



Response to the Commentary: Pro Justice

Michael Ruse

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Judge Overton was explicitly venturing into philosophical terrain. His *obiter dicta* are about as remote from well-founded opinion in the philosophy of science as Creationism is from respectable geology. It simply will not do for the defenders of science to invoke philosophy of science when it suits them (e.g., their much-loved principle of falsifiability comes directly from the philosopher Karl Popper) and to dismiss it as “arcane” and “remote” when it does not. However noble the motivation, bad philosophy makes for bad law.

The victory in the Arkansas case was hollow, for it was achieved only at the expense of perpetuating and canonizing a false stereotype of what science is and how it works. If it goes un-

challenged by the scientific community, it will raise grave doubts about that community's intellectual integrity. No one familiar with the issues can really believe that anything important was settled through anachronistic efforts to revive a variety of discredited criteria for distinguishing between the scientific and the non-scientific. Fifty years ago, Clarence Darrow asked, *à propos* the Scopes trial, “Isn't it difficult to realize that a trial of this kind is possible in the twentieth century in the United States of America?” We can raise that question anew, with the added irony that, this time, the pro-science forces are defending a philosophy of science which is, in its way, every bit as outmoded as the “science” of the creationists.

Response to the Commentary: *Pro Judice*

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As always, my friend Larry Laudan writes in an entertaining and provocative manner, but, in his complaint against Judge William Overton's ruling in *McLean v. Arkansas*,¹ Laudan is hopelessly wide of the mark. Laudan's outrage centers on the criteria for the demarcation of science which Judge Overton adopted, and the judge's conclusion that, evaluated by these criteria, creation-science fails as science. I shall respond directly to this concern—after making three preliminary remarks.

First, although Judge Overton does not need defense from me or anyone else, as one who participated in the Arkansas trial, I must go on record as saying that I was enormously impressed by his handling of the case. His written judgment is a first-class piece of reasoning. With cause, many have criticized the State of Arkansas for

passing the “Creation-Science Act,” but we should not ignore that, to the state's credit, Judge Overton was born, raised, and educated in Arkansas.

Second, Judge Overton, like everyone else, was fully aware that proof that something is not science is not the same as proof that it is religion. The issue of what constitutes science arose because the creationists claim that their ideas qualify as genuine science rather than as fundamentalist religion. The attorneys developing the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) case believed it important to show that creation-science is not genuine science. Of course, this demonstration does raise the question of what creation-science really is. The plaintiffs claimed that creation-science always was (and still is) religion. The plaintiffs' lawyers went beyond the negative argument (against science) to make the positive

case (for religion). They provided considerable evidence for the religious nature of creation-science, including such things as the creationists' explicit reliance on the Bible in their various writings. Such arguments seem about as strong as one could wish, and they were duly noted by Judge Overton and used in support of his ruling. It seems a little unfair, in the context, therefore, to accuse him of "specious" argumentation. He did not adopt the naïve dichotomy of "science or religion but nothing else."

Third, whatever the merits of the plaintiffs' case, the kinds of conclusions and strategies apparently favored by Laudan are simply not strong enough for legal purposes. His strategy would require arguing that creation-science is weak science and therefore ought not to be taught:

The core issue is not whether Creationism satisfies some undemanding and highly controversial definitions of what is scientific; the real question is whether the existing evidence provides stronger arguments for evolutionary theory than for Creationism. Once that question is settled, we will know what belongs in the classroom and what does not.²

Unfortunately, the U.S. Constitution does not bar the teaching of weak science. What it bars (through the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment) is the teaching of religion. The plaintiffs' tactic was to show that creation-science is less than weak or bad science. It is not science at all.

Turning now to the main issue, I see three questions that must be addressed. Using the five criteria listed by Judge Overton, can one distinguish science from non-science? Assuming a positive answer to the first question, does creation-science fail as genuine science when it is judged by these criteria? And, assuming a positive answer to the second, does the Opinion in *McLean* make this case?

The first question has certainly tied philosophers of science in knots in recent years. Simple criteria that supposedly give a clear answer to every case—for example, Karl Popper's single stipulation of falsifiability³—will not do. Nevertheless, although there may be many grey areas, white does seem to be white and black does seem to be black. Less metaphorically, something like psychoanalytic theory may or may not be science, but there do appear to be clear-cut cases of real science and of real non-science. For instance, an

explanation of the fact that my son has blue eyes, given that both parents have blue eyes, done in terms of dominant and recessive genes and with an appeal to Mendel's first law, is scientific. The Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (i.e., that in the Mass the bread and wine turn into the body and blood of Christ) is not scientific.

Furthermore, the five cited criteria of demarcation do a good job of distinguishing the Mendelian example from the Catholic example. Law and explanation through law come into the first example. They do not enter the second. We can test the first example, rejecting it if necessary. In this sense, it is tentative, in that something empirical might change our minds. The case of transubstantiation is different. God may have His own laws, but neither scientist nor priest can tell us about those which turn bread and wine into flesh and blood. There is no explanation through law. No empirical evidence is pertinent to the miracle. Nor would the believer be swayed by any empirical facts. Microscopic examination of the Host is considered irrelevant. In this sense, the doctrine is certainly not tentative.

One pair of examples certainly do not make for a definitive case, but at least they do suggest that Judge Overton's criteria are not quite as irrelevant as Laudan's critique implies. What about the types of objections (to the criteria) that Laudan does or could make? As far as the use of law is concerned, he might complain that scientists themselves have certainly not always been that particular about reference to law. For instance, consider the following claim by Charles Lyell in his *Principles of Geology* (1830/3): "We are not, however, contending that a real departure from the antecedent course of physical events cannot be traced in the introduction of man."⁴ All scholars agree that in this statement Lyell was going beyond law. The coming of man required special divine intervention. Yet, surely the *Principles* as a whole qualify as a contribution to science.

Two replies are open: either one agrees that the case of Lyell shows that science has sometimes mingled law with non-law; or one argues that Lyell (and others) mingled science and non-science (specifically, religion at this point). My inclination is to argue the latter. Insofar as Lyell acted as scientist, he appealed only to law. A century and a half ago, people were not as conscientious as today about separating science and religion. However, even if one argues the former

alternative—that some science has allowed place for non-lawbound events—this hardly makes Laudan's case. Science, like most human cultural phenomena, has evolved. What was allowable in the early nineteenth century is not necessarily allowable in the late twentieth century. Specifically, science today does not break with law. And this is what counts for us. We want criteria of science for today, not for yesterday. (Before I am accused of making my case by fiat, let me challenge Laudan to find one point within the modern geological theory of plate tectonics where appeal is made to miracles, that is, to breaks with law. Of course, saying that science appeals to law is not asserting that we know all of the laws. But, who said that we did? Not Judge Overton in his Opinion.)

What about the criterion of tentativeness, which involves a willingness to test and reject if necessary? Laudan objects that real science is hardly all that tentative: “[H]istorical and sociological researches on science strongly suggest that the scientists of any epoch likewise regard some of their beliefs as so fundamental as not to be open to repudiation or negotiation.”⁵

It cannot be denied that scientists do sometimes—frequently—hang on to their views, even if not everything meshes precisely with the real world. Nevertheless, such tenacity can be exaggerated. Scientists, even Newtonians, have been known to change their minds. Although I would not want to say that the empirical evidence is all-decisive, it plays a major role in such mind changes. As an example, consider a major revolution of our own time, namely that which occurred in geology. When I was an undergraduate in 1960, students were taught that continents do not move. Ten years later, they were told that they do move. Where is the dogmatism here? Furthermore, it was the new empirical evidence—e.g., about the nature of the sea-bed—which persuaded geologists. In short, although science may not be as open-minded as Karl Popper thinks it is, it is not as close-minded as, say, Thomas Kuhn⁶ thinks it is.

Let me move on to the second and third questions, the status of creation-science and Judge Overton's treatment of the problem. The slightest acquaintance with the creation-science literature and Creationism movement shows that creation-science fails abysmally as science. Consider the following passage, written by one of the leading

creationists, Duane T. Gish, in *Evolution: The Fossils Say No!*:

CREATION. By creation we mean the bringing into being by a supernatural Creator of the basic kinds of plants and animals by the process of sudden, or fiat, creation.

We do not know how the Creator created, what processes He used, *for He used processes which are not now operating anywhere in the natural universe.* This is why we refer to creation as Special Creation. We cannot discover by scientific investigations anything about the creative processes used by the Creator.⁷

The following similar passage was written by Henry M. Morris, who is considered to be the founder of the creation-science movement:

... it is ... quite impossible to determine anything about Creation through a study of present processes, because present processes are not created in character. If man wishes to know anything about Creation (the time of Creation, the duration of Creation, the order of Creation, the methods of Creation, or anything else) his sole source of true information is that of divine revelation. God was there when it happened. We were not there ... therefore, we are completely limited to what God has seen fit to tell us, and this information is in His written Word. This is our textbook on the science of Creation!⁸

By their own words, therefore, creation-scientists admit that they appeal to phenomena not covered or explicable by any laws that humans can grasp as laws. It is not simply that the pertinent laws are not yet known. Creative processes stand outside law as humans know it (or could know it) on Earth—at least there is no way that scientists can know Mendel's laws through observation and experiment. Even if God did use His own laws, they are necessarily veiled from us forever in this life, because Genesis says nothing of them.

Furthermore, there is nothing tentative or empirically checkable about the central claims of creation-science. Creationists admit as much when they join the Creation Research Society (the leading organization of the movement). As a condition of membership applicants must sign a document specifying that they now believe and will continue to believe:

(1) The Bible is the written Word of God, and because we believe it to be inspired throughout, all

of its assertions are historically and scientifically true in all of the original autographs. To the student of nature, this means that the account of origins in Genesis is a factual presentation of simple historical truths. (2) All basic types of living things, including man, were made by direct creative acts of God during Creation Week as described in Genesis. Whatever biological changes have occurred since Creation have accomplished only changes within the original created kinds. (3) The great Flood described in Genesis, commonly referred to as the Noachian Deluge, was an historical event, worldwide in its extent and effect. (4) Finally, we are an organization of Christian men of science, who accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The account of the special creation of Adam and Eve as one man and one woman, and their subsequent fall into sin, is the basis for our belief in the necessity of a Savior for all mankind. Therefore, salvation can come only thru accepting Jesus Christ as our Savior.⁹

It is difficult to imagine evolutionists signing a comparable statement, that they will never deviate from the literal text of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. The non-scientific nature of creation-science is evident for all to see, as is also its religious nature. Moreover, the quotes I have used above were all used by Judge Overton, in the *McLean* Opinion, to make exactly the points I have just made. Creation-science is not genuine science, and Judge Overton showed this.

Finally, what about Laudan's claim that some parts of creation-science (e.g., claims about the Flood) are falsifiable and that other parts (e.g., about the originally created "kinds") are revisable? Such parts are not falsifiable or revisable in a way indicative of genuine science. Creation-science is not like physics, which exists as part of humanity's common cultural heritage and domain. It exists solely in the imaginations and writing of a relatively small group of people. Their publications (and stated intentions) show that, for example, there is no way they will relinquish belief in the Flood, whatever the evidence.¹⁰ In this sense, their doctrines are truly unfalsifiable.

Furthermore, any revisions are not genuine revisions, but exploitations of the gross ambiguities in the creationists' own position. In the matter of origins, for example, some elasticity could be perceived in the creationist position, given the conflicting claims that the possibility of (degenerative) change within the originally created

"kinds." Unfortunately, any open-mindedness soon proves illusory; for creationists have no real idea about what God is supposed to have created in the beginning, except that man was a separate species. They rely solely on the Book of Genesis:

And God said, Let the waters bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life, and the fowl that may fly above the earth in the open firmament of heaven.

And God created great whales, and every living creature that moveth, which the waters brought forth abundantly, after their kind, and every winged fowl after his kind: and God saw that it was good.

And God blessed them, saying Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let fowl multiply in the earth.

And the evening and the morning were the fifth day.

And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so.

And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and everything that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good.¹¹

But the *definition* of "kind," what it really is, leaves creationists as mystified as it does evolutionists. For example, creationist Duane Gish makes this statement on the subject:

[W]e have defined a basic kind as including all of those variants which have been derived from a single stock . . . We cannot always be sure, however, what constitutes a separate kind. The division into kinds is easier the more the divergence observed. It is obvious, for example, that among invertebrates the protozoa, sponges, jellyfish, worms, snails, trilobites, lobsters, and bees are all different kinds. Among the vertebrates, the fishes, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals are obviously different basic kinds.

Among the reptiles, the turtles, crocodiles, dinosaurs, pterosaurs (flying reptiles), and ichthyosaurs (aquatic reptiles) would be placed in different kinds. Each one of these major groups of reptiles could be further subdivided into the basic kinds within each.

Within the mammalian class, duck-billed platypus, bats, hedgehogs, rats, rabbits, dogs, cats, lemurs, monkeys, apes, and men are easily assignable to different basic kinds. Among the apes, the gibbons, orangutans, chimpanzees, and gorillas would each be included in a different basic kind.¹²

Apparently, a "kind" can be anything from humans (one species) to trilobites (literally thousands of species). The term is flabby to the point of inconsistency. Because humans are mammals, if one claims (as creationists do) that evolution can occur within but not across kinds, then humans could have evolved from common mammalian stock—but because humans themselves are kinds such evolution is impossible.

In brief, there is no true resemblance between the creationists' treatment of their concept of "kind" and the openness expected of scientists. Nothing can be said in favor of creation-science or its inventors. Overton's judgment emerges unscathed by Laudan's complaints.

NOTES

1. For the text of Judge Overton's Opinion, see 7 *Science, Technology, & Human Values* 40 (Summer 1982): 28–42; and *Creationism, Science, and the Law* (The MIT Press, forthcoming).
2. Larry Laudan, "Commentary: Science at the Bar—Causes for Concern," p. 18 of this issue.
3. Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959).
4. Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology*, Volume I (London: John Murray, 1830), p. 162.
5. Laudan, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
6. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
7. Duane Gish, *Evolution: The Fossils Say No!*, 3rd edition (San Diego, CA: Creation-Life Publishers, 1979), p. 40 (his italics).
8. Henry M. Morris, *Studies in the Bible and Science* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1966), p. 114.
9. Application form for the Creation Research Society, reprinted in Plaintiffs' trial briefs, *McLean v. Arkansas* (1981).
10. See, for instance, Henry M. Morris, *Scientific Creationism* (San Diego, CA: Creation-Life

Publishers, 1974); and my own detailed discussion in Michael Ruse, *Darwinism Defended: A Guide to the Evolution Controversies* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1982).

11. Genesis, Book I, Verses 20–25.
12. Gish, *op. cit.*, pp. 34–35.

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