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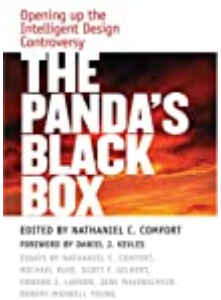

Nathaniel C. Comfort, ed. *The Panda's Black Box: Opening up the Intelligent Design Controversy.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. xv + 165 pp. $20.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-8599-0.

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The Many (Non-scientific) Dimensions of Intelligent Design

The loudest cry in the debate over Intelligent Design (ID) seems, at first blush, very reasonable. "Teach the controversy," the chorus goes. After all, any fair-minded scientist, let alone school board, should not censor an active scientific debate. Science is tentative by nature, a collection of "theories," and what harm can come from teaching the controversy? But, as you might expect, given the reaction from the scientific establishment, the controversy is not that straightforward. The debate over ID is not a scientific one, but a debate about the cultural, social, and political tensions between science and religion.

In the curiously titled, *The Panda's Black Box*, Nathaniel C. Comfort aligned an expert cast to explore a variety of dimensions of the debate over ID. The title is drawn from the notorious high school biology textbook, *Of Pandas and People* (1989), which is sympathetic toward ID. (However, it could as easily refer to Stephan Jay Gould's *The Panda's Thumb* [1992] or Michael Behe's *Darwin's Black Box* [1998]. It seems that pandas and black boxes are common fare in these debates.) Comfort, along with Michael Ruse, Scott F. Gilbert, Edward J. Larson, Jane Maienshein, and Robert Maxwell Young take great care in illuminating the context from which the current debate emerges. They are also, in my opinion, accurate in not pitting science against religion, but evolution against ID. Like so many debates in the public sphere, the extreme positions receive the lion's share of exposure at the expense of more moderate views; controversy, after all, sells papers. None of the essays support an ardent form of antireligious sentiment, as found with Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, nor do they defend ID. The latter, perhaps, is more troubling. This is not because the ID position is misrepresented. It is simply because if a topic is worthy of debate, both sides should be adequately represented.

The response to this concern comes in Gilbert's chapter, which ties the book together. There is a danger, as he explains, with even debating ID. The danger is that once it is debated in a scientific context, it becomes *de facto* science. To be sure, there are active debates within evolutionary biology, even some that are directed toward the role that natural selection plays, but there are no paradigmatic controversies. Darwinian evolution is not on shaky

ground; it is one of the most successful theories in terms of explanatory power and experimental verification that has ever been. Furthermore, the inability of biologists to explain the evolutionary history of particular mechanisms, which is the lynchpin of ID, should not count as evidence against evolutionary theory, nor should it count as support of ID. In contrast, ID offers no active research agenda. There are no publications defending ID in respected and established scientific journals. There are no predictive or explanatory elements of ID. Hence, the omission of debating the scientific merits of ID seems reasonable, or at least reasonably argued for.

Ruse and Larson discuss historical aspects of the debate. Ruse examines the history of the argument for design, which originated in ancient Greece. Accordingly, ID is not a new argument, but merely a new twist on an old argument. And, as Ruse notes, this new form of the argument is no more successful than its predecessors. What gave rise to the new form of the argument for design? As Larson explains, as religion has become expunged from the classroom, it has forced creationists to package their message in a seemingly scientific guise. At first, scientific creationism purported to use science to explain biblical events as well as explain away any views contrary to those beliefs, such as an old Earth. When that failed as a result of the Supreme Court ruling in *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987), a new strategy was required. As Larson argues, ID is simply creationism repackaged to reflect the current legal and political climate.

Even if ID is not a scientific doctrine, can there be any harm in teaching it, or at least offering resources for students to explore these issues more carefully? As Maienshein explains, there is a lot on the line. Compromising the integrity of science can erode the intellectual foundations of our society and can have harmful practical effects. Put succinctly, Maienshein gives the examples of "bugs and drugs." Evolution can offer insights into the origin and evolution of diseases and, more important, how and how not to combat diseases. Furthermore, evolution can give us reason to preserve biodiversity (as one way to preserve biological resources that can be used to combat disease). In short, the debate over ID is not inconsequential bickering between worldviews, but it a debate over the position science holds within our society.

One point stressed throughout the volume is that there can be dissatisfaction with the social status afforded science, but this does not mean that evolutionary theory, or any particular scientific theory, is in doubt. As Comfort notes, "one can sympathize with the cultural critiques of science without advocating Intelligent Design–or demonizing science" (p. 10). Along these lines, Young, in the final chapter, discusses the "metaphysical malaise" that often accompanies Darwinian evolution. He is uncomfortable with the use of key terms in evolutionary theory that, according to Young, do not have the proper metaphysical grounding. His argument claims that such teleological notions as "design," "selection," and "function" point toward something, which is not there. Young claims, "I think [the] opposition to the adequacy of the scientific explanation of the earth, life and human nature are symptoms of a legitimate malaise, one that merits some sympathy and which the scientific and philosophical communities need to address and, if possible, ameliorate" (p. 113).

I have never felt the metaphysical anxiety to which Young points. The anthropocentric evolutionary terms mentioned above have not caused any confusion on the scientists' part. In fact, an anthropocentric term, such as "natural selection," has a sufficiently robust reductionist explanation in the form of R. A. Fisher's "fundamental theorem of natural selection," which omits the use of any anthropocentric language.[1] More important, I do not feel that the metaphysical commitments, or lack thereof, are driving the ID debate. As many authors in the volume note, there does not need to be any tension between science and religion caused by Darwinian evolution, as long as either side takes a reasonably moderate position. There is a long history of science and religion coexisting, and, at times, even mutually reinforcing one another. Evolution, after all, is a theory about the evolution of species; it does not explicitly or implicitly provide meaning to human life.

This volume accomplishes what it sets out to do, which is to explore the broader context in which the ID debate takes place. By only looking more narrowly at the purported scientific controversy of ID, the most valuable lessons from the debate are lost. "Teach the controversy," but as this book suggests, teach it in a history or philosophy class.

Note

[1]. R. A. Fisher, *The Genetical Theory of Natural Selection* (Claredon: Oxford University Press, 1930), p. 35

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