

“Did the Human Genome Project Prove that Darwin Was Right?”

Help! I read Arthur Caplan’s article [“Darwin Vindicated!”](#) about the results of the Human Genome Project and it is seriously shaking my faith!

Caplan has never been a friend of Christians or creationists. In this inflammatory article, designed to stimulate public opinion, he has outdone himself. If Darwin were alive today, he would be astounded and humbled by what we now understand about the human genome and the genomes of other organisms. In some respects, it is difficult to know where to begin. So let’s just pick a few of the more glaring statements to help us understand that little else should be trusted.

First, he says, “Eric Lander of the Whitehead Institute in Cambridge, Mass., said that if you look at our genome it is clear that evolution must make new genes from old parts.”

While it may be true that we can see some examples of shared sequences between genes, it is by no means true that we see wholesale evidence of gene duplication throughout the genome. According to Li, et. al., (*Nature* 409, 15 Feb 2001:847-848) less than 4,000 genes belong to superfamilies that show sequences sharing at least 30% of their sequence. Over 25,000 genes demonstrated less than 30% sequence identity, indicating that as much as 62% of the human genes mapped by the Human Genome Project were unique, i.e., not likely the result of gene duplication. Determining that similar genes are the result of gene duplication is tricky business, not the least of which is trying to find out just how duplicated genes (which does occur) ever arrive at a new function. There are lots of guesses out there, but no observable mechanism exists at this time.

Second, he says, "The core recipe of humanity carries clumps of genes that show we are descended from bacteria. There is no other way to explain the jerry-rigged nature of the genes that control key aspects of our development."

Not everyone agrees. The complexity of the genome does not mean necessarily that it has been jerry-rigged by evolution. There is still so much we do not know. Caplan is speaking more out of ignorance and assumption than data. "Junk DNA" used to be a common term in genetics circles. Since only about 1.5% of the total human genome sequence codes for actual genes and proteins, the rest was thought to be junk, useless DNA. The term "Junk DNA" is rarely used in academic papers anymore because much of this "junk" is now known to have a purpose, usually a regulatory function. Even the highly repetitive elements are demonstrating patterns that indicate some kind of function. Listen to this comment from Gene Meyers, one of the principal geneticists from Celera Genomics:

"What really astounds me is the architecture of life," he said. "The system is extremely complex. It's like it was designed." My ears perked up. Designed? Doesn't that imply a designer, an intelligence, something more than the fortuitous bumping together of chemicals in the primordial slime? Myers thought before he replied. "There's a huge intelligence there. I don't see that as being unscientific. Others may, but not me." ("Human Genome Map Has Scientists Talking About the Divine – Surprisingly low number of genes raises big questions," Tom Abate, Monday, February 19, 2001, *San Francisco Chronicle*)

Jerry-rigged? Hardly! Confusing at the moment? Certainly! But more likely to reveal hidden levels of complexity than messy jerry-rigging.

Finally, Caplan says, "No one can look at how the book of life is written and not come away fully understanding that our genetic instructions have evolved from the same programs that

guided the development of earlier animals. Our genetic instructions have been slowly assembled from the genetic instructions that made jellyfish, dinosaurs, woolly mammoths and our primate ancestors.”

This comes partly from the documenting of fewer genes (30,000-45,000 genes instead of the expected 100,000 or more) and the fact that some of these genes are indeed very similar in nearly all species looked at. Are there similarities? Certainly! Are the similarities only explainable by evolution? Not at all!

First, the fewer genes are not a given number yet since the computer programs used to look for new genes relied on already known gene sequences to spot potential genes. Only crude estimates were used for the possibility of completely novel genes. Even if the number is correct, this means that the organization of the genome is as important as the actual genes. We already know that many genes can be used to make several different proteins through complex patterns of regulation. This only raises the stakes for evolution. More organization, more complexity are the hallmarks of design, not messy natural selection.

Also even though we only have two or three times as many genes as a fruit fly, Svante Paabo, writing in *Science* (Feb. 16, 2001, vol 291, p. 1219) said, “A glimpse of what this will show us comes from considering the fact that about 26,000 to 38,000 genes are found in the draft version of our own genome, a number that is only two to three times larger than the 13,600 genes in the fruit fly genome. Furthermore, some 10% of human genes are clearly related to particular genes in the fly and the worm.”

Basic cellular processes require many of the same proteins and therefore the same genes. Even if flies and humans are not related, why would these genes be expected to be dissimilar? Human engineers frequently reuse common elements because they

work. Besides, Paabo states that only 10% of the genes show any relationship. That means 90% do not. Far too much attention has been focused on the similarities and not enough on the differences. I welcome a sequence of the chimpanzee genome because I expect that among the many striking similarities, there will be uniquenesses unexplainable by Darwinian natural selection.

Arthur Caplan simply shows himself to be a part of the evolutionary establishment that appears to be worried by the inroads of intelligent design theory and is fighting back using only authority and bluster. "If I, Arthur Caplan, a bioethicist and Ph.D., say something loud enough and forcefully enough, some will believe it simply because of the position I hold." This strategy is slowly falling apart as the clear and ever increasing weight of the evidence causes more and more people to say, "Wait a minute, these guys (Phil Johnson, William Dembski, Mike Behe, Jonathan Wells, etc.) aren't dummies. Surely they can't be dismissed as easily as that." The bluster and appeals to authority are wearing thin and some are asking hard questions. Some will stop and begin to reevaluate; others, like Caplan, will only shout a little louder and ultimately lose credibility.

Stay tuned.

Respectfully,

Ray Bohlin
Probe Ministries

Cracking of human genome confirms theory of evolution

By Arthur Caplan, Ph.D.

SPECIAL TO MSNBC

Feb. 21, 2001 – The media flubbed the headline for the biggest news event in the past 50 years of science. The reporters and TV talking heads who crammed the Washington,

D.C., press conference on Feb. 12 did understand that the details they were hearing about the human genome offered the story of a lifetime. But, they missed the real headline. Their stories should have simply said, "Darwin vindicated!"

Most reporters ballyhooed the fierce competition between scientists working for the publicly funded Human Genome Project and those employed by the privately funded Celera Genomics Corporation of Rockville, Md., to gain credit for the discovery. Others wondered about the financial implications of allowing human genes to be patented.

Still other headlines were meant to give us pause about whether it would be good or bad to know more about the role genes play in determining our health. Knowing more about our genes, after all, might not be so great in an era in which there is not much guarantee of medical privacy but a pretty good chance of discrimination by insurers and employers against those with "bad" genes.

There were even a couple of headlines that suggested that humanity should not be quite so arrogant since we do not have as many genes as we thought relative to other plants and animals. In fact, as it turns out, we have only twice as many genes as a fruit fly, or roughly the same number as an ear of corn, about 30,000. Reductionism may not be all that it has been cracked up to be by molecular biologists.

But none of these headlines capture the most basic, the most important consequence of mapping out all of our genes. The genome reveals, indisputably and beyond any serious doubt, that Darwin was right—mankind evolved over a long period of time from primitive animal ancestors.

Our genes show that scientific creationism cannot be true. The response to all those who thump their bible and say there is no proof, no test and no evidence in support of evolution is, "The proof is right here, in our genes."

Eric Lander of the Whitehead Institute in Cambridge, Mass., said that if you look at our genome it is clear that evolution must make new genes from old parts.

The core recipe of humanity carries clumps of genes that show we are descended from bacteria. There is no other way to explain the jerry-rigged nature of the genes that control key aspects of our development.

No one can look at how the book of life is written and not come away fully understanding that our genetic instructions have evolved from the same programs that guided the development of earlier animals. Our genetic instructions have been slowly assembled from the genetic instructions that made jellyfish, dinosaurs, woolly mammoths and our primate ancestors.

There is, as the scientists who cracked the genome all agreed, no other possible explanation.

Sure the business side of cracking our genetic code is fascinating. And we all need to be sure that our government does not leave us in the genetic lurch without laws to ensure our privacy and protect us against genetic discrimination.

All that, however, is concern for the future. Right now the big news from mapping our genome is that mankind evolved. The theory of evolution is the only way to explain the arrangement of the 30,000 genes and three billion letters that constitute our genetic code.

The history of humanity is written in our DNA. Those who dismiss evolution as myth, who insist that evolution has no place in biology textbooks and our children's classrooms, are wrong.

The message our genes send is that Charles Darwin was right.

Arthur Caplan, Ph.D., is director of the Center for Bioethics at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia.