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Science, religion, politics

With the recent election results in Kansas and Delaware, debate is intensifying over teaching

evolution and "intelligent design" in public schools. Much is at stake, from scientific integrity to philosophical baggage. And the stakes are more intense than they should be because of how our county delivers educational services



Evolution refers to two different but related areas within science. On one hand, evolution is a fully observable mechanism by which life evolves in modest increments over time. In this manifestation, evolution is an indisputable scientific theory, empirically supported on empirical grounds. On the other hand, evolution refers to a largely unobservable process by which today's observable range of life supposedly developed from the earliest days on the earth. In this case, evolution is a hypothesis, proposing that the development of life is an unguided process. As such, it uses pieces of scientific explanation to construct a compelling story — as a proposed interpretation of history.

"Intelligent Design" fully accepts evolution in the former sense. But it proposes the alternative hypothesis to the development of life — that the development of life was guided process, caused by an intelligent designer of some sort. This, too, is intuitively compelling. When you see something complicated and meaningful (Mount Rushmore, for example), it's easy to infer it was designed.

So the question is whether the apparent design is reality or merely an illusion. This essay can't be long enough to address the question in detail. Suffice it to say here that scientific endeavors routinely use evidence of "intelligent design" in many accepted contexts, from code-breaking to the search for life outside our universe (are the data in patterns or random?) to arson and murder investigations (accident or intentional?) to archaeology (is the rock a tool or merely a stone?).

Scientific considerations aside, this issue provokes controversy because the dominant provider of education has strong monopoly power, and most consumers can't avoid its dictates. Let's see why this is the overarching problem and how we could avoid it.

Imagine that government decides food is important, so everyone can eat free at a government-run restaurant in their neighborhood. The subsequent government bureaucracy, the restaurant manager and a local "Food Board" determine the menu. Passionate constituents try to influence their choices. Proponents of the Atkins Diet clamor for "all meat." Vegetarians argue for "all veggies." Others want a range of options to match their various tastes and preferences.

This is a recipe for turmoil. For exam-

ple, if the Atkins people were politically persuasive, the vegetarians would be deeply offended and the others would not be wholly pleased, either.

The solution is as easy as the problem is silly. The government would allow different types of restaurants to arise and compete, based on consumer preferences. Better yet, the government would get out of the business of operating restaurants and leave it to the private sector, intervening only as necessary to help the needy afford food through vouchers or other subsidies to the individual.

The same goes for education. If one group wants its children taught sex education with cucumbers and condoms in the fifth grade, that should be their prerogative. But that shouldn't be forced on others. Another contentious example is school prayer. Some parents want a prayer to Jesus Christ. Many want a prayer to the lukewarm deity of civil religion, while others want no prayer at all, or prayer to other gods.

By providing options, school choice deals with such issues far more effectively than a government entity with significant monopoly power.

Who doesn't want freedom for others? Well, elites and theocrats don't. They're content to wage battle within the monopoly, hoping to capture the process and force their views on others.

More importantly, any special interest group that enjoys monopoly power is uninterested in such freedom. All producers prefer as little competition as possible, and the education market is no different. For self-proclaimed liberals, this should be an easy decision, given their penchant for individual choice and support for the poor. Instead, they are often captive to the dominant interest group.

Conservatives generally support competition and the private sector. But they aren't passionate enough in this context to carry the day. Libertarians favor breaking up government monopolies, but they are not yet numerous enough to make a difference. Science, religion and politics. Real wars in their name. Let's put down our weapons and give all American parents the freedom to educate their children as they see fit. ■

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