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## 'LUCY' OUT OF CONTEXT: A REPLY

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### Abstract

*Anti-creationists do not always adhere to the standards they demand of creationists.*

### Introduction

In "Lucy out of Context," published in *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Leon Albert (1985) voices his concern over the incidence of out of context quoting in creationist literature. He discusses the creationist claim that the australopithecines are not prehuman, particularly *Australopithecus afarensis*, the species to which 'Lucy' belongs. His report is an enthusiastic indictment and does raise some important issues, particularly the

tendency of creationists to apply to *A. afarensis* statements made about other australopithecine forms with little or no justification for the generalization. However, it also conveys the impression that virtually all creationists are guilty of blatant errors no self-respecting evolutionist would ever commit, which is highly misleading. Albert himself commits most of the errors he catalogs as part of the creationist repertoire. His own article is thus an excellent example of the fact that greater care needs to be taken in evaluation of these fossils—and the literature pertaining to them—by non-creationists as well.

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### Albert "Tactics"

For example, near the beginning of his report Albert pejoratively describes creationist arguments as "tactics" (p. 364), connoting stratagems which have no logical merit and serve only to sway the reader to one's side. On the same page, Albert asserts that scientific creationists insist on interpretation of Biblical passages within the context, but do not follow their own admonition—it is "a rule more often broken than observed." Not only is this statement entirely irrelevant to the rest of the article, supporting evidence for it is conspicuously absent. In other words, Albert's attempt to bias the reader against creationists before presenting any substantive discussion is a gratuitous swipe constituting tactical behavior indistinguishable from that which he is at pains to condemn. (This particular tactic has a name—it is called "poisoning the well.") Shortly thereafter Albert ridicules Henry Morris as the "high guru" of creationism, which is simply an insult and contributes nothing of substance to his analysis.

### Albert vs. Oxnard

Following this poor beginning, Albert proceeds to allege creationist misuse of a 1979 paper by Charles Oxnard entitled "Human Fossils: New Views of Old Bones." Albert's procedure for correcting the abuses is to misuse the paper himself. For instance, about Oxnard's opinion of the place of *afarensis*, he says (pp. 368-9):

Oxnard's article . . . refers to the 'new fossil finds' of Johanson and others and expressly identifies this material as humanlike. Moreover, Oxnard places this new fossil material on the ancestral line of humans in the evolutionary tree included in his article . . . and, although he himself identifies this new material as "*Homo*," he plainly states that it will probably be classified among the australopithecines. He even warns his readers to be alert to this likely change in names. Needless to say, Morris, Gish, and Bliss studiously avoid any reference to this warning when they cite Oxnard.

In contrast to creationist claims that Oxnard does not consider *afarensis* fossils to be humanlike, Albert says here that he "expressly" classifies them that way and situates them "on the ancestral line of humans." Let us see.

In the passage just quoted, Albert alludes to Oxnard's diagram of an evolutionary tree, but does not mention that the part of the figure associated with the supposed "expressly" humanlike material is actually described by Oxnard as "hedged in with many question marks" (1979b, p. 274). Is something hedged in with question marks "'expressly" humanlike, or is it instead tentative and indefinite?

Albert would know had he consulted Oxnard's *Order of Man*, where the figure in question is reprinted (1983, p. 2). In the caption under the figure, Oxnard's previous judgment is restated and reinforced: "Question marks demonstrate just how problematical all this is." Oxnard also suggests for the australopithecine fossils the possibility that "no individual fossil so far found bears any strict linear relationship to humans," and refers to the "exciting uncertainty" indicated by the question marks (p. 1). These statements hardly con-

stitute an endorsement of the *afarensis* material as "expressly" humanlike and are certainly at variance with Albert's claims.

Perhaps Albert would maintain that Oxnard actually thought in "New Views" that *afarensis* was humanlike and simply changed his mind by 1983. This possibility can be checked: Oxnard discusses the fossils in two other papers published during the same year as "New Views." In one, Oxnard asks, "are they similar enough to man to . . . be capable of being ancestors of man?" He answers, "we cannot quite tell," adding that "we may prefer to be extremely circumspect" in evaluating them, due to the well-known tendency of fossil discoverers to exaggerate the significance of their finds: "there has never yet been hailed a new find that was not a human ancestor, and . . . that was not bipedal" (1979a, pp. 242-3). In the other paper, Oxnard says, "one hopes that greater caution will be used in the assessment of the new finds than was in the evaluation of the old; alas, it already seems that some of them may not be all they are represented to be" (1979c, p. 430). These papers, too, controvert Albert's portrayal of Oxnard's views.

Albert (p. 369) claims that in his diagram, Oxnard actually "places this new fossil material on the ancestral line of humans." Examination of the figure in question reveals that none of the *afarensis* material is directly connected to the human lineage, contrary to Albert's claim. The only direct connection is in Albert's own diagram! The diagram is labeled "After Oxnard": apparently Albert is overwhelmed by his opinion of the *afarensis* fossils to the point of reading his own beliefs into Oxnard's work.

That tendency can also be seen from the inclusion in Albert's diagram of *Homo habilis* as an early representative of *Homo*, which, in a figure captioned "After Oxnard," is ludicrous. *H. habilis* is entirely absent from Oxnard's figure, and Oxnard has repeatedly stated elsewhere that he considers *habilis* a misnamed australopithecine (1975a, p. 389; 1975b, pp. 3, 80, 121-2; 1983, pp. 1, 309, 331).

Albert writes that some creationists "are guilty of reading opinions into Oxnard's article that not only are not there but are actually in direct contradiction to what is there" (p. 369). He describes these acts as "scholarly felonies," commenting that "in order to achieve this, they have been dishonest both with themselves and with their readers."

Albert seems to convey the impression to the reader that he is the paragon of careful scholarship. Allying a definite opinion on Oxnard's part regarding the status of *afarensis* as prehuman ("expressly humanlike," "on the human lineage," etc.) reads into his article an opinion not there. Placing *Homo habilis* explicitly on the main human lineage in a figure captioned "After Oxnard" brings in a species name Oxnard does not accept, and directly contradicts his published statements. *These practices are precisely those for which Albert criticizes creationists.* His behavior is indistinguishable from that which he condemns and attributes to creationists. One must therefore conclude that if creationists commit "scholarly felonies" and are "dishonest both with themselves and with their readers," (p. 369), they are hardly alone. Albert says creationists

“creatively reinterpret” (p. 368) Oxnard’s writing; his own ability in that regard is dazzling.

If all this were not enough, Oxnard’s more recent writings even more clearly fail to reflect the position Albert attributes to him. Albert makes much of Oxnard’s “expressly” humanlike classification of *afarensis* in 1979, but in *Order of Man*, Oxnard says (1983, pp. 331-2):

The claim . . . that these new australopithecines are ancestral to both humans and later australopithecines may turn out to be correct. But the Afar fossils are new and have not yet been studied by independent laboratories to allow it to be corroborated. It is just as possible that the claim will turn out to be wrong . . . it is entirely possible that we may eventually decide that this species, *Australopithecus afarensis*, is as lief upon a lineage leading only to the later australopithecine[s] as upon other alternatives.

Of course this refutes Albert’s portrayal of Oxnard’s views, and Albert mentions not a word of it.

In the same source, Oxnard documents support for his earlier suspicions that *afarensis* is not prehuman. His reasons (pp. *i-iii*) form, essentially, a catalog of observations pertaining to recent studies of *afarensis* fossils by several investigators. Here Oxnard lumps *afarensis* with the other australopithecines in his criticisms of that group as not primarily humanlike. He does not deny that there are some humanlike features, nevertheless he lists a number of affinities with other australopithecines or with apes: features of the pelvis, spine, elbow region, shoulder, foot, etc. While recognizing the emphasis many writers place on the potential for bipedality they see in *afarensis*, Oxnard presents many points strongly implicating tree-dwelling behaviors. He concludes, after surveying a number of studies, that “though the standard idea is that some of the australopithecines are implicated in a lineage of human-like forms, the new possibility suggested in this book, a radiation separate from either humans or African apes, has received . . . powerful corroboration” (p. *iii*).

#### Recent Work

If Oxnard ever considered the *afarensis* fossils humanlike (which is doubtful), it is clear he does so no more. It is also clear that Albert utterly neglects to inform the reader of this fact. His way of dealing with it is not to mention it. Albert focuses on comments published in 1979, falsely elevating them to an endorsement of prehuman status for ‘Lucy,’ and nowhere mentions Oxnard’s more recent statements.

Albert’s use of older references to build his case when more current ones are available is a practice identical to that which he criticizes, though he is so scandalized and indignant when he thinks this is done by creationists. This use of Oxnard’s older remarks to argue a point Oxnard does not support is yet another of the “scholarly felonies” of which Albert accuses others but engages in himself. If his article constitutes out of context use of another’s work in any way different from that which he so strongly condemns, I fail to discern the distinction. This seems to me a bitter irony indeed.

#### Conclusion

It appears that Albert’s enthusiasm for creationist-bashing often gains the upper hand over his better judgment. Statements (p. 371) such as “mendacity . . . seems to be a prerequisite to mendaciousness in the ranks of ‘scientific’ creationism” are not notable for an excess of sobriety or restraint. Nor are phrases such as “scholarly felonies” and “flat-out lying,” (p. 368). This prediction for inflammatory rhetoric is doubly unfortunate in view of the presence in his own analysis of the same errors he denounces.

One is very much less inclined to take Albert’s views seriously when the principles he professes to value—accurate interpretation and representation of other authors’ views, use of current rather than outdated sources, and so forth—are so manifestly betrayed. The thought that Albert is pretty mendacious himself may cross many creationist minds, and the temptation may be great to reject his analysis entirely. I hope this is not the result. In general he should have assessed the strength of his arguments with greater deliberation before embarking on such a hasty course of condemnation. It is unfortunate that he epitomizes so perfectly the zeal-induced blindness of which he accuses others.

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## Formation of the Thomas G. Barnes Institute of Physics

A new organization has been formed to honor Dr. Thomas G. Barnes, continue his outstanding work and publicize his theories. *Physics of the Future* and *Space Medium*, written by Barnes, have revealed unlimited areas for further research.

The purpose of the Institute shall be to promote educational work, research and study in the field of physics with the goal of promoting and advancing the theories of Thomas G. Barnes, formerly on the Board of Directors of CRS. The Institute will emphasize the classical approach to physics and demonstrate the inadequacies of relativity and quantum theories.

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