

Creationist Deception Exposed

Article published in [The Skeptic](#), September 1998, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 7-10.

by Barry Williams

A small apprehension often lurks in the back of the mind of any Skeptic who has ever given an interview for later publication or broadcast; "What if the interviewer wants to show me, or the Skeptics, in a bad light?" With the technology now available to the media it would not be at all difficult to rearrange the words one has used to change one's meaning completely.



Perhaps we should mention here a little about the technicalities of the TV interview.

In any news or current affairs type interviews, pre-recorded outside a studio, a small technical deception is not uncommon. Normally only one video camera is used, and that camera is usually focused on the interviewee, but if the interview is played like that, with disembodied questions coming from 'off camera', it tends to make the subjects look like they are talking to a wall. So, at the end of the interview, the camera changes places to focus on the interviewer, who then asks some of the questions again, or gives their reactions to something the interviewee has said. These are known as "reaction shots" (or "noddies" in the vernacular) and are designed to include the interviewer in the final product. This is technically a deception, but it is a harmless one used to make the segment more viewable. In documentaries, however, this quite often does not apply, and it is usual for the people speaking to be seen expounding their views without the intervention of interviewers.

Of course, in all such cases there must be an element of trust between the interviewee and the interviewer. It would be quite simple, technically, for the interviewer or the tape editor, to record a totally different set of questions and splice them together with the interviewee's answers, thus making the interviewee look like a complete idiot. However, to do so would be a gross breach of a journalist's professional ethics, and it doesn't happen often. Personally speaking, I have usually found that those ethical rules are scrupulously observed. I don't believe I have ever been misquoted, nor taken out of context, in the many interviews I have

given, although I might sometimes feel that my main point has not received the prominence it deserves. That is only personal opinion, however, and usually good editing has often made my answers sound more coherent and less prolix than I am sure they deserved, and they have always retained the sense of what I said.

Some exception to the rule may be made in the case of comedy programmes, where some prominent identity is seen as giving answers to some question the host throws up, for example, his genuine answer to a complex economic question might be seen as a response to a query about his sex life (Clive James uses this to good effect in his late night talk show). This is all good clean fun and is hardly likely to cause the respondent any serious heartburn, because it can clearly be seen to be a deliberate manipulation of data for comic effect. That this is not always the case is exemplified by a recent experience of Richard Dawkins.

Richard Dawkins is the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University. He is one of the world's leading evolutionary biologists, the author of several highly regarded books on evolution through natural selection, including [*The Selfish Gene*](#), [*The Blind Watchmaker*](#) (to my mind, the very best explanation of evolution for the lay person), [*The Extended Phenotype*](#), [*River out of Eden*](#), [*Climbing Mount Improbable*](#), and is constantly in demand as a public speaker, and by the media as an advocate for good science.

Given his position and his professional expertise, it is hardly surprising, then, that he is also a cogent and trenchant critic of the anti-scientific dogma that masquerades under the title "creation science".

The Background

In June this year, Professor Dawkins contacted *The Skeptic* office, seeking assistance in locating an Australian TV production company. His story will demonstrate the depths to which the creationist movement will stoop in order to try to discredit its critics.

Recently Professor Dawkins had been made aware of a video tape being circulated in creationist circles, in which he appears, and on the cover of which is his photograph. Titled "From a Frog to a Prince," it is distributed in Australia by *Answers in Genesis*, of Acacia Ridge, Queensland and in the USA by American Portrait Films, Cleveland, Ohio. Copyright is held by "A.I.G. - I.C.R. - Keziah" and it was produced by "Keziah".

AIG, as regular readers will recognise, refers to Answers in Genesis, the new trading name of the Queensland based Creation Science Foundation; ICR is the Institute for Creation Research, a prominent US creationist outfit, and the source for much of what passes for information in such circles; Keziah was then unfamiliar to us.

Prof Dawkins was puzzled, and not a little perplexed, to be informed by a Christian contact in the USA that his appearance on the tape included a question being posed to him, whereupon he pauses for 11 seconds, and then answers an entirely different question. His contact, having viewed the tape, and having noticed the long pause and seeming evasion of what was a pretty simple question about evolution, was convinced that it had been a set-up.

As he hadn't then seen the tape, it was difficult for Richard to comprehend the full details, but he was suspicious of the circumstances, and sought our assistance in tracking down Keziah, which he thought was an Australian company. We had no information about Keziah, though we did recall a request from a woman purporting to represent American Portrait Films, for an interview with Richard while he was in Australia as our special guest at the 1996 Australian Skeptics annual convention in Melbourne. Subsequently, we managed to track down Keziah Productions to Peregrine in Queensland.

The Set-up

Prof Dawkins then acquired a copy of the tape and became even more incensed as the details of what had been done to him became clearer. In correspondence to me (published here with his permission) he recounts what had happened:

What the tape shows

Cut from previous interview with an Israeli biophysicist to interviewer in an obviously different room from the one in which RD has previously been shown.

Interviewer: "Professor Dawkins, can you give an example of a genetic mutation, or an evolutionary process, which can be seen to increase the information in the genome?"

Cut to RD, who looks around the room, [shot holds for 11 seconds]

Cut back to interviewer, while RD begins speaking off camera

RD: "There's a popular misunderstanding of evolution [cut back to RD] that says that fish turned into reptiles and reptiles turned into mammals and that somehow we ought to be able to look around the world today and look at our ancestors and see the intermediate species... (Dawkins goes on to explain)."

As a preamble, I should explain that, following the advice of my colleague [Stephen Jay Gould](#), I have a policy of not granting interviews to creationists or flat earthers. This is not because I cannot answer their arguments, but because I have better things to do with my time and I do not want to give them the oxygen of publicity.

On September 16, 1997, Keziah Video Productions, in the persons of Gillian Brown and Geoffrey Smith, came to my house in Oxford to film an interview with me. I had agreed to see them, on the misapprehension (as it later turned out) that they were from a respectable Australian broadcasting company. I had no idea they were a creationist front and I would not have granted them an interview had I known this, because of my policy as mentioned above.

The interview began. I have considerable experience of television work, and I was initially surprised at the amateurishness of their filming technique, but I carried on without voicing my surprise. As the interview proceeded, I became increasingly puzzled at the tone of the questions. Puzzlement gave way to suspicion that Keziah was, in fact, a creationist front which had gained admittance to my house under false pretences.

The suspicion increased sharply when I was challenged to produce an example of an evolutionary process which increases the information content of the genome. It is a question that nobody except a creationist would ask. A real biologist finds it an easy question to answer (the answer is that natural selection increases the information content of the genome all the time — that is precisely what natural selection means), but, from an evolutionary point of view, it is not an interesting way to put it. It would only be phrased that way by somebody who doubts that evolution happened.

Now I was faced with a dilemma. I was almost certain that these people had gained admittance to my house under false pretences — in other words, I had been set up. On the other hand, I am a naturally courteous person, especially in my own house, and

these were guests from overseas. What should I do? I paused for a long time, trying to decide whether to throw them out, and, I have to admit, struggling not to lose my temper. Finally, I decided that I would ask them to leave, but I would do it in a polite way, explaining to them why. I then asked them to stop the tape, which they did.

The tape having stopped, I explained to them my suspicions, and asked them to leave my house. Gillian Brown pleaded with me, saying that she had flown all the way from Australia especially to interview me. She begged me not to send her home empty handed, after they had travelled such a long way. She assured me that they were not creationists, but were taking a balanced view of all sides in the debate. Like a fool, I took pity on her, and agreed to continue. I remember that, having had quite an acrimonious argument with her, when I finally agreed to resume the interview I made a conscious effort to be extra polite and friendly.

Now perhaps it could be argued that Prof Dawkins' memories of the events might have deteriorated with the passage of time since the interview, so let us consider the general plausibility of what the tape purported to show. A question was asked relating to "evolutionary process which increases the information content of the genome". This question was not asked of just anyone, but of a biologist whose speciality is precisely in that field, who has been teaching biology at Oxford University for 27 years, and who is very experienced in answering the far more complex questions of some of the best students in the world. It beggars belief that someone of Richard Dawkins' stature in the field would have been stumped by such a simple question or would have evaded it.

Anyone who has ever been interviewed will recognise that 11 seconds of silence is an inordinately long hiatus in any interview. Even if one is not an expert in the field, or is unfamiliar with the question being asked, the normal human reaction is to say, "Well, I don't know much about that ..." or "That's an interesting question ..." or to generally waffle on a bit, while arranging one's thoughts. What one does not do is just sit there saying nothing. Even in the case of a total media neophyte, stricken by "mike fright", they might react that way, briefly, but it is highly unlikely that anyone would remain mute for such a length of time. However, Richard Dawkins is far from being a media neophyte, having been the subject of hundreds of media interviews, and he was not asked a

question he couldn't answer, merely a question he regarded as being put in an ill-informed way.

Richard puts it into better context in his letter:

"As it happens, my forthcoming book, [*Unweaving the Rainbow*](#), has an entire chapter ('The Genetic Book of the Dead') devoted to a much more interesting version of the idea that natural selection gathers up information from the environment, and builds it into the genome. At the time of the interview, the book was almost finished (it is to be published in November, 1998). That chapter would have been in the forefront of my mind, and it is therefore especially ludicrous to suggest that I would have evaded the question by talking about fish and amphibians.

"If I'd wanted to turn the question into more congenial channels, all I had to do was talk about 'The Genetic Book of the Dead'. It is a chapter I am particularly pleased with. I'd have welcomed the opportunity to expound it. Why on earth, when faced with such an opportunity, would I have kept totally silent? Unless, once again, I was actually thinking about something quite different while struggling to keep my temper?"

If it had been left at that, it might merely have been evidence of professional incompetence on the part of the producer and editor of the tape. Further evidence of incompetence includes the tape showing the male "interviewer" in a completely different room from the Dawkins' drawing room where the interview took place, and with entirely different lighting. Moreover, the person who interviewed Prof Dawkins was named as Geoffrey Smith, while the "interviewer" shown in this clip is identified as Chris Nicholls, the narrator of the entire tape. However this, of itself, is not evidence of malice. While it is doubtful if any professional video producer would inadvertently leave a silence of that length in a tape, the fact that the long silence ends with an answer to an entirely different question, one about fishes, amphibians, and common ancestry, speaks strongly of malicious intent.

This becomes even more apparent when one views the tape, particularly if one has had the pleasure of spending any time in the company of Richard Dawkins, as I did as his Sydney host during his Australia in 1996.

Throughout this tape, Richard Dawkins speaks about his field of expertise in his usual polite and informative way. Then, suddenly, we see the interpolation of an "interviewer," quite obviously inserted at some later stage of production, posing a question directly to Richard [see box on previous page]. The tape then cuts directly to Richard and holds on him for 11 seconds, while he is shown looking uncomfortable, then cuts back to the "interviewer" briefly, while Richard begins to (seemingly) answer an entirely different question, during which the tape cuts back to him.

There are several clues pointing to deceptive intent here. Nowhere else in the tape is an interviewer shown directly asking a question of any of the other four people who speak, nor is an interviewer seen posing any questions to Richard in his previous pieces. Richard does not react as one would expect him to, had he merely been asked a difficult question; his reaction is much more believably one of someone who has just realised he has been conned into giving an interview he would not normally have given, ie he doesn't look nonplussed, he looks angry. To compound this, there is another brief insert of the "interviewer" with Richard's voice coming from off camera, before returning to Richard, looking as urbane and polite as ever. Such is the dramatic change in Richard's demeanour between the two segments, that it is utterly inconceivable that the second piece of tape followed immediately after the first.

Quite clearly, this tape has been manipulated, and rather ineptly done at that. But by now it is asking too much to blame it all on simple incompetence; it begins to reek of deceitful intent.

Stronger evidence of this has subsequently come to light. In an advertisement in *Creation Ex Nihilo*, the official mouthpiece of [Answers in Genesis](#), the tape *From a Frog to a Prince*, is touted as a "brilliant new documentary" and contains the following excerpt:

...Then the documentary shows a question put to the highly fluent evolutionist Dawkins, which is really the crucial question: can he point to any example today in which a mutation has actually added information? (If there is such an example, surely an Oxford zoology professor, promoting neoDarwinism around the world, would know of it!) This is actually the dramatic high point of the whole presentation.

We think that the Dawkins response on screen (we won't spoil it for potential viewers) makes a more

powerful point against evolution than volumes written by Creationists! Even a ten year old watching it in our Brisbane office, got the point.

And we also get the point. Because their volumes of unscientific dogma are having no effect in the scientific debate, they resort to trickery in order to denigrate their critics, and to mislead unsophisticated minds.

The Nature Of The Plot

It was mentioned earlier that some comedy programmes use the interposed question for comic effect, but the Keziah tape is not being sold as a comedy tape; it purports to be a serious discussion of a scientific issue; it purports to show that there is no biological evidence for evolution. By selectively editing this tape, the producer clearly seeks to show:

- a) that Richard Dawkins, an eminent biologist, was unable to answer a question he was asked about biology; and
- b) that he then evaded the question by answering a completely different one.

This tape seeks to denigrate Professor Dawkins' professional reputation, and it is difficult to believe that it was not deliberately done.

It begins to look, then, that this is a piece of crude propaganda*, deliberately manipulated to give the false impression that the fact of evolution is seriously under scientific question, and that the fanciful notions of creation 'scientists' are contributing to that debate.

There is further evidence that this is the line being pursued in creationist circles. In recent times, both the Australian Skeptics web site and at the Skeptic office, we have fielded questions from a number of individuals who have posed questions couched in the terms, "Can you give one example of new information being added to the genome by mutation today?" We have no way of telling whether the callers are asking this question because they have seen (and been misled by) this deceitful video tape, or because creationists have been otherwise spreading the word that it is "a question evolutionists cannot answer." It does, however, seem too

much of a coincidence that it should all be happening in such a short space of time.

From our experience of answering such questioners, it becomes clear that they have little knowledge of biology, and when asked to clarify what it is they are asking, they invariably flounder around the point. Clearly this has not been a question that just popped into a selection of enquiring minds all at once; it seems obvious it is something they have been told will "baffle the evolutionists".

Historical Precedents

Certainly this is by no means the first occasion on which the creation 'science' movement has sought to misrepresent the words of eminent scientists to bolster their own inept grasp of scientific matters, and to mislead their own unfortunate followers.

In the early 1980s, the Creation Science Foundation published and sold a pamphlet entitled *[The Quote Book](#)*. This publication contained some 120 quotations from prominent scientists (among others) whose words were considered (by the CSF) to call evolution into question. When one academic, Dr Ken Smith, a mathematician at the University of Queensland, and a member in good standing of the Baptist Church, took the trouble to track down the sources the quotations used (he could find only 80 of the 120, such was the poor level of scholarship used in the compilation of the magazine) he found that only one of the 80 could be considered to be a completely accurate reflection of the original statements. Much of this book consisted of quotations taken out of context, or so badly mangled as to entirely misrepresent the positions of those quoted.

In that case, adverse publicity forced the CSF to withdraw the item from sale, and to produce a substantially revised version; one that paid somewhat more attention to truth, and which thereby lost much of its propaganda value. Even there the organisation was less than honest, in that copies of the discredited book were still being sold at a discount, with no warning that it was inaccurate, some time after it had supposedly been withdrawn.

Professor Dawkins has taken steps to reduce the harm done by the Keziah tape, both to his reputation and to the public understanding of science. On July 2, he wrote to the Institute for Creation Research in California, pointing out in detail how the tape had dishonestly misrepresented his position, and requesting that the Institute investigate his complaint and immediately withdraw the tape from circulation. At the date of publication, he has not even

received an acknowledgement from the ICR. Nor can we be entirely surprised by this. As the titles roll at the end of the tape, we see that Dr. John Morris and Dr. Carl Wieland, chief executives respectively of the [Institute for Creation Research](#) and [Answers in Genesis](#), are shown as "consultants".

So much for the supposed impartiality of Gillian Brown, the producer of the tape, or for her protestations of "balanced view", of which she assured Professor Dawkins when seeking to continue taping in his home.

What Does It Mean?

So what is one to infer from this exercise? This tape, From a Frog to a Prince, purports to be a serious discussion of a scientific issue, but how is a scientific issue addressed by what clearly appears to be a deliberate misrepresentation of the position of one of the protagonists? That is not the way science works, and anyone who makes any pretence of being engaged in scientific discourse should be well aware of that. But then, science has very little to do with what creation 'scientists' are about.

This is, sadly, typical of the less-than-honest political propagandist approach creationists use in their "mission". Unlike genuine scientists they conduct little, if any, scientific research in support of their contention that the natural processes of the world are as a direct result of a supernatural creation event within the past 6-10,000 years, and of a global flood some 3,000 years ago. What they do seek to do is to attack the credibility of evolutionary (and other) theories that show up their claims for the poorly thought-out and simple-minded religious dogma they really are. Because they are not engaged in scientific research, and thus cannot hope to succeed on the scientific level, they resort to ad hominem attacks on the genuine scientists who have exposed their myths.

What are the effects?

What effects will the dissemination of this particularly egregious example of that tactic have in the real world? What effect would it have, for example, on Richard Dawkins' professional reputation among his scientific peers? We would suspect practically none, because no professional biologist, nor any other competent scientist, would be hoodwinked for a moment into thinking that Prof. Dawkins had been baffled by such a crudely easy question.

But that misses the point of the tape. This propaganda is not aimed at professional scientists who would not be fooled by the implied message. Richard Dawkins' academic chair deals with the "Public Understanding of Science" and, as such, he is among those academics who are sometimes referred to as "public intellectuals", those scientists, and others, who make their expertise and knowledge available and comprehensible to the public.

So what of his public reputation? Less scientifically literate members of the public, who have the misfortune to be subjected to this propaganda, may be led to believe that he had been stumped by a simple question and, as a consequence, they might be misled into believing that creationists are actually engaged in scientific debate. Nothing could be further from the truth — their purpose, pure and simple, is political.

There is yet another consequence — in some ways more serious. There are many people whose strongly held religious beliefs make them prime targets for creationist propaganda. Should these people see this video tape, and, by it be encouraged to believe that creation 'science' has found a fatal flaw in the theory of evolution, then they have been cruelly deceived by people they have been led to believe they can trust.

Most scientifically literate people, and even many of those whose understanding of it is slight, have long recognised creation 'science' for the infantile religious dogma that it is, so this crude propaganda is unlikely to have a great deal of lasting effect on them. But those who have little understanding of science, and particularly those who have trusted the creationists' claim that they are engaged in science, have had their trust betrayed. The nature of the calls we have received from people who have seemingly swallowed this line leave us in no doubt that that is precisely what has happened.

This is not the way of science — it is the way of political propaganda — yet another blatant example of "telling lies for God".