

Based on a paper by Kansas Citizens for Science entitled "A Response to the Intelligent Design Network's Proposals to Include 'Intelligent Design' in the Kansas Science Standards"

A Summary of Objections to "Intelligent Design"

The Discovery Institute's "intelligent design" movement is based on two main beliefs: that science embraces the philosophy of Naturalism and that "intelligent design (ID)" is a valid scientific "competing hypothesis" in respect to the theory of evolution. I believe both of these beliefs are wrong.

(Note: Various people contribute to articulating the Discovery Institute's ID philosophy - most notably Phillip Johnson and William Dembski. For convenience, throughout this paper I will refer to the collective group of Discovery Institute fellows and their followers as the "DI.")

From their two main beliefs, the DI concludes that science entails a belief in atheism, that the findings of science have contributed to the moral and cultural decay of society, that the evidence for "design" is censored, and that there are reasons why design should be given consideration in the public school science curricula. These conclusions, being based on false premises, are also wrong.

"Naturalism" and the Nature of Science

The DI believes that science, by limiting itself to "seeking natural explanations for what we observe in the world around us" (Kansas science standards, 2001), inherently embraces philosophical naturalism (or materialism,) the philosophical belief that nature is all there is, and that all phenomena result only from natural causes.

The DI is wrong: science neither embraces nor endorses philosophical Naturalism. Science is purposely limited to seeking natural explanations for observable phenomena. Science does not attempt to offer theological or metaphysical explanations for such phenomena. Neither does science attempt to explain our moral, aesthetic, or spiritual experience: these fall outside the realm of science.

Seeking natural explanations has proven to be highly successful in building a universally accessible body of knowledge about how the world works. Explanations involving non-natural causes cannot be investigated empirically with the tools of science, and have not successfully contributed to science.

Nowhere in the practice or teaching of science is there a commitment to the belief that what science studies is all that exists, or that the methods of science are the only valid human ways of seeking knowledge. Science is not a dogmatic philosophy about either the ultimate nature of the world or the full nature of human beings.

It is true that some individuals within the scientific community have used evolution as a vehicle to promote a true "philosophical Naturalism." However, it is equally true that many scientists who accept the evidence for evolution are also committed and outspoken theists. In particular, many Christians accept the position of "theistic evolution," whereby God, being sovereignly present in all moments, has guided the evolution of life just like he guides the lives of Christians every day.

Many groups of people, atheists and many forms of theists, see our current scientific understanding of the universe as supporting their philosophical position. This itself is evidence that science does not inherently imply any particular metaphysics. Science itself is neutral on issues of the ultimate nature of reality.

Design

The DI claims that natural processes are not sufficient to have produced some features of life, and that an additional type of cause, "design," the action of a mind or intelligence, is necessary to scientifically explain those features. The DI speaks as if "design" is an obvious and accepted alternative to natural causation, and that a scientific "theory of intelligent design (ID)" exists to compete with the theory of evolution. Neither of these claims is true.

There is no theory of intelligent design. First, ID proposes no testable hypotheses to explain how the alleged design happens - there is no proposed mechanism for design. Second, although the DI claims that the identity of the designer is unknown, leaders of the ID movement make it clear the designer is God. In fact, both William Dembski and Phillip Johnson have identified the Word of God (Logos) as the source and mechanism of "intelligent design."

ID does not explain how to determine precisely when design has taken place, or how to distinguish between what has been designed and what has evolved. ID writers have proposed vague philosophical concepts for use in detecting design ("irreducible complexity" and "complex specified information"), but they offer no empirical means for applying these concepts to actual reality, and thus have not offered any way to test the validity of their ideas.

There is no ID research. There are no published scientific papers on ID-based experiments that test any specific aspect of the theory of ID nor produce any new, usable knowledge. There just isn't any "theory of ID."

The theory of evolution is truly a scientific theory: "a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world that incorporates observations, inferences, and tested hypotheses." (Kansas science standards, 2001) ID, on the other hand, is not even a hypothesis because it makes no testable claims about the world. It is non-empirical speculation.

The "evidence for design"

The DI continually calls ID a "competing hypothesis," but this is a claim without merit. The theory of evolution and ID are not remotely equal in their status as scientific explanations.

ID relies on gaps in our knowledge for its "evidence," pointing to aspects of the natural world which currently have inadequate scientific explanation. However, since science has a reliable history of narrowing such gaps, this type of design argument is forced to continually emphasize new areas of uncertainty. Dependence on such negative evidence does not establish the claim that a supernatural intelligence must be considered in scientific explanations.

The DI claims that design, and evidence for it, is "censored" because of science's adherence to Naturalism. The truth is that the propositions of ID and the purported evidence for it have been rejected, not censored, because ID offers neither useful hypotheses nor productive research.

The claim of "censorship" is unfounded. The repeated use of the word, much like that of "competing hypothesis," is a rhetorical tactic meant to elevate ID to a status that it does not have. It is the nature of the scientific enterprise to evaluate new ideas. At this point, ID has made little progress in being accepted as valid science. To acknowledge this lack of acceptance by excluding ID from the science standards is not censorship.

Religious and Cultural Implications

The DI believes that science, by embracing philosophical naturalism, is consistent with, and therefore promotes, atheism, while design is consistent with and promotes theism. They conclude that science's adherence to Naturalism has had "devastating" moral and cultural consequences. The DI is wrong about both of these points.

As explained above, science does not embrace philosophical naturalism. Science does not declare that other types of knowledge are invalid, and it also does not presume to add to those other types of knowledge.

All people reach conclusions about morals, values, and spiritual reality by drawing on such non-scientific sources as religious faith, philosophical belief, and personal choice. They may integrate scientific knowledge into their larger belief system, but scientific knowledge itself forces no inherent moral or spiritual conclusions.

The DI incorrectly concludes that, in the interest of fairness, a theistic “theory of ID” is needed to balance the atheism they believe is implied by evolution. The appeal to fairness here is misplaced. Religion and science are complementary ways of looking at the universe, not antagonistic ways of knowing between which people must choose. True fairness involves acknowledging and honoring the interrelated complexity of human knowledge, which demands both scientific and other types of knowledge.

The DI explicitly attempts to drive a wedge between scientific and religious understanding. If anything is unfair, it is the DI’s insistence that accepting the evidence for evolution is incompatible with both a belief in God and a commitment to moral standards.

Science is religiously neutral. It is the DI that inserts theistic considerations into science. The DI places too great a value on scientific explanations as an ultimate arbiter of truth. They make the very mistake they claim others are making: trying to find empirical explanations for truths which must be reached in other than scientific ways. It is they who act like “philosophical Naturalists” as they seek to establish an empirical basis for all aspects of the world, including our beliefs about God and morality.

Constitutional Issues

The DI claims that Constitutional legal issues arise because the theory of evolution promotes atheism and the theory of ID promotes theism. However, as we have shown, the theory of evolution does not promote atheism and has no inherent religious implications. Therefore, there are no Constitutional issues of the kind claimed by the DI.

The true Constitutional issue here is that ID, if fully articulated to include the nature of the Designer and the undetectable nature of His interventions, is clearly a religious belief, and thus has no place in the science curriculum.

Conclusion: ID in School?

Public school science curricula should reflect science that is considered essential and fundamental worldwide. ID does not meet this criteria.

It is not the responsibility of the state or local Boards of Education, or other legislative bodies, to decide what is and is not verified science. If the ideas put forward by the ID movement ever become an essential part of mainstream science, then they may earn a place in the public school science curriculum. At this time, however, ID’s quarrel is with the scientific community, not with public education.

The ID movement’s incorrect beliefs about science and its relationship to religious and cultural issues have no place in the public school science standards. It is wrong for the ID movement to try to use the public school system as the vehicle to establish these beliefs.

The ID movement should not be allowed to use the public school curriculum as a means of bypassing the accepted ways for establishing scientific knowledge.