

Brian P. Madison
Duke University
bpm3@duke.edu

“Implications of Intelligent Design Theory for Cosmos as Creature and God as Creator”¹

What I will do for the next few pages is rather modest. That is to say, I will simply offer some observations of what seem to me would be the theological commitments of an intelligent design theorist regarding the nature of the cosmos as a created reality, and the nature of God as a Creator. Specifically, I will do so in reference to the classical Christian theism which I presuppose most actual thinkers and writers in the contemporary intelligent design movement would profess. Additionally, I will discuss intelligent design theory in relation to theodicy. William Dembski in his 2001 book *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence* notes that dysteleology – or suboptimal/malignant design (at least in reference to what we suppose to be human well-being and flourishing) – is a theological problem which cannot be addressed by the program of intelligent design itself.² Dembski has recently presented on theodicy and I will briefly engage his thoughts in the matter vis-à-vis intelligent design theory. But first, I should briefly recap what intelligent design theory is.

Contemporary intelligent design theorists propose that certain organic structures and life processes are too complex to have arisen without intentional arrangement. In other words, the contemporary intelligent design or ID program is about detecting whether or not there are entities, processes, and structures which exhibit intentional arrangement within the universe; the ID program is not attempting to establish whether the universe itself is designed. This also means that Intelligent Design theorists would acknowledge that much which is within the

¹ A version of this paper was originally presented in Washington, D.C. at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, November 20, 2006. This current version is as of December 11, 2006.

² William Dembski, *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), xvi.

universe *is not intelligently designed*, and is the result of the “unguided” interactions of particular entities, structures and processes under the conditions of chance, contingency, and law-like regularities characterizing the cosmos. Intelligent design theorists focus their efforts on detecting design in organisms due to the complexity living beings entail. Concepts such as irreducible complexity and specified complex information supposedly provide testable criteria to detect design and establish that particular organic structures and processes could only have arisen by the activity of an intelligent agent.

Irreducible complexity is the notion that particular structures and processes require multiple parts to be present simultaneously for those structures or processes to be functional for the organism possessing them. Michael Behe’s example of the five-part mousetrap – supposedly requiring all five parts to function as a mousetrap – has been the much trumpeted, much critiqued icon of this notion. Irreducibly complex structures and processes, therefore, supposedly could not have arisen in the piecemeal fashion of “descent with modification” that a neo-Darwinian account might offer, since no functionality could be obtained from a partial structure or process. As originally argued, the five part mousetrap could not have “evolved” piecemeal, but must have platform, hammer, hold-down bar, spring, and catch in order to function.³ In the realm of biology, the bacterial flagellum is the mascot of irreducible complexity, as it is, according to Intelligent Design theorists, non-functional without each of its forty some odd parts, and thus could not have evolved through natural processes/mechanisms such as natural selection.

Irreducibly complex structures and processes exhibit, according to William Dembski, arrangement that is improbably complex and functionally specific, or, in other words, specified complexity, the proposed hallmark of intentional arrangement or intelligent design. Dembski has

³For an early discussion of the mousetrap example see Michael J. Behe, "Intelligent Design Theory as a Tool for Analyzing Biochemical Systems," in William A. Dembski, ed, *Mere Creation: Science, Faith and Intelligent Design* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

expended a great deal of effort attempting to formulate an explanatory filter which essentially can detect and establish that a structure or process is specifically complex, and thus intelligently designed. ID theorists intend this proposal to be a scientific proposal. As such ID theorists' efforts must, in the final analysis, be assessed in terms of science, mathematics, and philosophy. In terms of theology, ID theorists are notoriously coy on the nature of the intelligent designer: their focus is on the detection of intentional arrangement, not on the intelligence which did the designing.

In and of itself, then, contemporary intelligent design has little to say theologically, even if an ID theorist holds the designer to be a supernatural being. At most, intelligent design, in and of itself, when paired with the notion of a supernatural designer would suggest that a supernatural being exists, this being has a form of intelligence, and that this being is capable of and does make particular alterations to particular entities within the universe. Not much more, if anything more, can be said. There is no need for the supernatural being to have created the universe, *ex-nihilo* or otherwise; it could be a demi-urge acting on an independently existing reality. There is no need for the supernatural being to have a providential plan or overarching purpose to its interactions with elements of the universe.

As I said at the outset, for the purposes of this paper I want to consider what intelligent design theory would imply about the nature of the created cosmos, and the nature of a cosmic Creator in the context of traditional Christian theism, what I take to be the theological stance of most in the contemporary intelligent design movement. And for the purposes of this paper, by traditional Christian theism, I mean minimally the understanding of the cosmos as ultimately dependent for its existence and character on a self-existent, personal, Creator deity, who

maintains a providential relationship with the cosmos. On those terms, it seems to me that a traditionally Christian theistic ID theorist would have to hold the following:

1) regarding the nature of the cosmos, the cosmos is truly distinct from God and is endowed by its Creator with a variety of characteristics such that many natural processes have their own integrity; however, without divine “special providence” in the form of specific interventions in the history of universe, the created cosmos is incapable of producing the forms of life God intends to exist as part of it (i.e. creaturely self-organization is insufficient/deficient vis-à-vis divine intentions for the created cosmos);

2) regarding the nature of God as Creator, God is capable of and desires interaction with the created cosmos in the unfolding of its history, such that certain aspects of the cosmos exhibit “chance” arrangement and certain (non-artificial or non-human-made) aspects exhibit specific design.

Additionally, a traditionally theistic intelligent design theorist would have to deal with theodicy – why a supernatural designer chooses to implement designs which do not seem optimal for creatures – and do so with the possibility of a new twist: what if intelligent design theorists were to establish on their own terms that creatures highly detrimental to humans such as HIV or Ebola exhibit specified irreducible complexity?

First: Creation as Created Cosmos

Recent scholarship in the science and theology dialogue has emphasized the capacity of created reality for autopoiesis, or “self-making” beyond merely “self-organizing.” The constituents of the world have properties such that basic structures under various specific conditions interact with each other with the result that more complex structures arise, including life forms. The world is not comprised of static entities and structures, and endlessly repeating

processes; but due to disequilibriums between and within systems the world is dynamic and able to bring forth novel entities, structures, processes, and systems. The natural world's ability for such is wholly implied by the contemporary natural sciences which, by definition, admit no non-natural (i.e. non-creaturely), causation. Theologically, such capacity(ies) for self-organization and self-making seem scripturally in accord with a close reading of the Genesis creation account. Others have observed that in Genesis 1, God's making living creatures coincides with God's command to let the earth bring produce life. Those making this observation would articulate the creativity of God as expressed in the inanimate creation itself bringing forth animate creatures as a new form, a new level of creaturely reality. Additionally, emphasizing the self-organizational properties and historical development of the created cosmos lends itself to notions of creaturely freedom and true creaturely distinction from God. In the Christian theological tradition the created cosmos is not God, and, as the creation of a loving Creator, is in some sense free – with freedom understood as a marker of relationships characterized by love. A created cosmos that has a part in its own becoming seems to accord with both the notion of God as loving that which is not God, and the understanding of the cosmos as possessing autopoietic capacities.

A creation possessing autopoietic capacities would manifest its true distinction from God, and a form of creaturely freedom, but not necessarily independence from God. Christian theological notions of creatureliness traditionally understand the created cosmos as dependent on God for its initial and continued existence, for aspects of its character (or why the cosmos is the kind of cosmos that it is), and as a reality which exists in interaction with the Creator, who is not a distant deistic first cause, but an agent providentially at work in creation. One of the ways Niels Henrik Gregersen addresses the relationship of an autopoietically endowed creation with its creator is in terms of “divine blessing.” He writes:

According to the notion of self-organization, natural processes, given enough time, *guarantee* that the world of creation attains increasingly complex orders – ‘for free’. Do we in religion find a similar awareness of orders that emerge ‘for free’?

We do. One example is the notion of *divine blessing*, common to the three Abrahamic faiths. God’s blessing is perceived as spreading into the networks of creation, so that the blessed person is enabled to pass on the power of blessing to others; at the same time, human agents are enabled to ‘bless’ God by thanksgiving. Hereby a divine-human economy of superabundance is slowly built up. This economy is both forceful and fragile: The blessing never reaches a state of natural equilibrium. At any time, it can be irrupted by non-reciprocation which may initiate avalanches of catastrophic processes. The blessing, however, is abundant as long as it lasts. The blessing of God thus at work is a structuring principle, at once transcendent in its origination and immanent in its efficiency. God is not perceived as a remote, a-cosmic designer of a world, but as creatively present in the midst of life by eliciting processes of fruitful albeit risky self-developments. Exactly the unfathomable richness of pattern formation *within* the world reveals the *transcendence* of divine creativity.⁴

The notion of a created cosmos possessing self-organizing and self-making characteristics does not preclude for Gregersen the immanent activity of God through blessing.

When intelligent design theorists argue that there is “no free lunch” they are *not* arguing that the world does not exhibit self-organizing capacities – or perhaps, to be more precise, self-reorganizing capacities. Many if not most contemporary ID theorists appear to acknowledge the neo-Darwinian principles of common descent of species and natural selection. What they would not uphold, is that the self-organizing/self-making capacities of the material world are sufficient unto themselves to account for *all* of the development and diversification of life. The dust of the earth does not have the capacity on its own to generate the specified complexity and irreducibly complex structures and systems which are evident in various organisms. More specifically, the dust of the earth could not generate life itself, if life is understood to bear novel, specifically complex informational content vis-à-vis inanimate realities. An immaterial intelligence is required to bring forth such novelty. Thus, autopoiesis as described by Gregersen could not be an

⁴ Niels Henrik Gregersen, “Beyond the Balance: Theology in a Self-Organizing World,” in Niels Henrik Gregersen and Ülf Gormam, ed., *Design and Disorder: Perspectives from Science and Theology* (New York: T&T Clark, 2002), 82-83.

divinely granted endowment inherent to creaturely entities, but divine activity in the strong sense of a deity's personal interaction. Theologically, then, ID theory would lean toward conceiving the created universe as truly distinct from God, in some sense free in its own becoming, but as requiring specific interventions by God to bring about the kinds of entities God intends to be part of the cosmos. Or, to put it differently, the material components of the universe need to be adjusted and rearranged by specific divine acts if the cosmos is going to become what God intends it to be.⁵

Why create a cosmos in need such adjustment by specific divine acts? One answer might be that it is part and parcel of the created cosmos' dependence on a God who is interested in interacting with it, and doing so in a particular fashion, i.e. periodically bringing forth novel structures and process that could not have arisen with such specific interaction. Such a cosmos would have a kind of freedom of becoming except in those instances where it was somehow deficient or perhaps more charitably, insufficient vis-à-vis God's purposes for it.

The notion of a cosmos in need of specific divine acts is not alien to traditional theological reflection. God breathes into the nostrils of an earthen figure in order that a human being may take stage within cosmic history. A traditionally theistic Intelligent Design theorist could draw upon traditionally theistic resources of understanding the created cosmos not only dependent on God for its existence and character, but also for its salvation/redemption and eschatological consummation. One theological tradition may argue that nature must be completed by grace; another might emphasize the fallenness of creaturely reality and its imprisonment to futility without divine redemptive activity. Of course, the traditionally theistic ID theorist would also face all of the critiques leveled at traditionally theistic notions of the

⁵ I say lean toward, because William Dembski argues against the notion that ID theory is interventionist per se. See *The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions about Intelligent Design*, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 178-182.

created cosmos. Dembski himself disparages the notion of a clocklike world which needs periodic adjustments by a clockmaker. Instead, he argues that the world is more like a musical instrument and God a musician, noting that a piano played by a concert pianist brings forth music of greater variety, sublimity, and novelty than a piano which plays itself.⁶

Second: Creation as Divine Act

Creation as a category of activity is traditionally granted only to God. A traditionally theistic doctrine of creation from nothing emphasizes the unique character of this form of causality. Creatures can alter themselves and other creaturely realities; only God *creates* creaturely reality. A traditionally theistic ID theorist might argue then that the rearrangement of structures and processes within the universe is wholly proper to creaturely causality, but only God can bring forth truly novel levels of complexity. This would raise a problem for the ID theorist, however, regarding human artifacts: artifacts involve the kind of specified complexity which cannot arise without intelligent agency, according to ID. Perhaps a more subtle line of argument could be made by an ID theorist developing human creativity as somehow in a strong sense analogous to divine creativity. In any case, traditionally God is understood as not merely the most powerful entity among other entities, but transcending all other entities and their capacities. As such, divine activity can be seen as wholly non-competitive with creaturely activity through the notion of primary (divine) and secondary (creaturely) causation. Non-competitive Divine agency could not be detected directly; the ID theorist would hold, however, that irreducibly complex and specifically complex structures and processes would indicate *that* God was an agent in their formation, but not give a clue as to *how* God was an agent.

⁶ Ibid., 149.

Much of the discussion in the science and theology dialogue gravitates around the question of how God can interact with a universe that the natural sciences depict (and assume) is causally “closed.” Any “causal joint” at which God’s activity affects/effects aspects of the creaturely realm would have to be an ontologically/metaphysically distinct reality from the causality by which creatures affect one another. However, such activity must also be such that it does not contravene any natural causation, at least according to much of discussion in the contemporary dialogue between theology and the natural sciences. It seems to me that an intelligent design theorist, however, would argue that the universe is not only casually open, but only appears causally closed because of falsely held presumptions of philosophical naturalism in the natural sciences. If a theistic intelligent design theorist held to the view that the universe does and can only appear causally closed, they would have to adopt some notion of primary vs. secondary causality coupled with some proposal of by what means (quantum indeterminacy, chaotic systems, information, whole-part causation) God might be undetectably acting in order to implement God’s designs. Dembski himself has argued that a supernatural creator could impart information into the universe through determining quantum mechanical events.⁷ If the universe is not causally closed, then one would have to understand God as either competitive with creaturely causality or creating de novo within creaturely reality. God’s creative action raises questions about what God desires God’s relationship to creatures to be.

Third: Theodicy

Finally, theistic ID theorists must return to the question, “Why implement designs which seem sub-optimal?” Those who emphasize God’s self-limiting, kenotic relationship to creation and creaturely autopoiesis can avoid many of the traditional problems involved with reconciling a benign, omnipotent creator with creaturely suffering. Theistic ID theorists might avail

⁷ Ibid, 150-158.

themselves of the position that God works with and within a creation that is by definition limited, and only acts minimally to bring about God's intentions in order to respect creaturely freedom and distinction from the divine.

William Dembski has written and presented on Intelligent Design and theodicy. He questions the extent to which the "sub-optimality" challenge to the notion of a benevolent, divine intelligent designer actually is a challenge. Dembski contends that to judge a design as sub-optimal means that one knows precisely that for which the design was intended, and that another design was possible, given all factors involved.⁸ Additionally, Dembski contends that natural evil exists in the world intentionally by God, in response to human sin.⁹ How can this be if what is deemed natural evil is present in the cosmos long before human beings appear on the scene? Dembski argues that God, anticipating human sinfulness, creates a cosmos in which there is natural evil in order to reveal to human kind the radical problem which sin is. Why would God do this? Dembski seems to be arguing that for an Abelardian notion of atonement, for one thing. In order for human beings to understand the radical nature of sin and sins concerning the rupture they bring in humanity's relationship to God, suffering the effects of natural evil is pedagogical in a two-fold sense. First, humanity is pressed to prodded to see the magnitude of moral evil by suffering the consequences of natural evil. Second, the suffering of God in Jesus Christ can only occur in the context of natural evil and such suffering is meant to communicate the extent of God's love and desire to be in loving communion with humanity. Or to put it differently, the example of divine love in enduring the cross is meant to bring humanity back to its senses, for people to abandon their willful rebellion against God, and to seek reconciliation. Under such a notion, it is not inconceivable for a traditionally theistic ID theorist to be unsurprised if his or her

⁸Ibid., 57-63.

⁹ Dembski's views on theodicy can be found in a paper "Christian Theodicy in Light of Genesis and Modern Science" on his website at http://www.designinference.com/documents/2006.05.christian_theodicy.pdf

research led him or her to conclude deadly viruses such as HIV or Ebola were intelligently designed due to their supposed irreducible and/or specified complexity precisely because we live in a world which includes designed natural evil.

In Summary

I have offered remarks about what implications ID theory would have for a classical Christian theist if such a person also held to intelligent design as contemporarily developed. The world is incapable of fulfilling divine intentions without interaction with its creator, the creator desires to and has the capacity to interact with the world to bring about specific structures, entities, and processes. Additionally, ID theory would have to deal with the possibility that structures, entities and process which entail natural evil are designed as such.

Finally, it is important to note that William Dembski is a strong proponent of the notion that ID theory is not just theologically minimalist, but also metaphysically minimalist. Intelligent design theory, according to him, is simply a means to detect design; articulating how such designs are implemented and under what conditions of possibility are not the ID theorists job, and design can arise in the context of a large variety of theological and metaphysical schema. In this paper I have discussed ID in terms of the classical Christian theism which I assume most ID theorists hold; I'll leave it to another to discuss whether or not ID theory could be held by an open theist or process thinker.¹⁰

¹⁰ Dembski discusses varieties of naturalism and process theology in relation to intelligent design in *The Design Revolution*, 169-177.