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“Intelligent Design: Theological Considerations

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Intelligent Design: What is at stake theologically?

ID is the concept that “certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection” (Discovery Institute). In particular, those instances of irreducible complexity,ⁱ specified complexityⁱⁱ and the fine-tuning of the universe (that makes life as we know it possible) commend themselves to ID proponents. Put simply, the *improbability* of such things occurring by chance and through natural causes justifies, they believe, the inference of intelligent design.

This sort of thinking is not new. ID is a new variation on an old argument. A brief historical survey may be instructive. We see the argument regularly arise, face challenges, and--with a remarkable resilience--simply assume new forms in response to the challenges. The argument from design appears very early in western classical tradition, in pre-Christian sources. Cicero, in 45 BCE, in his book on *The Nature of the Gods*, actually presented both sides of the argument in a form that is strangely familiar to our ears because it in fact reiterates itself in our very contemporary discussion. Speaking for the Stoics who favored “intelligent design” he posed the question, “When we see a mechanism such as a planetary model or a clock, do we doubt that it is the work of a conscious intelligence? So how can we doubt that the world is the work of the divine intelligence?” (2.97). Then Cicero lays out the Atomists view to counter that, “The world is made by a natural process, without any need of a creator...Atoms come together and are held together by mutual attraction.” No intelligent design or designer need be postulated.

Moving on to the Middle Ages, the argument gets freshly elaborated when Aristotelian physics is rediscovered with its four types of causes: efficient, material, formal and final. The argument goes, if there is a formal cause (that is a design) then there must be a final cause (a designer). As Thomas Aquinas works this out in his “five ways” the structure of his argument is very much shaped by Aristotelian physics, and the then prevalent

assumption that an effect cannot be greater than its cause. It was also assumed that something can be known of the cause from the effect. His argument proceeds *a posteriori* from observable “effects” such as the odd fact that the planets move even though they are not conscious and therefore cannot move themselves. Everything must be moved by something, and, since there can be no infinite regress; this all has to stop somewhere. Thomas concludes that it stops with an “Unmoved Mover,” who is God.

Formidable challenges to this form of the argument from design arise when Newton discovers the physical laws of nature and is able to explain the movement of the spheres without divine intervention to move things around in space. But rather than allowing this to count against the argument from design Newton himself reformulates it. He proclaims God the architect of these physical laws that explain the motion of the planets.

In the 18th century William Paley reformulates the argument from design by attending to specific instances of design. He takes the eye as a case in point and the ways in which the various parts of the eye cooperate in a complex way to produce sight. Such an adaptation of means to ends, he claims, *requires* that we postulate an intelligent designer. As he argues, it is as if we found a watch while crossing a heath. Rather than assume it had come together by chance we would assume an intelligent designer put it together. His argument was countered by both Hume and Kant fairly effectively, and then, with the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of the Species*, rather decisively. The theory of evolution offered a genuine alternative explanation to apparent design in organisms. After Darwin, we are no longer left with mere chance on the one hand or intelligent design on the other.

But this very resilient argument does not dissolve; rather it finds a new form that is responsive to Darwin’s discoveries. In a manner reminiscent of Newton’s reformulation, the theological focus of attention shifts from particular divine interventions to the wider divine design. What makes mutation and natural selection work in the way that it does? How did material existence come to be self-organizing in the way that it is? Why is the universe intelligible? Why is it suitable for the emergence of life? Many believers have accepted what we learn from science and do not assume that evolution is necessarily incompatible with belief in God.

This is decidedly *not* the route taken by proponents of Intelligent Design. That brings us to the present. In my view, what we see in the latter is a return to the sorts of arguments popular *before Darwin*. Their proposals are vaguely reminiscent of Paley. Here is one example. If archeologists find a statue made of stone in a field, they may justifiably conclude that the statue was designed and seek to identify the designer. This is a “sign of intelligence” and a very different situation from archeologists finding a large boulder. Remembering Paley’s arguments this is “*déjà vu* all over again.”

Why this refusal of evolution or in the more modest forms, why this need to make some exceptions to the ordinary process by which to highlight a direct divine design? I have puzzled as to what is at stake for the proponents of ID. The answer may lie in the larger goals they articulate here and there. Among other things, they see themselves as combating a scientific materialism which “suffocates the human spirit.” Perhaps we sympathize. Many science-friendly, evolution-supporting theologians also resist tendencies to materialist reductionism. Think of Nancey Murphy’s non-reductive physicalism, or John Polkinghorne’s dual-aspect monism, or Joseph Sittler’s holy naturalism, or the whole school of theistic and religious naturalists. But there is a significant difference. All these thinkers are very clear that the discussion of what is ultimately real, places us in the realm of metaphysics and theology. There are no claims that this reflection is “science.” As John Haught has argued, to claim to know (one way or the other) the answer to the question of what is ultimately real is to go beyond science. This is the case whether one makes that claim for supernaturalism or materialism or anything on the continuum between. Such conclusions are beyond the purview of science. Science can neither endorse nor refute the existence of God. Interestingly, an odd coalition is formed between proponents of ID and proponents of scientific materialismⁱⁱⁱ—they seem agree that the question of God *can* be settled by science. ☺

The proponents of ID seem to want to level the playing field with science when they claim, for example that evolution is “only a theory,” and ID is an alternative theory that ought, in fairness, to be given equal time. Here they use “theory” in the vernacular more like a “guess” or a “hunch.” But the *scientific* meaning of theory is rather “a well-substantiated explanation of some aspect of the natural world that incorporates observations, facts, laws, inferences, and tested hypotheses.” (Ayala, 2006, p. 73) The theory of evolution is more comparable, really, to the “theory” that the earth is round or that our solar system heliocentric.^{iv}

Why the insistence among ID proponents that this is *science*, a scientific theory to be placed alongside the *theory* of evolution. Part of what I think is going on here is that they mean to be making *truth claims* and are grappling with what counts as truth in our context. The “regime of truth” in our context is scientific. In the popular mindset, to claim that something is “true” is often reduced to claiming that it can be shown to be the case *scientifically*. This is how I understand the desperation to show that intelligent design is science and has scientific evidence to back it up.

Is this good science?

Sympathetic as I am, I have to ask, “Is this good science?” I do not think it qualifies as science. “The scientific method refers to a body of techniques for investigation of phenomena and the acquisition of new knowledge of the natural world, without assuming the existence or nonexistence of the supernatural, an approach sometimes called methodological naturalism.” (Wikipedia) A kind of agnosticism is required for the sake of openness and objectivity. This attitude does not characterize the methods of ID, as it goes looking for “signs of intelligence,” and readily admitting a supernaturalistic conclusion where complexities are found.

An overwhelming majority of the scientific community views intelligent design as unscientific.^v In fact, prior to the hearing of *Kitzmiller v. Dover* (the case in Pennsylvania where the question was whether ID would be taught in public schools as part of the science curriculum). Thirty-eight Nobel laureates issued a statement to this effect saying that ID is “fundamentally unscientific.” It does not meet even the very basic qualifications as a scientific theory: it cannot be observed, repeated, tested or falsified; it does not generate any predictions; and it does not yield new hypotheses.^{vi} In stating the decision of the courts in this case, Judge John E. Jones, III said, “We have addressed the seminal question of whether ID is science. We have concluded that it is not, and moreover that ID cannot uncouple itself from its creationist, and thus religious, antecedents.” (Wikipedia)

Opponents have made many pointed criticisms of the overall argument that would call it into question at another level if it *were* taken as a scientific approach.

One criticism is the degree to which the argument depends upon improbability—i.e. How unlikely it is that the initial conditions of the universe would be just the ones necessary for emergence of carbon-based life; therefore, there must have been an intelligent design. Already this ignores the possibility of other kinds of life emerging under other kinds of conditions. In his article “Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and its Consequences” John Allen Paulos urges that improbability should never be taken as the evidence of anything. When one is dealt a hand of bridge, for example, there is a 1 in 600 billion chance that one will receive any one hand. And yet—for good or ill--one does. Consider how the improbabilities pile up in a particular sequence of bridge hands in any good long evening of bridge, where there are several foursomes. And yet we do all play on, and do receive a particular hands and particular sequences of hands--improbable as it all may be.

Another criticism is that the ID argument is in fact an “argument from ignorance.” We do not clearly and directly observe the sequence of causes that yielded these complexities in nature. But that does not permit jumping to a conclusion that intelligent design must therefore be at work. An explanation must stand on its own evidence, not on the failure of alternatives. (Ayala, 2006, p. 76) Methodologically, it is more sound and responsible to say, “We do not see,” than to fill in the blanks with an intelligent designer outside the system of natural causes and their ordinary operation. An important principle in science is that, “the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.” (Wikipedia)

One other note comes from the evidence as we do see it. Jerry Coyne from the University of Chicago has quipped, “Either life resulted not from intelligent design, but from evolution; or the intelligent designer is a cosmic prankster who designed everything to make it look as though it had evolved.”^{vii}

Is it good theology?

As difficult as it may be to affirm that ID is good science, I think the deeper difficulties are theological. The proponents are careful not to claim that they know scientifically that the intelligent designer is God. But as they speculate upon the conclusion that there is an intelligent design, the implication of an “intelligent designer” is implicit and takes us in some

troubling directions. My question is what is at stake theologically in this whole conversation?

First of all, the argument from ignorance that we said was “bad science” is a very close relation to the theological maneuver called “God of the gaps” which has never gone well for us. The “gaps” keep getting filled and the space for this kind of God closes in. It is ill advised to consign the divine to the restricted spaces of the unknown, uncontrollable, unpredictable. Such a God is too small—and too likely to get smaller with every scientific advance.

Secondly, if there is any doubt, I do not think this approach *works* as a “proof for God.” That in itself is not so damning. The alleged “proofs for God” only make sense to people who already believe on other grounds. Whether one believes or not is a question for faith; any conclusions we reach are always “underdetermined by the data.” Where ID intends to function as kind of evidence or proof for God, its reach exceeds its grasp. As with all the other arguments, we end up, with, at most, *pointer* toward God and not a *proof* for God. A pointer can, at least, give us reason to believe that we are not being unreasonable in believing. However, the deepest theological difficulty here is with the *kind of God* to which ID points.

The God of Christian faith is not conceived as a “Designer” primarily, but rather as a loving and generous Creator; one who creates a space for an “other” to be and upholds creation in its integrity and autonomy (*concursum*). One who manifests compassionate solidarity with us in our finitude and fragility. To speak of God as a “Designer,” conjures up a very different vision. We begin to entertain notions of a pre-existent blueprint in the mind of God that is working itself out inexorably.

This is doubly difficult for process theologians and other open theists. It seems too constraining and coercive. The freedom of creation in its semi-autonomous unfolding is compromised. The future is not genuinely open.

Furthermore, such a picture pushes us to ask about the “defects and imperfections that pervade the living world,” (Ayala, 2006, p. 85) In so many instances, a good engineer might do better—consider the mismatch between the human birth canal and the size of an infant’s head. You know what I mean! Is *this* an *intelligent* design? (Ayala, 2006, p. 87) Theologically this sort of thing is problematic, if it has to be assigned to

divine design. How much better to know that the mismatch is a function of natural causes as human cranial capacity has increased over eons!

Or, on the larger scale, what about the waste and carnage of our evolutionary history (99% of the species that have ever existed are extinct). One is tempted to say that if this is a *design*, it is *not a very good one!* 😊 It is certainly not one compatible with a designer reputed to be benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. It is, however, compatible with a process of natural selection.

With these theological quandaries in view, theologian John Haught has spoken of “Darwin’s gift to theology.” Arthur Peacocke has reminded us of what theologian Aubrey Moore said way back in 1891, “Darwinism appeared, and, under the guise of a foe, did the work of a friend.” (Ayala, 2006, p. 89)

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think there are important forces at work contextually, to which some faithful Christians are responding when putting forth Intelligent Design: namely, scientific materialism and its reductionist tendencies, and the challenge of making truth claims in an age wherein “truth” is equated with scientific truth. We need to understand what it at stake for those who urge such a view. Nevertheless, I believe this particular response is misguided and ends up doing more harm than good with respect to the viability of belief in God in our day. It is not good science and strains credibility when it claims to be. Furthermore, when it seeks to enlist science to impose religious teachings in public schools it engenders an understandable resentment and resistance in the wider society.

And it is not good theology; it does not yield a religiously viable vision of God. It yields instead a “Designer” who is not the Creator God of Christian faith, and not a God worthy of worship. The Designer God compromises creaturely freedom and exacerbates the problem of evil. A case might even be made that evolutionary theory is *more* compatible with Christian faith than is Intelligent Design. But that is another paper for another day.

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ⁱ Behe's examples of irreducible complexity include such things as the blood clotting cascade and the adaptive immune system. According to Behe an irreducibly complex system is one that is "composed of several well-matched, interacting parts that contribute to the basic function, wherein the removal of any one of the parts causes the system to effectively cease functioning." (Ayala, 2006, p. 77) The idea is that these could not develop piece at a time since the pieces cannot function until the system (i.e. the eye) is whole. Therefore it has to come into being "in one fell swoop."

ⁱⁱ Demski defines specified complexity as anything with less than 1 in 10 (to the 150th power) of occurring naturally.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is important here to make a distinction between methodological materialism (or naturalism) and metaphysical/ontological (?) materialism.

^{iv} Science has demonstrated again and again beyond any reasonable doubt that living organisms evolve and diversify over time and that their features have come about by natural selection, a process that accounts for their design. This is not inconsistent with belief in God or sense of God's presence in all natural phenomena. Science can neither endorse nor reject religious beliefs. (Ayala 2006, p. vii).

^v ID proponents have yet to publish an article in any established, peer reviewed scientific journal. Even Templeton Foundation, which actively seeks to reconcile religion and science, has withdrawn funding. (Wikipedia)

^{vi} From Wikipedia article on ID. For a theory to qualify as scientific, it must be:

- Consistent (internally and externally)
- Parsimonious (sparing in proposed entities or explanations, see Occam's razor)
- Useful (describes, explains and predicts observable phenomena)
- Empirically testable and falsifiable (see Falsifiability)
- Based upon multiple observations, often in the form of controlled, repeated experiments
- Correctable and dynamic (changes are made as new data are discovered)
- Progressive (achieves all that previous theories have and more)
- Provisional or tentative (admits that it might not be correct rather than asserting certainty)

^{vii} Jerry Coyne, "The Case Against Intelligent Design," *The New Republic*, August 22, 2005.