists in the past and continues to do so for many scientists today. “Intelligent Design” is not God and nor is it a scientific theory. Also, accepting the evidence for evolution does ‘not’ require one to believe that “life and the universe, including conscious thought, are the result of blind and purposeless processes.” Why should lack of evidence for a ‘God of the gaps’ lead one to rule out a ‘God of the whole show’? Do C4ID imagine everything, at every turn, to be sighted and purposeful?

Where is the request for a “protected position which cannot be challenged on the basis of the empirical evidence”?

“How are teachers expected to respond to the inevitable questions from pupils in science about ‘creation’ and ‘intelligent design’ and the limitations of evolutionary theory? By telling them that such discussion is off limits?”

Of course not! As such questions would take us from ‘scientific research seeking (and expecting to find) natural explanations’ into ‘speculation about non-natural/supernatural’ explanations, it is something that pupils can (and do) discuss and debate – at length – in RME/RMPS.

It is hard to see how Creationism and/or Intelligent Design could possibly assist “scientific enquiry” or make science education more “progressive.”

As a teacher of RME/RMPS, I would certainly oppose any petition that sought to exclude “legitimate discussion in science of the ultimate questions posed by the evidence about the origin of the universe and the development of life” but what form should that discussion take? Pupils can draw their own conclusions (one way or another) from “genetic information, sentience, mind and consciousness” without having their science classes turned towards the pseudo-sciences of Creationism and/or Intelligent Design.

Does ‘anyone’ claim that the existence of “genetic information, sentience, mind and consciousness” has all been explained?

“In the background notes, it is argued that no objection is being raised to ‘the discussion of overall belief in God as the ultimate creator’ and ‘the respectable philosophical position that sees the operation of the Universe as a whole as the working of Providence’. This seems to be a clear recognition of the legitimacy of intelligent causation or design for the universe and for life.”

And it’s the difference between a ‘God of the whole show’ and an ID or Creationism ‘God of the gaps’!

C4ID claim that there is evidence “against” evolution and, further, describe evidence for all living things being related (and for complex life forms having developed from the simple creatures that existed billions of years ago) as “sparse and ambiguous.” They also claim that there is a “growing body of doubt about Darwin.” These are false claims. Adding them in to science classes would not be to teach/present evolution “objectively”, it would be to mislead and confuse.

Why should a line from a law professor, who denies evolution, be considered “noteworthy”?

“The essence of this petition seems to be that ‘any theory which holds that natural biological processes cannot account for the history, diversity and complexity of life on earth and therefore rejects the scientific theory of evolution’ cannot be permitted in science classes.”

Again, science is about looking for natural explanations and using reliable evidence. Creationism and Intelligent Design are not scientific theories. We would not waste time on, for example, Climate Change denial in Geography classes – and those deniers are just as good at pointing to a “body of doubt.”

“The question of whether discussion of the origin of these ‘natural biological processes’ can be permitted in science is left unanswered. Did they create themselves

– a scientific and philosophical absurdity – or were they generated in some other non-material way?”

The universe, our earth, and all living things may all owe their ultimate origins to God but that is not a question that is going to be settled in a science class, if at all. Also, is an uncreated God “a scientific and philosophical absurdity”?

As far as I am aware, no scientist claims that the mysteries of “genetic information, sentience, mind and consciousness” have all been answered – or ‘will’ all be answered. Perhaps no road will take us there but this still gives us no reason to head off (even for a little while) down the dead ends of Creationism and Intelligent Design.

“Evolution based on ‘natural biological processes’ is assumed to have solved all these problems...”

By whom?

“ID is strictly an interpretation of the scientific data we have about origins, arguing that there is clear evidence in nature of design.”

In other words, it is an updated version of William Paley’s religious/philosophical ‘Argument from Design’ (1802) with varying degrees of evolution denial added in. It is not science.

“It is based on the scientific principles of design detection such as are deployed in areas such as archaeology, the search for extra-terrestrial life and forensic science. These areas of science operate largely on the principle of making inference to the best explanation about events and causes which cannot be directly observed.”

If this were true, C4ID would be able to tell us which forest fires were started deliberately and which by accident, which deaths were natural/accidental and which premeditated murder, which rocks were chipped and scratched by humans and which by natural phenomena, which canvases feature an action painting and which were inadvertently splashed with paint when a shelf collapsed – and without employing any of the techniques detectives, scientists and art critics are already able to call upon. Unfortunately ID is of no help whatsoever and has added absolutely ‘nothing’ to the store of human knowledge.

According to the C4ID submission, “ID focuses on matters such as the ‘fine-tuning’ of the universe for life, the irreducible complexity of many living systems, and the enormous sophistication of genetic information.”

Dreaming up a ‘science’ or ‘movement’ that focuses on certain things does not, in any way, prove that you have something worthwhile to offer. Looking at the three points cited above: no-one disputes that genetic information is enormously sophisticated; it is not clear that our universe (which may be only one of many) has been finely-tuned; and “irreducible complexity” has been comprehensively debunked.

C4ID assert that non-material information cannot arise only from natural biological processes whilst implying that natural biological processes can arise from a non-

material Intelligent Mind (which was presumably the result of neither). If this sounds confused and inconsistent, this may be because it 'is' confused and inconsistent – two very good reasons 'not' to allow ID into science classes.

C4ID complain that it is “highly misleading” to describe ID as ‘an alternative to evolution’ before admitting that ID disputes the fact that “complex living things emerge from simpler ones by the unguided mechanism of natural selection acting on random mutations.” As before, all they are saying is that tiny differences can add ‘up and up’ but not ‘up and up and up and up.’ That “Some ID proponents” imagine an Intelligent Designer guiding “beneficial mutations in, for example, the malarial parasite” only makes matters worse and it is hardly surprising that many believers regard ID as blasphemous! – A God that won’t stop earthquakes, disease or genocide but ‘will’ assist the malarial parasite?!?

Intelligent Design offers no “legitimate challenge” to evolution and instead encourages pupils to see “an immaterial intelligence at work within the processes of the natural world” every time they encounter something they (and/or we) cannot explain – in other words, to solve a mystery with an even greater mystery, ad infinitum (even where no mystery exists)!

No-one could ever rule out “a priori, the possibility of an intelligent cause in nature” – or ‘of’ nature – but, as stated above, scientists are looking for natural explanations. Science teachers (whether believers, atheists or agnostics) encourage their pupils to do likewise.

No-one is suggesting that evolution “should be given protected status and be beyond criticism” or “beyond challenge.” No-one is suggesting that school pupils should be taught “that the scientific consensus must be accepted without question.” And no-one is suggesting that “dissent must be suppressed.” These are all straw men.

Also, what “controversy” are C4ID referring to? – One of the best-supported theories in science?

And what “fresh evidence” has come from ID and/or Creationism? Any?

The C4ID submission states that ID “is prepared to countenance that there is evidence in nature of intelligent mind.” As before, “in” is the key word here. To scientists who believe in God (e.g. Francis S. Collins, Kenneth R. Miller, Francisco J. Ayala), nature ‘is’ evidence of God – a God that does not have to be shoehorned in at various points as an Intelligent Designer.

The musings of world-renowned philosophers and atheists (on mind and consciousness) – and the debates that flow from them – can be best explored in RME/RMPS.

According to C4ID, it will “confuse students” if science teachers “demonstrate how scientific advances are made through painstaking research, sustained intellectual effort and hard work, and then claim that the vastly more complex structures of life

arose by random naturalistic processes.” They further assert that “This is not just counter-intuitive, but completely at odds with the cause and effect structure of the world.”

C4ID prefer to ignore the obvious problem here. Namely that their ‘Intelligent Designer’ may also be the result of “painstaking research, sustained intellectual effort and hard work.” Ditto the Intelligent Designer of the Intelligent Designer’s Intelligent Designer, and so on, ad infinitum. How much religious and philosophical speculation should science classes be given over to? And, as such big questions are already explored in RME/RMPS, why the pointless duplication?

It is not clear what “complex structures of life” C4ID are referring to. No-one would dispute that a new-born baby is vastly more complex than a zygote. Should this lead us to shoehorn a ‘God of the gaps’ Intelligent Designer in at various points during nine months of pregnancy? Should DNA be treated any differently?

What is “counter-intuitive”? And why should anything be ruled out on those grounds? Much of modern science is counter-intuitive (especially quantum physics) but we’re stuck with that whether we like it or not.

To atheists, God is counter-intuitive. To believers, a godless universe is counter-intuitive. So what? Further, both would appear to be “completely at odds with the cause and effect structure of the world” (as with much in quantum physics). This point alone disproves neither and merely calls to mind Bertrand Russell’s 1927 observation that “cause is not quite what it used to be.”

C4ID conclude their submission with a reference to “The American Experience” – inadvertently reminding us that unjustified scepticism (and outright denial) of evolution have both been actively encouraged, stateside, via dubious tactics that have been devastatingly exposed in court.

Good science education should indeed ‘prepare students to distinguish the data or testable theories of science from philosophical or religious claims that are made in the name of science.’ This is exactly why evolution should be taught sans Intelligent Design (ID) and/or Creationism.

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