

Research deals blow to intelligent design

Now is not a good time to believe in intelligent design. A few weeks ago, Judge John E. Jones's ruling in the Dover case put the legal lid on ID's coffin. Now it looks like science will pound in the nails.

Just last week, in Science magazine, biologists discovered what IDers said was impossible: An evolutionary pathway for an "essentially complex" system.

One of the great challenges to evolution is that of specificity. When we see a lock and a key that fits it perfectly, it's legitimate to ask how something like that could come about naturally. The lock can't be opened without the key, and the key exists only to open the lock. Present someone with a lock and key, and they'll immediately conclude that someone designed them with a purpose.

Darwin understood this problem well. He wrote, "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed which could not possibly have been formed by numerous successive slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down." IDers believe they have found many such examples, and demand that scientists prove them wrong. That's what happened last week.

The Science article talks about a biological lock and key system that's a real puzzler. The key fits the lock perfectly, the lock can only be opened by the key, but the key didn't evolve until 450 million years after the lock! How is that possible? At first glance, it seems miraculous that something would sit around for that long doing nothing, and then ultimately awaken once the perfect key had formed. It seems like predestiny.

First glances, however, are often wrong. Particularly when it comes to things that work over millions of years.

In this case, scientists were able to identify an ancestor lock that was opened by a couple of ancestor keys. About 440 million years ago, the lock (a gene) duplicated on the chromosome. Using two simple molecular mutations, tested in the laboratory, they showed how one of the new locks was serving one function while being "preadapted" for another due to its evolutionary history. When a new key evolved several hundred million years later, the lock was ready, but its function changed due to its increased ability to promote the survival of its host or-



OPINION
BARRY FAGIN
Contributing columnist

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Think of it this way: Imagine a lock with millions of tumblers, and a key with millions of points. The settings of the tumblers and the way the key is carved are constantly changing over time, sometimes doing one thing, sometimes doing something else, depending on what promotes survival. With those kind of locks and keys, we can get very complex systems that emerge gradually, over time. They're not really like locks and keys that humans make at all. The analogy is wrong.

What do ID followers have to say about all this? Dr. Michael Behe, a biochemist and one of the three founders of the ID movement, told the New York Times that the findings are "piddling." The system has to have "at least three parts" for him to consider it essentially complex.

Three parts? I've read just about everything Behe has written. He never said anything about three parts up until last week. This is the "moving target" strategy of IDers. And creationists, for that matter. Show them a transitional fossil that fills a gap, and they'll point to the two new gaps on either side and say we haven't accomplished anything. Show them an evolutionary pathway for an "essentially complex" system, and they'll change what "essentially complex" means. It's intellectually dishonest. I wish they wouldn't do it.

Not that it will matter. Yes, living organisms have complex systems with more than two parts. The human body has the most complex examples of all, many of which IDers will start demanding that we find pathways for. Sounds like a great idea! I have every confidence those pathways will be found. Just not within my lifetime.

But that doesn't matter. I call upon ID believers everywhere, of whatever religious persuasion or lack thereof, to accept the painful evidence that they have turned out to be wrong. There is no shame in that, it happens to everyone at some point in their lives. Swallow the bitter pill, and move on.

Move on, and join the quest for understanding. It's a noble effort. One might even call it spiritual.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a senior fellow at the Independence Institute. His column appears on alternate Thursdays. Readers may e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net.