

Review of “Only a Theory: Evolution and the Battle for America’s Soul”

By Mahesh Alur, PhD

In his second trade publication, “Only a Theory”, Dr. Ken Miller of Brown University seeks to systematically dismiss “Intelligent Design” (ID), not only as a reincarnation of creationism but as a shell of an idea that lacks scientific merit. He does so very deftly. Miller dissects each aspect of ID through the frame of science; that is, using logic and evidence. Then, Miller provides greater context for the ID movement. Throughout this compelling narrative, he has the reader following his pattern of thought and solidly argues for evolution as an intellectual understanding of our place in the history of the earth.

In his argument to debunk intelligent design, Miller considers arguments made by ID proponents. He carefully scrutinizes the statements that they make, both in favor of ID and against evolution. For example, ID proponents claim, he says, that some systems are irreducibly complex; that is, they cannot have evolved incrementally because the current system requires too many parts to work in concert for it to be functional. One of these systems is blood clotting. Miller shows that irreducible complexity is a fallacy. In the case of blood clotting, he explains elegantly how it is possible for individual components of the system could have appeared individually leading to the apparent complexity of the current system.

Beyond scientific explanations that delegitimize ID, he discusses larger motivations of ID proponents as a movement away from science and towards an anti-intellectualism that has become apparent in the “culture wars”. His explanations are both moving and a cause for serious concern.

Towards the end of the book, Miller brings together his thoughts, giving meaning to the place of humanity in earth’s lineage. His discussion of the work of two evolutionary scientists’ positions gives the reader perspective into whether a human-like species happened by chance or whether the rise of humanity (or something like humans) was inevitable considering our planet’s unique characteristics. This section should give pause to even the most ardent creationist to have him/her realize that the mechanism of how our species arrived here does not diminish our purpose. Rather, our unique place among species on this planet provides us unique responsibilities. Miller coins this idea as “evolutionary cosmology”.

The majority of Miller’s ideas in “Theory” can be easily accessed by a lay person with limited science knowledge. A few of them necessitate a deeper knowledge to gather the greatest understanding. For example, the frameshift mutations discussion in relation to bacterial nylonase activity cannot be readily appreciated without knowledge of the central dogma of molecular biology. This by no means detracts from the power of

this example because even the reader who is not versed in science can understand the gist of his explanation that follows.

In "Only a Theory", Dr. Kenneth Miller makes concise and moving arguments for why intellectual design advocates should be met with a critical eye, as people with an idea that cannot be scientifically tested and as creationists by another name. He provides clear evidence for why the tenets of evolution should be understood by all people - religious, scientific, and lay - and why not doing so is a threat to modern science and our civilization.