

On The Definition of Science: A debate between Socrates and Hector Dawkins

By James Hoskins

As a fairly reasonable person, I am repeatedly astonished by dogmatists who voice their opinions on *amoral* issues so loudly and adamantly, that they seem to imply a *moral* indignation toward anyone who would disagree, thereby encouraging the discrimination of those people of differing views. As a Philosophy student, I often enjoy imagining said dogmatists locked in a room with Socrates; the master of interrogation and debate. My latest fantasy involved Socrates questioning the archetype of the philosophical materialist, whom I will call Hector Dawkins, on the definition of science and the justification of Guillermo Gonzalez' tenure denial from Iowa State University. Hector Dawkins is a man who believes religion is the bane of human existence, that believers in the supernatural are ignorant or insane, and that anything other than Darwinian Evolution is pseudoscience. I fear such a person would not fare well in a debate with Socrates. And so I offer this lighthearted piece of fiction as a brief snapshot of what that dialogue might look like.

Socrates: I say, Hector, did you hear about Guillermo Gonzalez being denied tenure at Iowa State? It seems like quite the ordeal. As far as I can tell, the man seems more than qualified for tenure approval.

Hector: I don't think so Socrates. The man is a proponent of Intelligent Design. That is a major flaw in my opinion. How can he call himself a scientist when he promotes creationist pseudoscience! I'd vote against him.

Socrates: Really? You would vote against this man, who by all other accounts seems more than qualified for tenure, because he believes in a theory that you claim is not scientific?

Hector: Absolutely.

Socrates: Well then, if you would deny him tenure because he promotes, what you say, is *not* science, then you must be quite confident that you know what *is* science!

Hector: Certainly.

Socrates: For if you were the least bit unclear on what science is, then you could not justify denying a qualified man a job based on what science is not, for that would appear to be petty discrimination. And I know you to be above such disgraceful and juvenile behavior.

Hector: Of course.

Socrates: Then tell me, dear Hector, what is Science? For I do not have the same confidence as you, and therefore could not make such a difficult decision as to deny this man tenure based on a definition that I am unsure of. It would require a piety that I do not have.

Hector: Dear God, you're not going to make me define piety are you?!

Socrates: No, of course not. Our discussion is about the definition of Science.

Hector: Okay, good! Well, first of all, Intelligent Design theory does not square with Darwinian evolution, or the overall consensus of scientists.

Socrates: So, something is science or not based on whether it agrees with Evolution?

Hector: In a way, yes.

Socrates: I'm confused. It is my understanding that Evolution is an example of a scientific theory. But you cannot judge one example to be pseudoscience because it disagrees with an alternate example. If I asked you to define religion, you could not say that Islam is pseudo religion because it disagrees with Christianity. For that would be to define religion based on one example. But an example is not the same thing as a definition. A Christian might say he does not believe Islam to be true because it disagrees with the Christian worldview, but he could not say that Islam is not religion. And so, an Evolutionist might say he does not believe Intelligent Design to be true because it disagrees with the Darwinian worldview, but he could not say that Intelligent Design is not science based on that difference alone. If you were to hear of a case where an overqualified Muslim was denied tenure by his predominantly Christian colleagues in the Religious Studies department, with the justification being that, due to him being a Muslim, he is a promoter of pseudo religion and therefore not qualified to be on staff, would you not see it as a clear-cut case of discrimination?

Hector: I would indeed, Socrates.

Socrates: Then you cannot dismiss Gonzalez as a promoter of pseudoscience simply because his view disagrees with Evolution, even if you have taken Evolution on as your personal worldview. For that would be no different than religious bigotry. And I know you to be far more open-minded than that Hector, for you have openly and publicly condemned such zealots.

Hector: Why, yes of course, Socrates. But don't you think there's something wrong with a theory if the overwhelming majority of scientists disagree with it?

Socrates: There very well may be something wrong with Intelligent Design theory, I do not know yet, but that's quite different from saying it is not science. Are you suggesting that science is defined by whatever the consensus says? Are you

proposing that I believe something because the majority of other people believe it? I thought you called yourself a free thinker.

Hector: Yes, I am Socrates. No, I am not suggesting that you believe something based on consensus alone.

Socrates: Then please enlighten me, Hector. You have still not answered my original question as to what science is.

Hector: I would say that Science is the search for truth.

Socrates: Ah, now we're getting somewhere! And how does the definition you just gave exclude Intelligent Design theory?

Hector: Well, because ID posits a Creator God, therefore it is religion, not science.

Socrates: You are mistaken. Intelligent Design theory does not mention a God of any sort. It simply concludes that certain aspects of the universe are better explained as the product of intelligence, rather than chance and necessity.

Hector: Socrates, have you been duped by the ID proponents? If you looked into it at all, you would see that the overwhelming majority of ID-ists are Christians. They are being dishonest when they say they are not promoting religion.

Socrates: Interesting. Hector, you are an atheist and also an advocate of Darwinian evolution. So, when you teach Evolution are you promoting atheism?

Hector: No, just science.

Socrates: But Darwinian evolution is compatible with your personal belief of atheism.

Hector: But that does not mean I'm promoting atheism.

Socrates: Nor does it mean that a Christian ID proponent is promoting religion simply because ID happens to be compatible with his beliefs. An ID *theorist* may say he believes in the Christian God, but the *theory* of ID itself does not say that. It makes no mention of any God.

Hector: Okay, I see your point. But I've heard ID-ists voice their desire for the U.S. to become more Christian and that they wish to combat atheistic views.

Socrates: Hector, you have said similar things. You've publicly stated that you wish for religious belief to be eradicated or at least quarantined, and you wish to combat religious views. Surely you are intelligent enough to be able to decipher when someone is stating personal desires and when someone is making a scientific argument. If you can decipher it in your own actions, then you can decipher it in

others. It seems your problem with Intelligent Design is more with the personal beliefs of its advocates than with the theory itself.

Hector: No, my problem is with the theory because it is not scientific!

Socrates: You keep saying that, but you have not defined Science in such a way as to justifiably exclude ID.

Hector: Science is the search for causes. It can only deal with natural things. Intelligent Design posits a God, which by definition is outside nature and therefore outside science.

Socrates: Intelligent Design also searches for causes. It simply concludes that some causes are intelligent. Again, ID, the *theory*, does not posit a God. It simply posits intelligence and the intelligence is not necessarily outside nature.

Hector: Oh, give me a break! An 'intelligence' that designed life or the universe? Everyone knows that means God!

Socrates: So you are rejecting Intelligent Design theory not because it is unscientific, but because it has theistic implications?

Hector: No, no, that's not right. It's *not* science. Science must be restricted to methodological naturalism. ID falls outside that boundary.

Socrates: Well, then Science cannot also be the search for truth. If Science is restricted to methodological naturalism then a more accurate definition would be: Science is the search for exclusively materialistic theories of the world. That is much more narrow and agenda driven than simply "the search for truth."

Hector: No, I still believe that Science is the search for truth, I'm just having trouble explaining how ID is unscientific.

Socrates: Perhaps you are having trouble because ID is in fact a valid scientific theory, regardless of whether it is true or not. The problem is that you are trying to reject it *a priori*. It cannot be done, except by arbitrary and dogmatic means. If you want to reject ID you must engage its arguments and falsify it empirically, not avoid the debate entirely.

Hector: But that's already been done. Why do we need to rehash 150 years of scientific evidence for Darwin's theory? If some imbecile tried to deny the law of gravity, no reputable scientist would need to waste his time in debate because gravity is an established law. It is the same with Evolution.

Socrates: I understand the point you are trying to make, but your analogy is flawed. No one can deny the existence of the phenomena we call gravity because it is

observable. The same as no one can deny the existence of say, human DNA or the bacterial flagellum because they are observable. The dispute is over the *cause* of these things - how they came about - not whether or not they exist or operate presently. If a growing number of credentialed scientists started questioning, not the phenomena of gravity itself, but the way in which gravity works – the *cause* of the phenomena – then the consensus of scientists would indeed have to address this concern, especially if the dissenting scientists were offering carefully reasoned arguments supported by empirical data. It is the same with Evolution. No one can deny that things change and evolve through time. That is presently observable. The dispute is concerning the *mechanism* of change; the *cause*. Darwinists insist the mechanism of evolutionary change is blind, random, and unintelligent. Moreover, some of them insist such a mechanism properly explains the existence, not only of all biological complexity, but of the entire universe, thus adopting Darwinism as a worldview. Intelligent Design proponents doubt that a blind, random, and unintelligent mechanism adequately explains the entire world and all of the complex life forms in it. They conclude that some things are better explained as the product of an *intelligent* cause, rather than a non-intelligent one. Such a view can only be dismissed as unscientific if one adopts a narrow definition of Science that excludes intelligent causes; which would, in turn, mean that Science is not the search for truth. Such a definition would also consign valid scientific disciplines such as archeology, cryptography, and forensic science into the category of ‘mystical pseudoscience’ simply because they are open to the conclusion of intelligent causes. Hector, I’m afraid you are at an impasse. You can define Science as the search for truth, which would include ID as a valid scientific theory, thereby refuting your own justification for denying Mr. Gonzalez tenure. Or you can arbitrarily and dogmatically define Science as the search for only non-intelligent causes, which would seem to limit Science as a discipline much more than anyone has feared ID would.

Hector: I respect your opinion Socrates, because....well, you’re freakin’ Socrates! But you’re kind of old and you’re not a scientist, so I don’t really expect you to understand the issue fully.

Socrates: Son, if I were a bit younger, I might take offense to that comment you just made. However, since I was also young and foolish once, and seeing how you are not interested in seeing the argument through to its conclusion, I’ll leave you with this: Philosophy comes prior to Science in history, and it comes prior to it logically. The definition of Science is not a scientific question. It is a philosophical one. Therefore, I am just as qualified as you are to participate in this discussion. As a scientist, you owe quite a bit to many scientists and philosophers throughout history who had no problem with teleological views of the world. But as long as you continue to dogmatically and arbitrarily exclude teleological theories from Science, you will be perceived by the public as arbitrary and dogmatic. As long as you continue to evade debate with *ad hominem* arguments and rhetoric, the more you will lose the confidence of the people and build for yourself a reputation of prejudice and intolerance. And the

more the intellectual empire of materialistic Science continues to expand her territories into areas of thought, such as Philosophy and Religion, discriminating against skeptics of her dogma as if they were heretics, the more she will embitter the people whose freedom she has usurped. And a backlash is inevitable. Sadly, when any belief system has reached that point, then it is too late. For when a person is oppressed for simply doubting the established dogma is when good people are left with a bad taste in their mouth....the taste of hemlock.