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Evolution: Texas' textbooks drive the nation so an olive branch solution might be in order

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A proposal before the Texas Board of Education calls for including the "strengths and weaknesses" of evolution in the state's science curriculum.

This initiative is understood by supporters and opponents to be a strategic effort to get around First Amendment restrictions on teaching religion in science class. The proposal is a new round in an old debate, and, if it fails, creationists will innovate once again, just as they have since the 1920s.

If they succeed, there could be national implications: Because of Texas' sizable school population, the state curriculum can influence national standards.

Book publishers don't want to produce multiple versions of the same text for different states or regions, so ideas that work their way into Texas' curriculum often end up shaping content in classrooms elsewhere.

Opponents of teaching intelligent design — civil libertarians, scientists and educators alike — have fought these challenges with a scorched-earth line of attack. No compromise, ever. Bloggers opposed to the idea of intelligent design ridicule its proponents as fundamentalist hicks, while formal assessments tend to condemn them in a slightly more civil tone.

Those who study social movements, as we do, know that loss does not always deter; in fact, crushing one's opponents, especially again and again, can create feelings of persecution and solidarity among them and deepen their commitment to their cause.

From a tactical perspective, this may not be the best way to protect the science curriculum or the separation of church and state.

From a more humanistic viewpoint, stigmatizing those who believe in intelligent design does not get us any closer to a respectful discourse. We presume that the Texas challenge will be found to violate the Constitution and that scientists will never accept the watering down of evolutionary concepts in the classroom. But by taking seriously a concern of critics of evolution, educators could offer an olive branch that might result in less debate overall and in better-informed students.

Intelligent design and previous creationist debates appear to center on where humans came from. A less public yet similarly powerful motive of activists is their belief that the materialist underpinnings of evolutionary theory harm children's values. For example, the defender of fundamentalism in the 1925 Scopes "monkey trial," Williams Jennings Bryan, was motivated by his conclusion that Darwinism taught "the law of the jungle" and had led to World War I by subverting the morality of the Germans.

More recently, "the Wedge," an infamous leaked strategy document of intelligent design proponents, suggests that advocates are not as concerned about the truth of evolution as they are about the underlying values they think it teaches. The paper concludes that teaching evolution leads to moral relativism. As one contemporary supporter of intelligent design put it, "Darwinian evolution tells us not only where we came from but also what behavior Teach kids they are animals, and . . . is natural and normative for humans. they'll act like animals."

We propose a compromise that would neither violate the establishment clause of the First Amendment nor limit the teaching of evolution in the public schools.

Most defenders of evolution do not consider valid the critics' fears that evolution teaches values. Even so, teachers could take these concerns seriously by clarifying what evolutionary theory does not imply about values. To assuage the type of concern articulated by William Jennings Bryan, teachers could tell students that even though evolutionary science talks about the survival of the fittest organism, it is not a model for how humans should treat each other.

They could explain that students should not make an "ought" about human behavior from an "is" of nature and that competition in contemporary society will not lead to increased survival rates. Moreover, they could explicitly note that just because mutations in organisms are random, it does not follow that human morality is random.

We are not asking teachers to discuss what morality should look like but, rather, to explain that morality does not logically flow from evolutionary theory.

This will not allay all the fears of those who could be attracted to intelligent design. But it's understandable that parents could be concerned that evolution entices their children to think unconsciously of themselves as creatures with animalistic impulses, to lose faith in their religious traditions and to think that if the nature of animals is determined by random mutations, then morality must be random as well.

Teaching consciously what evolution does not need to imply for morality recognizes these concerns and does not cross church-state separation boundaries. Furthermore, challenging students to think about the connections between science and society would promote high-quality science instruction.

We recognize that, ultimately, we are asking teachers to shoulder yet another burden. To us, though, this seems lighter than the burden that would ensue if evolution's opponents became even more disgruntled with their public schools and tried still more novel challenges, straining the courts and generating conflict in communities across our country.

