

The future looks bright

A report on the Discontinuity Conference,
Cedarville University, 15–17 August 2001

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Life originated in discrete groups that we can liken to the trees of an orchard. The paths in the orchard provide access to the trees and represent the discontinuity of life. The wise farmer carefully plans his orchard with adequate space so that he can care for the trees and harvest the fruit. Likewise, the Designer of life carefully created organisms with discontinuity that reveals His nature and intentions. If we examine these discontinuities, we will discover new insights into the meaning of biology. To explore discontinuity, creation biologists gathered at Cedarville University on 15–17 August 2001 for a conference titled *Discontinuity: Understanding Biology in the Light of Creation*. The conference drew 79 specialists and spectators for three days of presentations, discussion, and fellowship.

Speakers on the first day laid the Biblical, philosophical, scientific, and historical foundations for discontinuity. On the second day, speakers presented the various methods for identifying and interpreting discontinuity. The final day of the conference included talks on the application of discontinuity and a panel discussion. On the first two days of the conference, short research presentations were given in the afternoon by seven different speakers. As the conference progressed, certain important themes began to emerge.

The unity of explanation—consilience of induction—became the most significant goal and theme at the conference. As stated in the introduction to the conference notebook,

‘Although evolution may be poorly capable of explaining specific features of individual fields of science, the ability of evolution to explain the general features of so many fields of science is a piece of evidence strongly in its favor. The fact that a single theory can explain the general features of such diverse fields as population genetics, paleontology, developmental biology, and DNA sequence analysis is a powerful piece of evidence all by itself. The unified explanation of distinct pieces of evidence with a single, simple theory is called *consilience* To challenge a consilient theory successfully, one must construct a second consilient theory from similar pieces of evidence. To be widely accepted, the second theory should explain all the evidence of the first theory and then some. This conference is an attempt to begin that project for biology. To truly challenge evolutionary biology, we must offer a replacement theory.’¹

The dominance of the evolutionary idea of universal common ancestry—all organisms descend from a common ancestor—requires a compelling and consilient argument if evolution is to be challenged.

Throughout the conference, consilience looked like a difficult goal to attain. Each speaker presented biological discontinuities from his own field, Todd Wood in genomics, Charles Thaxton in biochemistry, Joseph Francis in cell biology, and Jonathan Wells in developmental biology. The consilience finally came into sharp focus during the presentation of Kurt Wise. Wise carefully demonstrated that each discontinuity detected by the previous speakers was also evident in the fossil record. Thus, evidence from biology and paleontology points to the **same** discontinuities. The diversity of evidence supporting the same conclusion, discontinuity in this case, forms the basis of a consilient argument.

The consilience of the argument for discontinuity establishes the reality of discontinuity, but the reality of discontinuity requires an explanation. In the past, creationists have been content with simply demonstrating that evolution cannot explain the origin of different kinds. Two speakers at the conference took discontinuity to a higher level by presenting theories to explain the particulars of both continuity and discontinuity. John Mark Reynolds presented a model derived from Plato’s philosophy. Reynolds proposed that all possible forms of life were created in the beginning. The forms of all organisms that ever existed are only constrained by the conditions of existence, their constituent matter and the environment they occupy. In a similar vein, Richard Sternberg reviewed structuralism, a pre-Darwinian model of biology. Structuralists believe in the primacy of biological form in and of itself. They eschew reductionist theories, such as natural selection, that invoke function as the explanation of form. Structuralism is often associated with neo-Platonism, perhaps due to the transcendental structuralism of Richard Owen. Sternberg introduced the conference participants to the idea of a rational taxonomy of organisms, similar to the periodic table, a rational classification of elements. As evidence of the rational taxonomy, Sternberg cited butterfly wings and mollusk shells, the variety of which may be described in precise mathematical terms.

Models such as Reynolds’s and Sternberg’s must not be ignored, for they represent a line of thinking that creationism sorely needs. These models, or others like them, would allow creationists to predict organismal forms that have not yet been observed, much like the (often unsuccessful) prediction of evolutionary transitional fossils. In contrast to the evolution model, however, the creation model could predict forms based on regularities in the morphological patterns of baramins rather than an imagined evolutionary history. Thus, creation biology would be better than evolution at predicting animal form. As illustrated by Reynolds and Sternberg, we still have a long way to go to develop such a theory.

Richard Sternberg also explicitly stated a third important theme of the conference, holism. Rather than focus on constituent parts, Sternberg challenged creation biologists to focus on the form of the organism. He even claimed that scientists working at these lower levels (such as genetics or biochemistry) are not doing biology. Along a slightly different line of argument for holism, several speakers presented evidence that many biological phenomena are not directly reducible to their components. Jonathan Wells presented non-genetic inheritance patterns, Joseph Frances demonstrated that the uniformity of cell division actually represents several very different mechanisms, and Todd Wood illustrated the irreducibility of the genetic code to simple enzymatic reactions. Many conference participants struggled with this anti-reductionism, highlighting the powerful influence of materialist reductionism on even long-time creationists. A more thorough evaluation of creationism and reductionism is needed to root out vestiges of materialist thinking in creationism.

These conference themes—consilience, predictive theories, and holism—produced lively discussions and disagreements among many in attendance. At some points creationists were chastised, but always in the spirit of improvement rather than criticism. For example, Sternberg challenged creationists to stop using evolutionary terms (e.g. *phylogenetic*) to describe baramins and their history. He advocated forming a new vocabulary to describe the new theories under development. This spirit of encouragement pervaded the conference. Although the conference was unashamedly young-Earth in orientation (with a young-Earth Biblical interpretation presented by David Fouts on the first day), people holding different beliefs about the age of the Earth or the mechanism of creation attended the conference. These people came together to discuss these differences in a way that honed the thinking of all parties involved. Remarkably, unity prevailed at the conference despite diversity of belief.

The themes of the conference and the spirit of unity made the conference an outstanding success. The discontinuity conference marks another milestone in the development of creation biology. The Baraminology Study Group (BSG), which organized this conference, first met at Bryan College in 1997. Six people attended to discuss mostly baraminology methodology. Two years later, a second BSG meeting was held at Liberty University and attracted 25 participants. The Cedarville conference saw



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Photo by Scott Huck

a broadening of scope and impact, with 79 in attendance. The participants at this most recent conference have made important theoretical strides, but a comprehensive and systematic creation biology model remains a distant goal. This goal can be achieved, however, through continued research excellence and scientific cooperation. As biologists steadily come forward to join the work, our understanding of God and His Creation continues to expand and grow. The future looks bright indeed.

References

1. Wood, T.C., Discontinuity; in: Helder, M. (Ed.), *Discontinuity: Understanding Biology in the Light of Creation*, Baraminology Study Group, p. 3, 2001.