

Sunday July 15, 2012

I can destroy, therefore I must exist

The facts are clear enough; the rationale remains a mystery.

Last month, in the middle of June, a team from the University of Alberta found the complete skeleton of a dinosaur in the Red Willow River valley, near Grand Prairie, in northern Alberta.

Drumheller, site of the famous Tyrrell Museum of Paleontology, used to be the happy hunting ground for dinosaur relics. Recently, some of the emphasis has shifted north. Dozens of fossil deposits are being located around Grande Prairie.

In this case, a team led by paleontologist Phil Bell had excavated enough of the fossilized bones to know it was a Hadrosaur, a duck-billed dinosaur. But because digging a dinosaur out of solid rock can take months or even years of painstaking work, the team covered up their find to protect it from possible damage until they could come back to complete the job.

They came back a week ago. In that brief time, vandals had smashed the Hadrosaur skeleton to pieces.

Deterrents don't work

The skeleton is ruined. Any reconstruction is now a matter of guesswork. The original skeleton, with all its pieces in place, is now gone forever.

"We still know very little about the dinosaurs that existed up here so every skeleton is crucial," Bell said in a statement. "Each bone is irreplaceable."

Why would anyone smash a dinosaur?

For profit, perhaps.

A *Tyrannosaurus bataar* (a sister species to *T. rex*) fossil sold for \$1.052 million at a U.S. auction last month. The U.S. government promptly seized it on suspicion of having been fraudulently imported from Mongolia.

But in this case, it seems, none of the Hadrosaur's bones were taken away. They were just smashed and scattered.

Canada has stiff penalties intended to prevent damage to archeological artifacts – up to \$40,000 fine, or a year in jail. But the possible punishment clearly didn't matter to the vandals who trashed the Hadrosaur. So much for Public Safety Minister Vic Toews' argument that harsh sentences will prove a deterrent.

Rash of incidents

If you've been following the news, you may have wondered if there has been a rash of vandalism recently.

According to Dr. Bell's U. of A. group, there have been at least four acts of fossil poaching and vandalism in the region in the last six weeks.

Over in Ireland, the 5,500-year-old Stone of Destiny, on the Hill of Tara near Dublin, was senselessly chipped by vandals with hammers.

In Israel, a 1,600-year-old mosaic in a historic synagogue at Tiberias was damaged, apparently by ultra-orthodox Jews. The same group are suspected of spraying graffiti on the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial near Jerusalem.

In Timbuktu – once a symbol of the most remote places one could travel – Islamist fanatics destroyed the tombs of two saints within an ancient mosque. The tombs, a World Heritage site, were deemed idolatrous.

I suspect that there's actually no more vandalism than usual. But each incident invites the media to look for other similar incidents.

No benefit for anyone

Personally, vandalism makes me wonder why?

I can understand – even though I reject – the rationale for the Taliban to blow up the world-famous statues of Buddha at Bamiyan in 2001.

I can recognize that Israel's ultra-orthodox Jews do have a rationale for their actions, whether or not I endorse it.

As an editor who spent most of his working life trying to improve other people's prose, I can almost sympathize with the arrogance of 18th century British writers who rewrote Shakespeare's plays into the rhymed couplets of iambic pentameter, believing that they had raised the English language to its highest level of perfection.

I can even understand some of the passions that might lead a person to commit murder, or that might incite terrorists to cause anarchy and panic.

But I simply cannot get my head around vandalism.

What benefit – even momentary – do vandals derive from smashing a dinosaur that hasn't threatened them for 70 million years?

For that matter, what does anyone gain from hurling rocks through the windows of a derelict factory or warehouse? What prompts young people to overturn cars and buses and set them on fire? What satisfaction does someone derive from strolling through a parking lot casually incising a deep scratch along the full length of a car?

Vandalism strikes me as the last refuge of the hopeless. Their motto is the antithesis of Rene Descartes' famous epigram. Descartes theorized, "I think, therefore I am." Or, perhaps, loosely paraphrased, "I can think, therefore I must exist."

The vandals' motto would be, "I can damage, therefore I must exist."

It's pure guesswork on my part. But I wonder if it is only their ability to destroy that gives them any assurance that they are real. When they look at their trail of destruction, they can say, "I did that! I can see something real that I did, therefore I must be real myself!"

Otherwise, they would be nothing.

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YOUR TURN

I certainly didn't expect the volume – or the variety – of mail that came in about last week's column, on the confirmation of the existence of the Higgs Boson.

Alex Carr, a physics teacher, commented, "You came as close as possible to a lay person's explanation as I have heard. Your concluding statement is especially subtle and nuanced. Here's how I see the world. We do not know all the answers and possibly never will. We then proceed to supply the answers: God did it. Then we ascribe characteristics to this God. Now we invent codes of conduct and ideas dictated by this God which are totally unprovable. Each of our groups comes up with different beliefs and codes of conduct that our followers must obey. Now we conclude that our beliefs are the correct ones. All others are wrong because we say so. Now we proceed to kill each other defending these unproven beliefs."

Paul Wichlinski (first time he's written) weighed in with a contrary viewpoint: "The universe is a vast electric machine -- scientists with an evil heart of unbelief are wasting billion\$ on fictional theories and using them to create 'makework projects' for themselves to have employment! Read George W. Warder's book 'The universe a vast electric organism' (1898)... and you will see that people in Warder's day had a far better understanding of the universe than these lying fools (NASA etc.)... Big Bang, black holes, dark matter, thermonuclear suns are ALL FICTION---the sun is an electromagnetic generator, not a nuclear furnace."

And friend James Russell challenged my connection between science and religion: "This hopeful near-equation of religion and science always drives me nuts. Let me try to explain: The object of a scientific search may not be directly observable and hence only inferred by its effects. But the effects need to be consistent, measurable, independent of the observer.... The effects of the invisible religious object, on the other hand, need only be

incomprehensible. It seems to me that the difference between the scientific object and the religious one is the difference between knowledge and ignorance. I love and respect you, but I just can't let it pass."

Jeannette Matthews, a lecturer in Old Testament in Australia, passed my column on to her husband, a PhD in physics. He amplified James Russell's theme:

Jim's "main point seems to be that 'belief' by scientists in subatomic particles is somehow analogous to 'belief' in God, on the basis that both of these are 'invisible' and can only be observed indirectly, and that it would be inconsistent to 'believe' in one and not the other.

"The essence of science is repeatable experiments. Science is not, as is popularly thought, centred on smart people coming up with theories which other people choose to accept or reject. Theories are part of the scientific process but not the core. Most treatments of the history of science discuss the work of Galileo as a key point – that Galileo was one of the first to answer questions about nature by experiment rather than philosophy. Does a ball made of lead fall faster than a ball made of wood? Galileo's answer was to take two balls up to a high tower and drop them to find out, and that is what makes him one of the first scientists. The crucial thing is that you or I could do exactly the same experiment and get exactly the same result – it's repeatable. It is only after that you can think about if the result is consistent with some theory about nature.

"The Higgs boson 'discovery' is the result of an experiment – actually, two experiments, each done independently to check if they could repeat the results of the other. Obviously you and I cannot repeat this experiment but it has been done so the method was truly 'scientific'.

"The experiments have shown that under certain repeated conditions, a process happened with results which are consistent with a theoretical model of physics which includes a thing known as the Higgs boson. While the press announce this as the 'discovery' of the Higgs, it is not. All the experiments have done is shown that that the 'standard model' of subatomic particles is not wrong. The experiments have not proved the model correct – only that it is not incorrect.

"This is another key part of science – once you have a theory the next step is to try to prove it wrong – you test the theory. At some point, after lots of these kinds of experiments are tried, the scientists start to (cautiously) say that the theory might be a good approximation for reality.

"Can the scientific process be applied to religious ideas? In general, no. Religious ideas cannot, in general, be the subject of controlled, repeatable experiments. There are some exceptions in extreme cases – some people believe that God will protect them from snake bites or poison. You can test that (and the tests show that it is not true). But 'God exists' is not something you can subject to a repeatable experiment.

"Science never actually asserts anything is proven to be true. Science only ever states that the results of repeatable experiments and observations are consistent with current understandings of how nature works. Science always leaves open the possibility that the next experiment will undermine the current understanding and something new will have to be worked out. Religion mostly asserts God's existence and does not admit the possibility that might be wrong.

"I also don't understand what it means to say that God's 'presence can only be determined by observing its effect on people.' One person who thinks God exists cares for orphans in Calcutta; another flies an aeroplane into a building; another beats a gay person to death; another struggles for the end of slavery. This comes back to the scientific approach – where are the consistent, repeatable results? There are none. This is not to say that this is a good or bad thing – but the 'effects' of God are hardly analogous to a scientific experiment."

Fortunately for my tender ego, others responded more favourably. Alan Reynolds just wrote, "Wow!"

Steve Lawson picked up on the notion that we have to imagine it before we can understand it: "It is amazing that we spend eons trying to figure out something that deep, deep, down inside we already know about but just want to be able to understand -- whether it be science or faith or both."

Bob Vining leaped enthusiastically on the idea that something must first be imagined: "Yes! You & I and all of us are creating our reality, now. Creation is going on constantly based on thoughts, intents, ideas, imagination, dreams, aspirations. Everything that now exists was once imagined. Everything that will exist must first be imagined. What you think about you bring about. Nothing is more powerful than an idea."

Cliff Boldt asked, "But who did the imagining? Will we be happier for knowing? Will it change us? How?"

Gwynne Harries, who calls himself a non-physicist, has been doing some reading: "The Quantum Physics books like 'Holographic Universe', 'The Field', and 'Intention Experiment', tend to support the concept that everything is thought -- an energy field of information and light, and that our brains, both personal and collective, choose to

redefine those energy fields as matter. Within this framework our left brains filter information until the field is interpreted as something that fits our personal reality. Add to this the concept that the universe is holographic, any part carries the information of the whole, and that the holographic universe contains infinite possibilities, and we get some interesting material to chew on.

“Also within this framework, results are altered by observation, so scientists will inevitably find what they are looking for.”

Suzanne Edgar had an interesting take on controversies: “Stephen Hawking’s views don’t worry me at all -- if he believes in love, if he’s living his life to the fullest, doing what he can with who he is and what he knows, that’s all God asks. Belief is not required; letting our light shine as much as we are able, is all that is asked of us. And Stephen Hawking is letting his light shine. More power to him.”

Suzanne then turned to an analysis of the gospel reading for last Sunday: “When people treat us badly, we often turn to the English translation of what Jesus said to do: ‘Shake the dust off your feet as a testimony against them.’ But literally (yes, I am going for the genuine, literal meaning!) the Greek phrase is ‘shake the dust off the soles of your feet...’ It’s not a condemnation of others; it’s a way of dealing with other’s condemnation. Shake it off, don’t let it get you down; move on and let your light shine somewhere else.

“I am never even tempted to argue the existence of God with anyone; I tell them it doesn’t matter to me -- God believes in them [whether or not they believe in God]. And then I talk with them about what they’re excited about!”

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won’t make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you’ll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

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For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating’s “SeemslikeGod” page, www.seemslikegod.org;

- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
