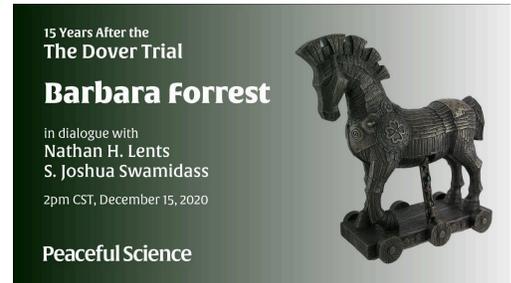




Barbara Forrest: The Trojan Horse at Dover

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<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/barbara-forrest-trojan-horse-at-dover/>



Barbara Forest is a philosopher. She was one of the witnesses in the Dover Trial. In the lead up to the trial, she co-authored *Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design*. Their thesis was that Intelligent Design (ID) was a trojan horse for injecting creationism back into high school textbooks.

I had a chance to sit down with her last month. It was a privilege to interview yet another witness at the trial. There is much about this exchange that has left me in thought.

I will unpack just one point of constructive back and forth between the two of us. *Is Intelligent Design science or not?*

Barbara and I had several points of common ground. We are both critics of Intelligent Design. Though she is an atheist, Barbara emphasized she was not anti-religious, and wanted to make space for religious beliefs. I agree, also, that several of the peculiar idiosyncrasies of ID are because it was architected to separate itself from creationism, for the purpose of anti-evolution arguments into high school science classrooms.

But what is ID? Barbara Forest argues that ID is nothing but sectarian religious beliefs, not science, a trojan horse for creationism. Leading ID proponents are religious, and they do find religious significance in their scientific work.

I'm not so sure. Consider the many scientists who are religious. Many of us do indeed find religious significance in our work.

I find religious significance in the scientific work I do to understand and reduce adverse drug reactions important; it is part of how I am loving my neighbor. My personal motivations and beliefs do not invalidate my scientific work, do they? Of course not.

Leading ID proponents are religious, and they do find religious significance in their scientific work. In my view, this does not make ID intrinsically religious. Science does not, ultimately, care about our personal beliefs. Scientists like Michael Behe and Doug Axe have made several purely scientific claims about how biology works. Often these claims are directly testable with evidence too.

For example, Axe's argues that enzymes are very vanishingly rare in protein sequence space. That is a direct and testable claim that should not depend on personal religious beliefs. Axe goes on to make inferences to "design," using this as a critical starting point. Of course, he also does find religious significance in this. He believes, as do I, that the "designer" is actually God. But that is his personal views, and not necessarily his scientific claim.

ID is also a large and diverse movement. Certainly, some of its leaders were angling to get creationist arguments into public science curriculums. Not everyone in the movement, however, had this goal. It doesn't seem fair, or accurate, to reduce such a diverse group down to a single dimension.

Barbara sees this different than do I, and I have been wondering about why exactly this is the case. Others have been musing about this alongside me, [including Faizal Ali, a denizen of the *Peaceful Science* forum](#). He writes,

One thing that emerges from these interviews is that those involved on both sides of the conflict were expecting the issue of ID to come before the courts eventually. In fact, the Discovery Institute was actively seeking a school district that would provide a test case to support their position that ID was distinct from creationism and, therefore, not subject to the Constitutional limitations that prohibited the teaching of creationism.

This seems right to me. Faizal goes on to point a key and surprising point for many of us that are scientists,

It's important to understand that this case did not depend solely on demonstrating that ID is not supported by good scientific evidence. There are no laws in the U.S. that ban the teaching of bad science. The plaintiffs had to demonstrate that the policies adopted by the school board amounted to an endorsement of a particular religious view.

Here Faizal is summarizing some [helpful clarifications from a lawyer on the forum](#). Demonstrating that ID was just "bad science" might not have been enough, from a legal point of view.

In the end, I'm sure ID is more complex, and more interesting, than merely a religious belief.

Let's return to Doug Axe. Where does he go wrong? In the assessment of many of us that are scientists, [many of his scientific claims not seem his analysis is consistent with the evidence](#). Simply put, this looks like "bad science" to us.

Of course, Axe disagrees with us, and that disagreement is okay. But this disagreement can be sorted out, at least in principle, in a scientific exchange. We can engage many components of ID in purely scientific terms.

There is religious significance to the debate, of course. At some point, ID has to extend *beyond* science to make its case. That shouldn't

bother anyone in the end. Unless putting ID in science classrooms is the aim, it should not matter if ID is classified as “science” or not.

We are past the anniversary now, but I am still thinking about Dover. Perhaps, if we move past the text book wars, we might find better ways to engage with science together.

There is still much to learn from the history here. As for me, I’m still remembering what happened, and I am still reflecting.

References

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