

Dear Dr Plait,

I note that your blog has moved over to Slate magazine. I wish it well, since only good can come of proper popularisation of science. In my opinion, however, there has been a serious failure in some recent commentaries of yours. I believe that your personal attacks on some colleagues, particularly Prof Chandra Wickramasinghe, have been uncalled-for, unfair and irresponsible. People who rely on sites such as yours for information will quite likely be misled.

Let me begin with the following: “So, to be polite about it, Wickramasinghe is something of a fringe scientist. Who would publish a paper by him?”

In answer to your question, here is a partial list:

Nature

Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society

Astrophysical Journal

Astronomical Journal

Publications the Astronomical Society of Japan

Earth, Moon, Planets

International Journal of Astrobiology

Reports of Progress in Physics

Astrophysics and Space Science

Space Science Reviews

Microbiology

International Journal of Modern Physics

... and so on.

In all, Prof Wickramasinghe has about 350 publications in the refereed literature, 75 of them in Nature.

You state that “to be polite about it, Wickramasinghe is something of a fringe scientist”, and: “Now, you might accuse me of using an *ad hominem*... but sometimes an *ad hominem* is warranted!”, and later backtrack: “...this is not really an *argumentum ad hominem*, but more of a meta-argument made on past behavior.” The latter presupposes a state of past ‘fringeness’ in the first place. Whatever the semantic niceties, the effect is the same. And you sprinkle your blogs with comments such as “The lead author is N. C. Wickramasinghe, and as soon as I saw his name alarm bells exploded in my head.”

One doesn’t expect too much in the way of scholarly standards in a blog, but this casual assassination of a lifetime’s hard-won reputation is deplorable. The ‘fringe scientist’ label seems to have escaped the notice of a number of distinguished institutes. Any one of their awards below would be a significant achievement (the list is again partial):

The United Nations (the International Dag Hammarskjold Gold Medal for Science, jointly with Fred Hoyle)

Cambridge University (the ScD, the highest doctorate Cambridge gives; and a fellow of Jesus College)

The President of Sri Lanka (the title of Vidya Jyothi, the highest honour for science in Sri Lanka)

The International Sahabdeen award for Science

The Soka University of Tokyo (honorary doctorate)

The University of Ruhuna, Sri Lanka (another honorary doctorate)

The Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland (John Snow medallist)

... and so on, the 'so on' including the delivery of many endowed lectures at universities worldwide. The European Space Agency likewise seem to have missed Chandra Wickramasinghe's 'fringeness' since he is a consultant member of their Rosetta team mission.

It is certainly true that the concept, developed with Fred Hoyle (another fringe scientist in your judgement?) of panspermia as ongoing and responsible for both evolution and some current illnesses is daunting and not generally accepted, but so what? We could both draw up a third list, this one of mainstream ideas which came in from the cold. If, like many others, you have objections to the idea of incoming viruses (even as an academic possibility), then the proper approach is to state these objections and have them scrutinised in the normal way, not to make personal attacks on the proposers.

A search on Phil Plait reveals three joint papers and one astronomical result. And while I would not for a moment denigrate "the discovery of a candidate substellar companion to HR 7329", one does have to wonder how this record of scientific achievement compares with Wickramasinghe's and whether it qualifies you to pass judgement on his position in the world of science.

You will appreciate that my complaint is not with your opinion on the science, either the diseases from space, the nature of the Polonnaruwa object (personally I do not rush to judgement on the matter), the high altitude microorganisms or whatever (by the way the Russian Academy of Sciences should be added to your fringe list since they are financing similar balloon experiments). The history of science is stuffed with 'fringe' ideas, some of which turned out to be correct, most of which turned out to be wrong, and one must make one's own personal judgements. Likewise, if you are content to be seen as Defender of the Orthodox, that's your business. However I do urge you to lay off the personal abuse, if only in the interests of your own reputation. See for example:

<http://wattsupwiththat.com/2013/09/24/the-reply-to-the-bad-astronomer-phil-plait-that-slate-com-refused-to-publish/>

You can make your points without it.

Finally, let me at last turn to a piece of real science. You state that, "So to me, panspermia is an interesting idea but has no evidence to support it. There are a host of other problems with it as well..." It is of course interesting to know that you have come across "a host of other problems" with panspermia. I'm sure you're right, and urge

you to raise these problems, in the refereed literature if you can, in your blog if you can't, but in any case without the *ad hominem*.

Yours sincerely,

Bill Napier

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