

Bill Cobern

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ID Hysteria says more about some people's freudian "ID" than about science

One of the dumbest things I have ever heard from an otherwise intelligent person came not quite a decade ago and from astronomer Alan Hale commenting on the Heaven's Gate mass suicide (Hale, 1997). It is silly enough that he thought that his personal encounters with a few psychotic speculators regarding the Hale-Bopp comet represented a commonly held view of comets; but no, we learn from Alan Hale that the real reason 39 people in the Heaven's Gate cult committed suicide is that they were ignorant and superstitious. They apparently didn't know that after all a comet is nothing more than a cosmic "dirty snowball," as Fred Whipple once quipped. Obviously science education failed these people or they would have known that there was no mother ship lurking behind the Hale-Bopp comet ready to receive their suicide-emancipated souls. Contra Hale, all it takes is an ounce of commonsense to see that the Heaven's Gate followers were a deeply disturbed group of people whose mental health had nothing whatsoever to do with knowledge of the natural sciences. And if they *were* ignorant of the natural sciences, their ignorance was no worse than Hale's apparent ignorance of human nature and the limitations of science.

The plot of the children's story *Chicken Little* is a recurring one with story of Alan Hale and the Heaven's Gate cult being only one of many recent appearances. The sky is falling. The sky is falling. It is a story of hysteria mongering-- hysteria evoked by the imagination. In this case, Hale issues dire warnings about "ignorance and superstition" evoked by his imagined sense of scientific supremacy. He reminds us of the importance of science and its vulnerability by quoting one of Carl Sagan's subtitles: "Science as a Candle in the Dark." The Hale-Bopp comet won't be back for a very long time to remind us of our scientific illiteracy; but no matter, the *spectre* of ignorance and superstition takes many forms, for example, Intelligent Design, or simply, ID.

Chicken Little is on the loose again—at least in the USA.¹ ID-hysteria can be found in the major media organs of the science and science education communities, in the press, and of course in court decisions. To paraphrase Barry Goldwater, it would seem that "Extremism in the defense of science is no vice. Tolerance in the face of ID is no virtue." How is it that the community that is supposed to epitomize rationality can act so irrationally?

I propose that there are two causes for such irrationality but I should preface my comments with a brief clarification of my central assertion. The science and science education communities over react to perceived threats from anti- science and pseudo-science. We can agree that ID does not belong in the school science curriculum along

side evolution without also hysterically concluding that ID is tantamount to a Staph infection that will kill the patient unless quickly contained and eradicated.

As to the causes, the first and less worrisome cause for the Chicken Little syndrome is merely confused thinking. For example, Hugh Gauch's (in press) interesting paper on science and worldviews highlights the internal contradiction that plagues policy at the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

The AAAS says that there are “beliefs that— by their very nature— cannot be proved or disproved (such as the existence of supernatural powers and beings, or the true purposes of life)” (AAAS 1989, p. 26). So, science is neutral as regards both theism and atheism.

However, in another position paper, the AAAS claims that science supports a particular worldview, that “There can be no understanding of science without understanding change and the fact that we live in a directional, although not teleological, universe” (AAAS 1990, p. xiii; also see p. 24). Now “not teleological” just means purposeless. Since it is common knowledge that the world's great monotheisms— Judaism, Christianity, and Islam— view the world and life as purposeful, this pronouncement of a purposeless universe is tantamount to an endorsement of atheism. (Gauch, in press)

The AAAS has yet to address this contradiction, this confused thinking (a point to which I shall return), however, the National Association of Biology Teachers (NABT) facing a similar contradiction did take action. The 1995 NABT “Statement on the Teaching of Evolution” originally described evolution as an “unsupervised” and “impersonal” process (see Scott, 1997). From a narrow, strictly technical, scientific point of view, the terms were correctly used. It was pointed out to the NABT that nonetheless most readers would interpret these words metaphysically; hence, they were inappropriate for a science education policy statement. The NABT agreed and subsequently amended its statement on evolution by dropping these terms.

The much more worrisome cause for the Chicken Little syndrome has to do with the clashing of worldviews precipitated by conflating natural science with metaphysical naturalism. We refer to the “natural” sciences to denote the study of nature and natural processes without reference to a deity or deities, souls or spirits, immaterial essences, and the like. This is “naturalism” and, as noted by Paul de Vries (1986), naturalism can be applied methodologically or metaphysically. For example, if the terms “unsupervised” and “impersonal” are applied to the process of natural selection and the intent is narrow, strictly technical, scientific point of view then naturalism is being applied methodologically. In contrast, consider the perspective of Richard Dawkins who wrote in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986, p. 6) what could not be a more explicit confession of metaphysical naturalism:

An atheist before Darwin could have said, following Hume: “I have no explanation for complex biological design. All I know is that God isn't a good explanation, so we must wait and hope that somebody comes up with a better

one.” I can't help feeling that such a position, though logically sound, would have left one feeling pretty unsatisfied, and that although atheism might have been logically tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.

Scientific practice, however, is amenable to various worldviews, including orthodox Christianity, in so far as naturalistic refers only to a methodology. As noted by John Hedley Brooke (1991), the notion of chronic warfare between science and Christianity is a serious distortion of historical fact. Christians practice science at the highest levels with no cognitive dissonance (see for example Barr, 2003; Collins, 2006; and Polkinghorne, 1996) though they are rarely advocates of unorthodox scientific ideas such as ID. Moreover, rank and file Christians are enthusiastic supporters of science and technology even as they embrace such concepts as ID (Cobern & Loving, 2004; Balmer, 2001). For example, most Christians can embrace a clinical description of cell division and human growth *in utero* and still recite the Psalmic praise “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb” (Psalm 139:13 NIV).² None of this means that ID should be accorded a place in the school science curriculum, but neither is the embrace of ID the harbinger of scientific oblivion.

The embrace of metaphysical naturalism has a rather different outlook. Both methodological and metaphysical naturalists may agree that ID is not science, but for the metaphysical naturalist ID is much worse than merely not being science. ID is a lethal infection that attacks the most fundamental presuppositions of his naturalistic faith. Hence the fusillades leveled by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Dennis Dennett against ID and even the slightest deviation from the naturalistic faith. The clashing of worldviews is thus certain given that no theist (whether Christian, Jewish or Muslim) can cede science to the metaphysical naturalists.

The metaphysical naturalists might be ignored except that the science and science education communities are far too tolerant of metaphysical naturalism. Why hasn't the AAAS addressed the blatant contradiction of metaphysics in its science education policy documents? As much as I support the work of AAAS, it is difficult not to conclude that the editors have a tacit commitment to metaphysical naturalism. Far worse, however, are the editors at *Scientific American* who seem to have fully embraced metaphysical naturalism as essential to science. In 1990, *Scientific American* sought to hire a new writer for its “Amateur Scientist” column. Forrest M. Mims, who for 20 years had written columns for more than “60 magazines and newspapers, including National Geographic World, a sister publication of National Geographic, Science Digest and The American Journal of Physics,” (NYT, 1990) applied for the job. He wrote several example columns that were all judged to be very good. Nonetheless, Mims was denied the job when he happened to mention that on scientific grounds he could not accept the theory of evolution. He was a creationist though he was not an active participant in the creationist movement nor had he ever written about the subject. The mere fact that *Scientific American* might be associated with a creationist was enough to deny Mims the job in spite of his otherwise exemplary qualifications for the position.

One might have some sympathy for the editors' position at *Scientific American* if it were not for the fact that *Scientific American* runs a column called the "Skeptic" written by Michael Shermer. Shermer is also the publisher of *Skeptic* magazine and director of the Skeptics Society. His anti-theism credentials are impeccable! He is without a doubt a metaphysical naturalist and he uses his *Scientific American* column to support his own naturalistic faith while denigrating others. In a 2002 column, Shermer likened creationists to Holocaust deniers— no explanation. He just dropped the comment into his column where he later concludes:

It appears to me (whether rightly or wrongly) that direct arguments against Christianity and theism produce hardly any effect on the public; and freedom of thought is best promoted by the gradual illumination of men's minds which follows from the advance of science. (Shermer, 2002)

There you have it. The "illumination" of our minds by science will free us from religion. Shermer of course is free to believe whatever nonsense he wishes. My point is that a major scientific journal intended for wide readership thus endorses metaphysical naturalism. It is bad enough that the editors of *Scientific American* contradict efforts by many in the science and science education communities to show that the scientific establishment, and evolutionists in particular, are *not* antagonistic to religion, especially Christianity. Worse, in the four years since this *Scientific American* column appeared, none of the major science and education organizations (including AAAS, NABT, NARST, and NSTA) have uttered so much as a syllable in protest of such flagrant scientism.³ Yet all have been strident in their denunciations of ID.

Some will argue that ID draws attention because its proponents attempt to introduce ID into the school science curriculum where the same is not true of Shermer and other proponents of metaphysical naturalism. Setting aside the fact that *Scientific American* with its Skeptic column is frequently found in school libraries and hence a component of the hidden curriculum, this argument misunderstands the dynamics of public opinion. To be concerned about ID incursions into the school science curriculum while at the same time discounting high profile appearances of scientism in the scientific press is folly. Picture the foolish person attempting to tamp out a fire with his right hand while holding an open container of gasoline in his left hand. We all know what will happen— and the same will happen with current efforts to "tamp out" ID. It is pointless to address the fire until you get rid of the gasoline. Shermer et al inflame the public opinion that leads to the support of ID and other such movements.

Of course, we can't "get rid" of Shermer and his ilk though in my less democratic moments, the muzzling of all extremists strikes me as a good idea. But we can vigorously protest the damage they do to science and science education. We can endorse Derek Hodson's recent editorial on the need to "prioritize learning *about* science" (2006, p. 293) but even more his concern that scientific literacy include *understanding the limitations of science*. That's a lesson that Alan Hale, Michael Shermer and their ilk either missed or failed. Indeed, rather than allowing ID and such movements to rivet our attention, we should bear in mind that the science education community has already been reasonably

successful at fending off inappropriate incursions into the school science curriculum. The greater threat to good science education today is the unchecked challenge of metaphysical naturalism, in both explicit and implicit forms, that inflames public opinion and fuels “alternative science” movements.

What worries me is that the increasingly secularized power brokers of the West will insist that the presuppositions of their freudian Id really are the essential pillars of science. If that is our future... well, I don't think the sky is going to fall; but I do wonder how long “science for all” can remain a plausible goal if science is increasingly formulated in ways alien to the beliefs of most people.

NOTES

¹ ID and creationism are often thought of as a uniquely American phenomenon. There may be some truth to this, however, creationist organizations can be found in numerous countries. Indeed, the upcoming 2007 annual meeting of the AAAS will host a special section on “Anti-evolutionism in Europe.”

² I owe this thought to a comment posted by Merv <mrb22667@kansas.net> on the American Scientific Affiliation listserv.

³ The 2002 column was not unique. Shermer has expressed the same views on other occasions with protest from the science and science education communities similarly absent.

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