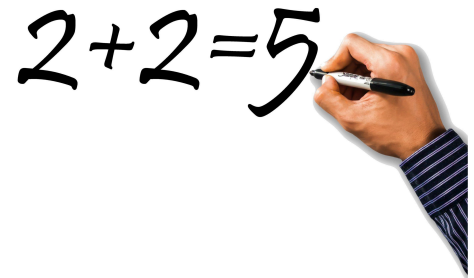




# How will you manage mistakes in your book?

S. Joshua Swamidass

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/managing-mistakes/>



## How will you manage mistakes in your book?

Science is not merely a set of conclusions; it is also a process of refining our understanding by ruthlessly subjecting our ideas to peer-review within the scientific community. Science progresses as we willingly subject our ideas to scrutiny, root out errors in our work, quickly fixing and publicly retracting them as they are uncovered. Good scientists willingly give ground.

Humility, practiced in this way, is one of the demands of science. Perhaps paradoxically, scientific reputation grows as we willingly give ground, as we concede we were wrong.

Perhaps counterintuitively, the best scientists are bold enough to make claims that could be false, and often are proven false. We judge them not because their speculation is always right, but because great scientists are humble to data and the discourse community of science. When errors are published, good scientists correct the record.

We expect to make mistakes, but scientific culture demands we manage our mistakes with integrity.

## A Matter of Integrity and Trust

With the publication of my book, *The Genealogical Adam and Eve*, I feel acute responsibility to manage my errors with integrity.

First, my book is meant to be a scientific resource to the public, many of whom are not trained to adjudicate scientific claims for themselves. For this book to be a trustworthy resource, I am obligated to correct any mistakes I make quickly, publicly, and honestly. Even when not technically in error, I want to ensure the underlying science is clearly understood.

Second, this book identifies and corrects errors made by other scientists. Over the last couple years, moreover, I have publicly identified errors in the work of other scientists. It is a matter of personal integrity and fairness that I am above reproach in how I manage my own errors.

Third, in response to this book, some scientists have already admitted error in their work. This serves the common good, sets the record straight, and is evidence of integrity. As a matter of human reciprocity, in respect for their example, I am obligated to do the same.

In the end, being right is not good enough; we also have to be trusted. To be trusted, we need to be trustworthy. Perhaps we will find no errors that substantially change the conclusions of my book. I want to prepare, nonetheless, for large mistakes. I want to be willing to acknowledge my errors and do the hard work of correcting them. How we manage errors is one way to practice trustworthiness.

## Principles and Processes

There will be legitimate disagreement about many points I make in my book. Beyond normal disagreements, I also expect I made *mistakes*, and perhaps some of these mistakes are serious. I've written 265 pages of text on a complex topic; I am sure mistakes were made. With this in mind, I wanted a process for correcting my errors that is guided by trustworthy principles. This is what I arrived at in the end:

1. **Welcoming correction.** In place of an adversarial approach to identifying errors, we invite anyone and everyone to help us identify and submit errors or mistakes they find in the book. Please use the form we created for this purpose. I am very grateful for your help.
2. **Public and rapid errata.** We will correct errors quickly and publicly, noting them in an errata document that is freely available and visible to everyone.



Darrel Falk admirably writes in his endorsement,

In this book, Joshua Swamidass effectively demonstrates that people like me, stuck in a specific genetic paradigm, were wrong."

3. **Corrections to the print edition.** These errata are submitted to my publisher, who will correct them in future printings of the book as they deem feasible.
4. **Oversight by others.** Every error report submitted online is visible to several scientists other than me. We have a large network of scholars I will engage with as needed when questions are beyond our expertise.
5. **Transparency.** Where scientific debate is substantial, we will conduct these debates in public on our forum, where any scientist will be invited to join in and the public can watch.
6. **Public explanation where needed.** Particularly significant errors, those that cause severe misunderstanding in public, will be addressed as prominently as possible, for example, with a blog post explaining my error in detail.
7. **Acknowledgement and gratefulness.** Those that point out errors will be acknowledge by name in the errata document. I am particularly grateful to those that identify any serious errors, and will acknowledge them specifically for the serious errors they identify.

For those that can identify an important error, I am truly grateful. How can you help me?

1. **Report errors through the errata form.** To reduce duplicate reports, please check the errata document to ensure the error you are reporting was not already corrected.
2. **Follow through on serious errors.** If the errors you identified are serious, resubmit them with a note if they are not corrected in the errata within two months. We will reassess the report and explain our decision.

With transparency in mind, we may make the disputed errata reports public. Scientists who want to participate in reviewing errata reports can contact me as well. I welcome oversight from trustworthy scientists, and I am grateful to the many scientists that already support my work this way.

## The Errors Found So Far

So far we have received dozens of reports, and dozens of errata are reported. Thankfully, so far, most these errors are typos and copyediting errors. I am prone to typos, so I expect many more will be discovered. There is, however, one serious error identified and corrected already, and another possible error we are investigating further.

The **first error**, serious and clearly a mistake, is found on page 23. I made a false claim about the contents of the book in relation to mainstream science. This is a critical mistake to fix because, as a scientist, I do not want to misrepresent that domain and scope of the scientific consensus.

| Nothing in this book is outside mainstream science.

This is not true. For example, the book includes theology, and theology is not part of science. Scientists might legitimately object, so I am glad I caught this error myself. This sentence is corrected to:

| Everything in this book is *consistent* with mainstream science.

My book puts science into dialogue with other fields, including history, philosophy, exegesis, and theology. These other fields are not science, even though they are valid and important, with their own communities of discourse. Each field extends beyond science in its own legitimate ways. Many of my claims, also, extend beyond science, even though they are consistent with science.

A **second error** is not adjudicated yet, and less serious, but important nonetheless. I use the terms *monophylogeny* versus *polyphylogeny* as nearly synonyms with *monophyletic* versus *polyphyletic*. The Catholic philosopher, Kenneth Kemp, tells me that my usage is not quite right, but I am not sure. Certainly, the two sets of words have slightly different meanings. I am consulting with philosophers of biology to sort out if my usage of these terms was valid, or if a correction or clarification is warranted.

## A Civic Practice of Science

Some might see most these corrections as minor, and not worth publicly noting. After all, this book already went through a brutal peer-review process. In the end, I earned the unqualified endorsements of a diverse scholarly community, including secular scientists. My book is about questions of origins, and this doesn't affect, for example, the safety of patients in a clinical study. Many others in the origins debate do not ever retract or fix their errors. So why should I?

Perhaps this is true, but I want to do better.

My scientific reputation was built by ruthlessly subjecting my work to peer-review, correcting my errors as soon as I found them. I bring the same honesty and rigor to my work in the public square.

The primary difference is that my errors in this book are visible to a larger community than most my work, so corrections to these errors need to be just as visible. The stakes are higher when engaging the public, the potential for misunderstanding and deception is greater, so I see that the standards for rigor and honesty are higher.

Science, after all, is not merely a set of conclusions. It is a process. The genius of science is that it is self correcting. Scientists usually accept the scientific consensus, but we are also rewarded for successfully challenging the consensus. Scientists are admired for major advances in our understanding, but we are also admired for abandoning our failed theories and acknowledging our mistakes.

As for me, embracing the scientific culture, I aim to quickly correct my own mistakes as publicly as I make them.

## References

<https://mitpress.mit.edu/books/instinct-truth>  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse\\_community](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Discourse_community)

<https://peacefulscience.org/books/genealogical-adam-eve/>  
<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/defense-tim-keller/>

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/three-stories-on-adam/>  
[https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/t/\\_/5237](https://discourse.peacefulscience.org/t/_/5237)  
<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/humility-of-our-scholars/>  
<https://peacefulscience.org/pdf/genealogical-adam-eve-errata-jan2021.pdf>  
<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/front-porch/>

<https://peacefulscience.org/articles/publisher-report/>  
<https://www.ivpress.com/the-genealogical-adam-and-eve>  
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2019/10/04/upcoming-book-leaves-scientific-possibility-existence-adam-eve-column/3826195002>