

Intelligent Design: The Threat in the UK

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In his final address as President of the Royal Society, Lord May warned of many dangers that lay in wait for us in the years to come (1). One of these was Intelligent Design (ID), the suggestion that intelligent intervention is required to explain the origin of life, and the challenge it has presented to the contemporary teaching of science.

Since May's warning, there has come increasing evidence that Intelligent Design is gaining platform in science lessons in the UK. In 2006, a poll commissioned by the BBC revealed that we were living in a country where 41% of adults believe that ID should be taught in science classrooms, outnumbering the 40% who are against it (2). Later that year, a UK think-tank called Truth in Science sent out what have been branded 'creationist teaching materials' to every secondary school in the UK and within two months claimed their use in 59 schools nationwide (3).

Truth in Science justified sending out these resource packs by quoting the National Curriculum which requires pupils to be taught "how scientific controversies can arise from different ways of interpreting empirical evidence (for example, Darwin's theory of evolution)" (4). In their opinion, students "should be given fair and accurate presentations of alternative views" such as intelligent design (5).

Though this may seem innocuous, at the heart of the ID controversy is the idea that ID provides a genuine challenge to evolution, the well-established scientific explanation for the origin of species. In particular, ID would first have to be accepted as a scientific theory before it could be judged on its ability to explain the evidence at hand.

Its acceptance as a scientific theory is a complex matter for the philosophy of science since it attributes natural consequences to supernatural forces. Since it is a philosophical issue, and not directly a scientific one, the debate itself has no place in science classrooms. Without this being resolved, ID has no way of providing a valid "scientific controversy" as required by the National Curriculum to be taught as Science.

Though seemingly coming to the right conclusion in excluding ID from science, the philosophical problem is an important example of the wider controversies between science and religion. May also warns in his speech that in modern times "for many, the response is to retreat from complexity and difficulty by embracing the darkness of fundamentalist unreason" (1). He uses this to allude to ID proponents in the US, calling them "a growing network of fundamentalist foundations and lobby groups" (1).

Yet if we are to step up and face this unreason, we do need to understand what is happening; without this issue being debated in lessons, students will be far more poorly equipped.

The forum for this discussion is necessarily not Science for two reasons: the National Curriculum currently seems to rule it out (as previously shown), and political sensitivities surrounding it will presumably mean that it is unlikely to be included in the near future. One proposal from the Rev Jan Ainsworth, Head of Education for the Church of England, following her rejection of ID teaching in Science lessons, is for its inclusion instead in the History of Science (6). Another option already in practice is the Theory of Knowledge course, a compulsory part of the International Baccalaureate (7).

Science education is changing; with the recent introduction of a new GCSE, aimed at increasing breadth and accessibility, has come important concepts such as evaluation and risk perception (8). It would seem that a complimentary understanding of the philosophy of science is equally called for – a call the government has yet to answer with the appropriate interdisciplinary forum. Armed with these new tools, scientists of the next generation could well be ready to tackle the threats of tomorrow's world.

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