

Science, Evolution, and Intelligent Design

Part III: Intelligent Design and Public Education

Précis

Presented to

The Roundtable in Ideology
Trinity Baptist Church
Norman, OK

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November 2008

I. Intelligent Design

A. An Information-Theoretic Design Argument¹

The design argument begins with features of the natural world that exhibit evidence of purpose and from there attempts to establish the existence and attributes of an intelligent cause responsible for those features. Just what features signal an intelligent cause, what the nature of that intelligent cause is (for example, personal agent or teleological process), and how convincingly those features establish the existence of an intelligent cause remain subjects for debate and account for the variety of design arguments over the centuries.

1. Historical Synopsis

Perhaps the best known design argument is the “divine watchmaker,” found in William Paley’s 1802 book titled *Natural Theology*. Subtitled, *Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*, it was Paley’s project to reason from the natural world to the God of Christianity. But Paley was too optimistic about how much theological mileage could be obtained from the design argument. As Immanuel Kant noted in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, the most the design argument can establish is an architect of the world, not a creator of the world.

¹ Based on William A. Dembski, “An Information-Theoretic Design Argument,” in Beckwith, Francis J., W. L. Craig, and J. P. Moreland (eds.), *To Everyone an Answer: A Case for the Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 77-94.

Dembski draws a clear distinction between creation and design. Creation is always about the source of being in the world. Design is about the arrangements of preexisting materials that point to an intelligence. One can have creation without design and design without creation. Suppose Richard Dawkins is right about the universe revealing no evidence of design. It would not logically follow that the world was not created. On the other hand, it is logically possible that the world is full of signs of intelligence but was not created; this was the ancient Stoic view.

Design arguments can tell us that certain patterns exhibited in nature reliably point us to a designing intelligence. But there's no inferential chain that leads from such finite design-conducting patterns in nature to the infinite, personal, transcendent Creator God of Christianity. Nevertheless, a design argument can clear away materialistic stumbling blocks to belief in God. For instance, it can refute the claim that science has shown that all the patterns in nature can be explained without recourse to intelligence.

2. Information and Matter

Matter is raw stuff that can take any number of shapes. Information is what gives shape to matter, fixing one shape to the exclusion of others. For instance, a slab of marble represents matter; a bust of Beethoven represents information.

Nature, too, is capable of structuring matter and conferring information. Consider the acorn, which has within itself the power to develop into an oak tree. On the other hand, raw pieces of wood do not have the capacity to assemble themselves into ships. Thus, nature and design represent two different ways of producing information.

The information-theoretic design argument contends that the art of building certain information-rich structures in nature (like biological organisms) is not in the physical stuff that constitutes these structures, but requires a designer.

3. Complex Specified Information

Consider the claim "it's raining outside." This claim will be more informative depending on how improbable it is. If you live in the desert, where rain chances are low, then this claim will be both highly improbable and highly informative. On the other hand, for someone living in Seattle in the spring, the claim will be both probable and uninformative – it's telling you something you could easily have guessed. Thus, high probability claims have low information content and low probability (high improbability) claims have high information content.

To generate information is therefore to rule out possibilities. In practice, there are two sources of information: intelligent agency and physical processes. Let us refer to the former type of information as *agent-induced* or *conceptual information* and the latter as *event-induced* or *physical information*.

What happens when conceptual information and physical information coincide? Consider verified Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) in the movie *Contact*. It is precisely

such a coincidence between conceptual and physical information that constitutes *complex specified information*.

4. From Complex Specified Information to Design

Dembski uses an example of a rat in a maze to demonstrate that complex specified information reliably detects design. In general, to recognize intelligent agency we must observe an actualization of one among several competing possibilities, note which possibilities were ruled out, and then be able to specify the possibility that was actualized. In other words, the possibility that was actualized is complex. All the elements in this general scheme for recognizing intelligent agency (i.e., actualizing, ruling out, and specifying) therefore find their counterpart in complex specified information. It follows that complex specified information formalizes what it is that all along has enabled us to recognize intelligent agency.

5. Displacement

Darwinian naturalists accept that biological systems exhibit complex specified information but deny that it results from intelligence. Dembski introduces the concept of displacement – essentially a bookkeeping device for keeping science honest about the sources of information. It forces us to show where complex specified information supposedly gotten for free has in fact been front-loaded, smuggled in, or hidden from view.

Dembski states his belief that the Christian God is the ultimate source of design in the universe. Yet there is no way for design inferences based on features of the natural world to reach that conclusion. The complex specified information exhibited in natural phenomena is perhaps best thought of as God's fingerprints. An information-theoretic design argument therefore doesn't so much lead us to God as remove us from the paths that lead away from God.

B. Naturalism and its Cure²

1. Nature and Creation

When Napoleon asked the French mathematician Pierre-Simon Laplace where God fit into his cosmological equations, Laplace replied, "Sire, I have no need of that hypothesis." For the scientist, it seems, God is a hypothesis and an unnecessary one at that.

The problem with conceiving of the world as nature is this: For nature to be an object of inquiry for the scientist, nature must have an order which the scientist can grasp. Einstein once remarked that the most incomprehensible thing about the world is that it is comprehensible. There are but two options: Either the world derives its order from a source outside itself or it possesses it intrinsically.

For the naturalist God plays no role in the world. Religious believers are apt to think that a world without God is a terribly sad place in which no one given the choice would want to

² Based on William A. Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999), Chapter 4, "Naturalism and its Cure."

live. But to the naturalist it is precisely the presence of God in the world that threatens to undo it. There are very definite advantages to severing the world from God. Thomas Huxley, for instance, found great comfort in not having to account for his sins to a creator.

2. Naturalism Within Western Culture

Within Western culture, naturalism has become the default position for all serious inquiry. From biblical studies to law to education to science to the arts, inquiry is allowed to proceed only under the supposition that nature is self-contained. Of course, God could have created the world that way. Nonetheless for the sake of inquiry we are required to pretend that God does not exist and proceed accordingly. Naturalism affirms not so much that God does not exist as that God need not exist.

Not only has God created the world, but God upholds the world moment by moment. Daniel's words to Belshazzar hold equally for the dyed-in-the-wool naturalist: "Thou hast praised the gods of silver, and gold, of brass, iron, wood, and stone, which see not nor hear, nor know: and the God in whose hand thy breath is, and whose are all thy ways, hast thou not glorified" (Daniel 5:23 KJV).

Controversy arises once we ask whether God's interaction with the world is *empirically detectable*. If we prescribe in advance that science must be limited to strictly natural causes, then science will necessarily be incapable of investigating God's interaction with the world. But if we permit science to investigate intelligent causes (as many special sciences do, e.g., forensic science and artificial intelligence), then God's interaction with the world becomes a legitimate domain for scientific investigation.

Science, we are told, studies natural cause, whereas to introduce God is to invoke supernatural causes. This is the wrong contrast. The proper contrast is between *natural causes* on the one hand and *intelligent cause* on the other.

3. The Cure: Intelligent Design

A new program for scientific research has emerged known as intelligent design. Within biology, intelligent design is a theory of biological origins and development. Its fundamental claim is that intelligent causes are necessary to explain the complex, information-rich structures of biology and that these causes are empirically detectable.

We can know that something is designed without knowing the ultimate or even proximate purpose for which it was designed. As Del Ratzsch notes, "The Smithsonian has an entire collection of obviously designed human artifacts, concerning the purposes of which no one has a clue."³

The recognition that items in nature are designed would put a stop to all those unsubstantiated just-so stories that evolutionists spin out in trying to account for, say, the

³ Del Ratzsch, "Design, Chance and Theistic Evolution," in Dembski, William A. (ed.), *Mere Creation: Science, Faith & Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 294.

mammalian eye through a gradual succession of undirected natural causes. ID can also address how objects are produced. The design theorist thus acts a reverse engineer.

C. A Biblical Creation Response to ID⁴

Dr. Georgia Purdom of Answers in Genesis provides a response to the Intelligent Design movement from a Biblical Creation point of view.

The ID movement does have several positives. ID may serve as a useful tool in preliminary discussions about God and creation to gain an audience that might be turned off at the mention of the Bible. Since the movement is very careful not to associate itself with Christianity or any formal religion, some think it will stand a better chance of gaining acceptance as an alternative to Darwinism in the schools. The movement has produced many resources which support the biblical creationist viewpoint. It makes clear that Darwinism/naturalism is based on the presupposition that the supernatural does not exist, thus affecting the way one interprets the scientific evidence.

However, the major problem with the ID movement is a divorce of the Creator from creation. The Creator and His creation cannot be separated; they reflect on each other. The current movement focuses more on what is designed, rather than who designed it. Thus, leaders in the movement do not have problems with accepting an old age for the earth or allowing evolution to play a vital role once the designer formed the basics of life.

Proponents of ID fail to understand that a belief in long ages for the earth formed the foundation of Darwinism. If God's Word is not true concerning the age of the earth, then maybe it's not true concerning other events of the Creation Week; and maybe God was not a necessary part of the equation for life after all.

Without the framework of the Bible and the understanding that evil entered the world through man's actions, God appears sloppy and incompetent. People ask why God is unable to prevent evil from thwarting His plans, resulting in such poor design, instead of understanding that because of the Fall there is now a cursed design.

In addition, because the ID movement does not acknowledge God as Redeemer, there seems to be no final solution for the evil in this world; and by all appearances it will continue to reign supreme. However, when trusting the Bible as opposed to neglecting it, we read that Jesus clearly conquered death with the Resurrection and that one day death will no longer reign. Again, the Creator and the creation reflect on each other.

II. Darwin, Design, and the Public Schools⁵

One of the great cultural conflicts in American history has been over the teaching of evolution in public school science classes. Many Christians have objected to the teaching of

⁴ Based on Georgia Purdom, "The Intelligent Design Movement: Does the identity of the Creator really matter?," *Answers 1:1* (2 May 2006), accessed at <http://www.answersingenesis.org/articles/am/v1/n1/intelligent-design-movement>.

⁵ Based on Francis J. Beckwith, "Darwin, Design, and the Public Schools," in *To Everyone An Answer*, 266-286.

evolution on the grounds that evolutionary thinking is really a form of atheism and that teaching the subject in public schools “as truth” would violate several Supreme Court opinions that the teaching of irreligion as a state orthodoxy violates the Constitution as much as teaching any religion as a state orthodoxy.

In order to create a fair public school curriculum, many Christians have supported legislation in their individual states that would require that their schools offer lesson plans that are balanced. Several federal courts, including the U.S. Supreme Court, have struck down these statutes as unconstitutional because they violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which forbids the government from establishing a religion.⁶

Although the U.S. Supreme Court has dealt specifically with state laws that either forbade evolution (*Epperson v. Arkansas* [1968]) or required balanced treatment between evolution and creationism (*Edwards v. Aguillard* [1987]), it has never addressed directly the question of whether a public school or teacher could offer scientific criticisms of, and alternatives to, evolution that are not derived from religious literature but still lend support to a theological worldview. In another key case, *McLean v. Arkansas* (1982), Norman L. Geisler testified for the state of Arkansas, which passed a law requiring that public schools offer a balanced approach including both creation and evolution. The statute was struck down.

If a public school curriculum offers exclusively a naturalistic point of view, it is in fact instructing the students that claims of knowledge outside of naturalistic science are not really knowledge. This sends the message that non-naturalistic claims are simply matters of opinion or subjective preference. Further, although Christians should not be employing the resources of the state to coerce people to become Christians, naturalists should not do the same in order to advance their cause. Right now, students are given the false impression that naturalism is the only intellectually respectable view, and, because alternatives to naturalistic science are dismissed as religious regardless of the quality of the arguments for them, naturalism also wins by default.

If the Supreme Court were to assess a law that permitted or required the teaching of ID in the public schools, it would likely employ the test it set down in *Edwards*. That Louisiana statute was struck down for four reasons: (1) its historical continuity with the Scopes trial and the creation-evolution debate; (2) its textual connection to the Genesis-inspired statutes struck down in previous federal court cases; (3) the religious motivation of its supporters; and (4) its illegitimate means (e.g., advancing religion, limiting what teachers may teach) to achieve appropriate state ends (e.g., academic freedom). Thus the court concluded that the statute’s only purpose was to advance religion and thus violated the Establishment Clause.

⁶ It seems to escaped notice that the Establishment Clause is a restriction on Congress, not the individual states. Further, the federal government has no Constitutional authority to regulate state schools.