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THE KEN HAM–BILL NYE CREATION DEBATE: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY

by Casey Luskin

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One night in early February, I was browsing Internet news sites hoping to alleviate writer's block. Upon visiting CNN.com, I discovered that shortly the site would be live-streaming the "creation debate" between Ken Ham and Bill Nye.¹ "This looks intriguing," I thought, "and it's probably better than watching highlights of Conan O'Brien." So I clicked on the stream and waited for the debate to begin.

For those not already aware, Ken Ham is the president of Answers in Genesis, the group behind the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, built to promote a young-earth creationist interpretation of the Bible. Bill Nye "the Science Guy" is well known for his eponymous children's science show, broadcast on PBS during the 1990s, and numerous other appearances on science-focused television. Nye is less known for his atheistic activism. In 2010 he was named "Humanist of the Year" by the American Humanist Association, and during his acceptance speech, he explained his "skeptical," Sagan-esque views: "I'm insignificant....I am just another speck of sand. And the earth really in the cosmic scheme of things is another speck. And the sun an unremarkable star. Nothing special about the sun. The sun is another speck. And the galaxy is a speck. I'm a speck on a speck orbiting a speck among other specks among still other specks in the middle of specklessness. I suck."²

Nye also made headlines in 2012, after declaring that parents who "deny" evolution should not instill in their children their beliefs about origins. "If you want to deny evolution and live in your world that's completely inconsistent with everything we observe in the universe, that's fine," Nye said. "But don't make your kids do it because we need them. We need scientifically literate voters and taxpayers for the future. We need engineers that can build stuff, solve problems."³

As the debate began, I had low expectations, but by its conclusion, I was dismayed at the huge opportunity that was lost.

The ID Advantage. While watching the debate, I was reminded about what attracted me in the first place to the approach to investigating origins represented by the theory of intelligent design (ID).

True, Ken Ham discussed some science, but almost all of his arguments tried to support a young-earth viewpoint. Since he's not a scientist, a great portion of his arguments amounted—over and over again—to “Because the Bible says so.” Nye's main argument was “Because the evidence says so,” and he cited much reasonable evidence for an old earth. While Ham made some effective points that one can do good science without accepting Darwinian evolution, the compelling scientific evidence for design in nature got skipped over.

Because the debate focused on the age of the earth, and pitted a young-earth creationist against a materialist, no one mentioned the possibility of holding an “old-earth” scientific viewpoint that supports intelligent design—and challenges materialism. Tragically, *Nye the materialist was the one defending Big Bang cosmology, but viewers never heard that the Big Bang is one of the best arguments for intelligent design ever offered by science.*

Many viewers who have shared their feelings with me about the debate walked away thinking, “Ken Ham has the Bible; Bill Nye has science.” Some Christians are satisfied with that. Other Christians, who don't feel that accepting the Bible requires belief in a young earth, will feel that their views weren't represented. Debate watchers won't realize there are other possible ways to interpret Genesis, such as the framework hypothesis recently expounded by Lee Irons,⁴ or more historical “old-earth” interpretations of Genesis, such as those advocated by Reasons to Believe.⁵

Most importantly, however, skeptics won't budge an inch. Why? Because Ham's main argument amounted to “Because the Bible says so,” and skeptics don't take the Bible as an authority. They need empirical evidence.

This is precisely why I prefer scientific evidence-based approaches to origins such as ID. Skeptics who say, “Show me the evidence” are challenged with empirical data because ID argues from the evidence for design in nature. In a debate where people want to know what the scientific evidence says, that moves everyone in the right direction.

I know Ken Ham means well, and as a Christian, I'm always glad when the gospel is preached. But given that millions of people have reportedly watched the debate, it's regrettable that the powerful evidence for design in nature was hardly discussed. A huge opportunity to reach skeptics was missed.

What Could Have Been. Bill Nye is an indisputably gifted science communicator, but I suspect he's unfamiliar with the many scientific challenges to the neo-Darwinian paradigm.⁶ Indeed, he rarely defended Darwinism during the debate. When expressing the standard view that “evolution is a process that adds complexity through natural selection,” a debater familiar with these issues could have shown the audience that an ID-based view of life is superior to a Darwinian one.

In another rare instance where biological evolution came up, Nye cited *Tiktaalik* as a “fish-lizard” that is a fulfilled “prediction” of evolution. Nye is apparently unaware that *Tiktaalik* isn't lizard-like at all, or that its fins are entirely fish-like.⁷ He's probably also unaware that the so-called evolutionary “prediction” that *Tiktaalik* fulfilled went

belly-up after scientists found tracks of true tetrapods with digits some 18 million years before *Tiktaalik* in the fossil record.⁸

At one point, Nye displayed a slide crammed with photos of hominid skulls, as if somehow this demonstrated something about human evolution. In actuality, there is a distinct break in the fossil record between human-like and ape-like fossils, and skull sizes through time make a poor argument for the gradual evolution of humans.⁹

In one of the few times intelligent design was mentioned, Nye said nature is “inconsistent with a top-down view” of ID. He appears unaware that the growing field of systems biology uses precisely this “top-down” approach.¹⁰ As a recent paper coauthored by Paul Davies observes, “The unique informational narrative of living systems suggests that life may be characterized by context-dependent causal influences, and in particular, that top-down (or downward) causation—where higher-levels influence and constrain the dynamics of lower-levels in organizational hierarchies—may be a major contributor to the hierarchal structure of living systems.”¹¹

Likewise, Cambrian explosion expert James Valentine notes that the fossil record’s “first appearance of living phyla, classes, and orders can best be described...as ‘from the top down.’”¹² Indeed, a recent paper in *Cellular and Molecular Life Sciences* maintains that a “holistic” approach to biology reveals the “irreducible organisational complexity” of the cell.¹³

Twenty-first century biology is fundamentally incompatible with the “bottom-up” approach of neo-Darwinism, and requires a goal-directed cause that can explain the integrated, “top-down,” “holistic,” and “irreducible organisational complexity” of life. That cause is intelligent design, but the Ham–Nye debate told viewers almost nothing about this viewpoint.

A Receptive Audience. Soon after the debate, I published a retrospective at Discovery Institute’s news site, Evolution News and Views (ENV).¹⁴ I mention this only because the positive response to that commentary provides an encouraging ending to this story.

That piece was the first ENV article that truly went “viral.” In the ID-evolution debate, “viral” doesn’t mean ten million hits and a reality TV show. But to date, it has received over 6,000 likes and 25,000 shares on Facebook. Now, I don’t even own a Facebook account, and I’m not the type who roams the Internet hoping to feel validated by “friends.” But the immediate and overwhelmingly enthusiastic response to an ID perspective on the Ham–Nye debate was encouraging, and it shows the ID-approach resonates strongly with the public.

People hunger for compelling scientific arguments that can encourage their own faith and persuade skeptical friends. While the young-earth viewpoint satisfies some, many Christians seek sound, *strictly* scientific approaches that are both supported by mainstream scientific discoveries and friendly toward Christian beliefs. In that regard, ID offers Christians the best of both worlds: unlike young earth creationism, ID accepts the best evidence offered by mainstream science, and unlike theistic evolution, ID is consistent with orthodox Christian theology.

True, ID has apologetic limits: it's a scientific theory that only holds that some aspects of nature are best explained by an intelligent cause rather than apparently undirected causes such as natural selection. If one desires to take a friend or colleague to Christ on the cross, ID is insufficient. But if one seeks convincing scientific arguments that the universe and life require an intelligent designer, then, as ID's motto says, all we must do is follow the evidence. The Ham–Nye debate won't cover this evidence, but since the public seems eager to hear it, the task of informing them shouldn't be too difficult. — *Casey Luskin*

Casey Luskin is an attorney with graduate degrees in science and law. He is research coordinator for the Discovery Institute, and cofounded the Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness (IDEA) Center.

NOTES

- 1 The debate can be watched in full at <http://debatelive.org/>.
- 2 "Bill Nye Speaks at the 2010 AHA Conference: Part 3/3" (June 6, 2010), <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S4dZWbFs8T0>.
- 3 See Casey Luskin, "Bill Nye the Intolerant Science Guy" (August 27, 2012), http://www.evolutionnews.org/2012/08/bill_nye_the_in_1063641.html.
- 4 Lee Irons, "The Framework Interpretation of the Days of Creation," *Christian Research Journal* 35, 1 (2012), <http://www.equip.org/articles/the-framework-interpretation-of-the-days-of-creation/>.
- 5 See Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001).
- 6 See Stephen Meyer, *Darwin's Doubt: The Explosive Origin of Animal Life and the Case for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2013).
- 7 See Casey Luskin, "Tiktaalik roseae: Where's the Wrist?" (July 14, 2008), http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/07/tiktaalik_roseae_wheres_the_wr008921.html; Casey Luskin, "An 'Ulnare' and an 'Intermedium' a Wrist Do Not Make" (August 1, 2008), http://www.evolutionnews.org/2008/08/an_ulnare_and_an_intermedium_a009651.html.
- 8 Philippe Janvier and Gaël Clément, "Muddy Tetrapod Origins," *Nature* 463 (January 7, 2010): 40–41; Rex Dalton, "Discovery Pushes Back Date of First Four-legged Animal," *Nature News* (January 6, 2010).
- 9 See Douglas Axe, Ann Gauger, and Casey Luskin, *Science and Human Origins* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2012).
- 10 Hiroaki Kitano, "Systems Biology: A Brief Overview," *Science* 295 (March 1, 2002): 1662–64.
- 11 Sara Imari Walker and Paul Davies, "The Algorithmic Origins of Life," *Journal of the Royal Society Interface* 10 (2012): 20120869.
- 12 James Valentine, "Late Precambrian Bilaterians: Grades and Clades," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 91 (July 1994): 6751–57.
- 13 Georgi Muskhelishvili and Andrew Travers, "Integration of Syntactic and Semantic Properties of the DNA Code Reveals Chromosomes as Thermodynamic Machines Converting Energy into Information," *Cellular and Molecular Life Sciences* 70 (December 2013): 4555–67.
- 14 Casey Luskin, "The Ham–Nye Creation Debate: A Huge Missed Opportunity" (February 4, 2014), http://www.evolutionnews.org/2014/02/the_ham-nye_deb081911.html.