



The Perils of Digital Dialogue

S. Joshua Swamidass 

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/digital-dialogue/>

In his response to *The Genealogical Adam* at the Dabar Conference, Jack Collins cited an insightful blog by Jon Garvey on Original Sin, as if it was a journal article. I have been wondering about the significance of this footnote citation for two months.

One of the strange realities of the conversation between theology and science is that **the most substantive dialogue takes place in digital spaces**. Scholarly work often ends up entwined with public engagement. Key steps forward are often made in digital dialogue, immediately micropublished unofficially online. Forum threads, news letters, and blog posts can all become important artifacts in the ongoing conversation. Interesting ideas can hit the conversation immediately, without any filter. Peer review is real time, and part of the dialogue. It is through public comments on a blog post, for example, that new knowledge about population genetics was uncovered.

In many ways, this is exciting, as everyone can contribute. The scholarly work that is spawned is democratized, and its formation is transparently out in the open. Digital dialogue may be the best way towards consensus and understanding. There are, nonetheless, important **perils** to digital dialogue we are facing, and this bears some consideration.

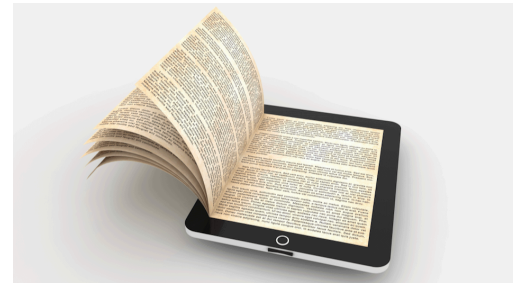
Mistakes Are High Stakes

In this environment, it is often unclear which are the settled and unsettled positions. It is often unclear what is official and unofficial. Comments made in one place or another can be taken to mean much more than they were originally meant. Much conflict can ensue.

Confusion might arise as casual comments in online forums might be understood to carry more weight than originally intended.

For example, **I created an unintentional mess last week with a blog post here**. In attempt to publicly workout who we are at Peaceful Science, I proposed the term “post-evangelical” in reference to another organization. Big mistake. Whatever real dynamics I might have referenced, that term was not received well. In the interest of comity, I withdrew the post and am genuinely sorry for the conflict it stirred up. I am still looking for a good term to describe the differences in our approach, but that was clearly the wrong way to explain it. I am genuinely sorry for the conflict that stirred up.

I wonder if this sort contentious misunderstanding might be more likely where the line blurs between official and unofficial positions, between settled and unsettled thoughts. Going forward I do hope to



be good at retracting this quickly, and clarifying where I have made mistakes, I have done in the past and am doing right here. **No matter what, public online communication is going to be an ongoing risk for everyone.**

Seeing this risk, some will withdraw from meaningful digital dialogue all together, but that would be a tragedy. Some of the best examples of real progress and dialogue are taking place in online conversations right now. **Instead of withdrawing, I hope we can be a community of grace**, that will tolerate and forgive missteps in public. Everyone takes a risk when they communicate in public, but it might be the only way we can all move forward in such a fragmented and interdisciplinary context.

Important Artifacts Un-Citable

A larger problem, however, is the difficulty citing online artifacts of real significance. **The problem is growing as key advances this last year were made in forum threads, not peer-reviewed articles.** I anticipate this trend will continue. All the important findings eventually need to be published in peer-reviewed journals, but the forum threads and blog posts are independently important contributions. They should be cited both now and in the future, but how?

This is an important challenge facing everyone in this area. To give an important example from a peer-reviewed paper published last week:

1. A blog post by Robert Carter made an important point about population genetics.
2. Responding to the blog, a forum thread by another scientist and myself responded to his point with experimental results.
3. In response to the forum thread, Robert Carter and John Sanford (and others) published a peer-reviewed article at a conference last week.

This was an interesting and illuminating exchange. Real dialogue took place, and it took all our understanding forward. It is an example of the type of substantive dialogue that should be rewarded and encouraged. Right now, however, real dialogue like this risks being lost and forgotten because it is un-citable.

The final paper references the forum thread. However, online forums in particular, and URLs in general, are ephemeral. Blog software changes, remapping URLs of cited articles. After the fact edits can evaporate key points of discussion. Forum threads can also vanish. **URLs are not a stable or recommended way of citing digital resources.**

DOIs A Partial Solution?

When ephemeral artifacts have become so important, we need better identifier than URLs. Perhaps stable [digital object identifiers \(DOIs\)](#) could be helpful here. With that in mind, we recently started using [Zenodo](#) to archive [key digital artifacts I am to citing](#) in an upcoming book on genealogical ancestry. For example, look at these entries:

1. The [Sapientia article](#) from June 2017, where I first proposed the idea of [The Genealogical Adam](#). DOI [10.5281/zenodo.1328264](#)
2. The comments on a blog, where several scientists examined commonly stated claims of population genetics, finding that an ancient bottleneck of “humans” might not contradict the evidence (514 pages!). DOI [10.5281/zenodo.1323939](#)
3. My technical summary of the salient points I learned from these blog comments: [Heliocentric Certainty Against a Bottleneck of Two?](#) DOI [10.5281/zenodo.1328247](#)
4. One of the best dialogues we have had with another organization, took place on their forum. Here, we explored last November the science and theology of universal ancestry. Several key points were engaged in depths, and I hope for more conversations like this with them. DOI [10.5281/zenodo.1328255](#)
5. A dialogue with Winston Ewert on his new paper on the *Peaceful Science* Forum. DOI [10.5281/zenodo.1318762](#)

A DOI can be assigned to any forum thread or blog at *Peaceful Science*. They include a static PDF file that serve as the definitive reference. The DOI record, also, can link back to the original URL from where the stable version was uploaded. To encourage citation, scholars can request registration of a DOI for anything on our blog or forum, and we will do our best to accommodate you. [The full list of Peaceful Science DOIs will always be visible at Zenodo](#). For highly

related work on other sites, such as Jon Garvey’s blog post, we can also register DOI’s if the author’s allow us.

I hope, also, that key publishers like *The Creation Project* and *Perspectives on Science and the Christian Faith* would consider assigning DOIs to their articles too. This might be a good way to ensure a more stable and citable record of the science and theology conversation. In time, I hope to release a definitive list of DOIs for the conversation this last year on genetic and genealogical ancestry, for citation by scholars engaging this work.

The value of this currently un-citable conversation might grow as time goes on. In particular, we are looking forward to [regularly hosting conversations](#) with leading scholars. This coming week, for example, [Greg Cootsona will be discussing his book and the ASA workshop on Reworking the Science of Adam](#). I hope you can join us. Some of these conversations may end up important in unexpected ways.

What Are We Becoming?

We are still figuring out important things about the identity of *Peaceful Science*. This is unavoidably going to require exploration, in language and imagery, of how we situation ourselves in the wider conversation.

There was a surprising amount of controversy that erupted from my blog post last week. Some found it very helpful, but some were offended. To calm things down, I am glad to have withdrawn that blog post. I emphasize again that we are still figuring things out at *Peaceful Science*. We do not have all the answers. We are really curious, nonetheless about the questions. Maybe your voice will shape us as we grow into whatever this might become.

[Come join us sometime on our forum](#). Help us do better.

References

<https://www.ivpress.com/Media/Default/Downloads/Excerpts-and-Samples/5263-Appendixes.pdf>
<http://potiphar.jongarvey.co.uk/2012/05/17/irenaeus-and-others-on-original-sin>
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.1328247>
https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/t/_/935
<https://creation.com/historical-adam-biologos>
<https://discourse.biologos.org/t/can-someone-explain-like-im-5-yo-whats-wrong-with-this-refutation-of-biologos/5657/16>
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/icc_proceedings/vol8/iss1/8
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_object_identifier
<http://zenodo.org>

<https://zenodo.org/communities/peaceful-science/?page=1&size=20>
<http://henrycenter.tiu.edu/2017/06/a-genealogical-adam-and-eve-in-evolution>
<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/genealogical-rapprochement/>
https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/t/_/61
https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/t/_/728
<https://zenodo.org/communities/peaceful-science>
<https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/c/hours>
https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/t/_/591
https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/t/_/591/3