

## IS INTELLIGENT DESIGN BIBLICAL?

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Design arguments in apologetics have a long pedigree. Originally put forward by the ancient Stoics, and popularised by the Roman lawyer Cicero in his book *The Nature of the Gods* (106-43 B.C.), they were quickly taken up by early Christian thinkers such as Tertullian as a way of promoting belief in God to the surrounding pagan world [1]. In fact some pagans even wanted Cicero's book suppressed because it was used so successfully by Christian writers!

Arguments from design have taken a great many forms over the centuries, but they have generally shared a common theme. The strategy has been to draw attention to the general properties of the world or universe, or of particular aspects of it that arouse our awe and wonder, and to ascribe those properties to the work of a designer, identified by Christians as the God of the Bible. Such a strategy is in keeping with wonderful Biblical passages such as Psalm 19 and with Paul's arguments in Romans 1:18-21, and is generally referred to as 'natural theology'. But at the same time it is worth remembering that all the eight mentions of 'design' in the Bible (NIV) are made with reference to *human* design and the term is never applied with reference to God, although there was familiarity with the idea of people designing machines (2 Chr. 26:15), so the analogy was available for use in application to God had the Biblical writers felt it necessary. But they did not. This does not of course imply that Christians now should never refer to God as 'designer', but there has been a tendency in the history of the church to

over-emphasise or abuse design arguments, with lethal consequences for evangelism, so we should be on our guard. For example, the 18<sup>th</sup> century deists emphasised the rationalistic arguments of natural theology to such an extent that Biblical revelation was devalued in the process, in the end nurturing atheism.

### *The Intelligent Design Movement*

Recently the ‘Intelligent Design’ (ID) movement, which emerged in the USA during the 1990’s, has gained some notoriety by suggesting a form of ‘design argument’ which is quite distinct from its widely accepted traditional version. One of the movement’s most influential spokespersons, Bill Dembski, specifically distinguishes the central core of ID from the historical design arguments alluded to above [2]. For whereas traditional design arguments perceive the whole universe to be designed by God, ID proponents argue that certain components of the world around us are designed whereas others are not. Dembski suggests that the universe may be likened to an oil painting. Some parts of the painting result from ‘natural causes’ whereas other parts are due to ‘design’. The designed components correspond to various biological systems which, it is suggested, could not have arisen by ‘chance’ and are therefore characterised by ‘irreducible complexity’. Dembski suggests that “there has to be a reliable way to distinguish between events or objects that result from purely natural causes and events or objects whose emergence additionally requires the help of a designing intelligence...at issue is whether natural causes are supplemented or unsupplemented by design. The whole point of the design inference is to draw such a distinction between natural and intelligent causes” [3]. Therefore ID proponents expend considerable energy in trying to set up

mathematical and scientific strategies for detecting what is ‘designed’ and what is ‘not designed’.

ID therefore envisages that there are two types of explanation for biological phenomena: the ‘naturalistic explanations’ that are represented by our current scientific knowledge, and ‘design explanations’ which depend on ‘intelligent causes’. The biological world is like a patchwork quilt with just two colours: one colour represents intelligent designed entities, and the other colour represents non-intelligent non-designed entities.

ID proponents maintain that a designer may be invoked “as yet one more theoretical entity” in our “scientific tool chest” [4], suggesting that ‘design’ represents a rival scientific theory to other theories, rather than a theological argument. In fact their claim is that their arguments do not belong to natural theology at all, although to most readers they certainly sound like a form of reconstructed natural theology. Even less do they think that ‘design’ has anything to do with miracles, and Dembski specifically excludes Biblical revelation as a way of identifying the ‘designed’ parts of the world. Instead, perhaps with an eye on the strict US separation between Church and State, ID proponents such as Dembski tend to emphasise the secular aspects of their agenda and are eager to bring their strictly ‘non-religious’ arguments into the classroom. But in practice evangelicals, including some within the UK, have been quick to seize on ID arguments as the latest tools in their apologetic armamentarium, perhaps seeing them as some kind of half-way house between young earth creationism on one hand and theistic evolution on the other. And it is clear that some, although not all, ID proponents wish to use their arguments apologetically, consistent with the publication of ID books by evangelical publishers such as InterVarsity Press.

Critics, both secular and religious, have been quick to critique ID ideas on scientific and philosophical grounds [5]. I have to agree that I think that ID arguments have both scientific and philosophical weaknesses that are fatal to their cause. But that is not the topic of the present article. Instead I wish to address the rather different question as to whether the ideas of ID are firmly grounded in a Biblical theology. Of course no person engaging in apologetics expects to find all their arguments *per se* encompassed within the Biblical text. Each generation of Christians has to work out apologetic strategies that are appropriate for their own context. But ultimately all our apologetics have to be brought to the bar of Scripture to make sure that they are at least consistent with the Biblical revelation in general, and with the doctrine of God as creator and redeemer in particular. Unfortunately I believe that ID is significantly deficient in this respect, for four distinct reasons.

### *A Split Creation?*

One of the striking characteristics of the Biblical doctrine of creation is that God is described as the author of the whole created order without exception, both in its origins and in its on-going sustaining [6]. Page after page of the Psalms, Isaiah and Job remind us that God creates and sustains the smallest details of biology, including making grass grow for cattle (Ps. 104:14), supplying food for lions (Ps. 104: 21) and “for the raven when its young cry out to God” (Job 38: 41). The New Testament likewise underlines the fact that all things exist by the creative and sustaining power of the Lord Jesus, the Word of God (Jn. 1:1-3; Col. 1: 15-17; Hebr. 1: 1-3). “Through him all things were made; without him *nothing* was made that has been made” (Jn. 1:3, my italic). The Bible therefore has no concept of ‘nature’

for the simple reason that the term is redundant: instead it speaks of ‘creation’ to refer to the complete panoply of God’s activities that we as scientists struggle to describe so inadequately. The notion of ‘nature’ as a quasi-independent entity has often been implied by enlightenment thinking, but Biblical theology renders the concept redundant.

It is the same Biblical theology which undermines the ID attempt to create a ‘split universe’ comprising one realm which science currently explains adequately, and which Dembski refers to as generated by ‘purely natural forces’, and a second realm which comprises those components which are ‘designed’. The ID biochemist Michael Behe even envisages these two different realms as being represented in different parts of the same cell. So the origins of plasma membranes (which enclose the cell) are, according to Behe, readily explicable by well understood natural forces, whereas other complex parts of the cell, such as certain biochemical pathways, are “obviously designed” [7]. But the Bible knows of no such division between the ‘natural’ and the ‘designed’; instead all is a seamless cloth of God’s sustaining creative activity. God is the great composer whose musical symphony of creation reflects his creative power in every part of its being. The sharp division between the ‘natural forces’ and the actions of the ‘designer’ in the ID literature has overtones of a deistic view in which ‘nature’ is presented as being quasi-autonomous, whereas the actions of the intelligent designer are restricted to a rather limited repertoire of events in the patch-work quilt. Dembski refers approvingly to Aristotle’s idea that design completes “what nature cannot bring to a finish”, but the Bible simply knows of no such dualism between “design” and “nature”, speaking only of a single created order. As Augustine succinctly put the point back in

the 5<sup>th</sup> century: “Nature is what God does”. All that scientists can do in their work is to describe what God does.

The ID literature makes much of the notion of ‘chance’ in describing the supposed ‘naturalistic, non-designed’ aspects of the world. But the Bible sees God as completely sovereign over all events without exception, so the Augustinian slogan “Nature is what God does” applies equally well to the ‘chance’ aspects of the created order as to any other. “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord” (Prov. 16:33). ‘Chance’ may be a handy way of referring to our own human ignorance as to the outcome of a particular event, but for God everything is the ‘everlasting now’ and nothing is hid from his gaze or foreknowledge. So there is no ‘chance’ as far as God is concerned. Besides, ‘chance events’ from a human perspective are often built into biological systems by design to generate an orderly and finely-tuned system, so there is no necessary incompatibility anyway between ‘chance’ (from our perspective) and the notion of design.

It should also be noted that in making its case the ID literature uses the terms ‘naturalism’ and ‘naturalistic’ in a way that is quite different from their commonly accepted meanings. The Oxford dictionary definition of ‘naturalism’ in its philosophical sense is “a view of the world that excludes the supernatural or spiritual” and this is indeed how this term is generally understood. Instead ID proponents commonly use ‘naturalistic’ as a synonym for ‘scientific’, whereas of course those scientists (of whom there are many) who see their science as but descriptions of God’s creative handiwork, would be greatly in error to use the term ‘naturalistic’ to refer to their descriptions. One unfortunate consequence of ID’s terminological inexactitude is that it reinforces the impression of a deistic view, in which science is portrayed as describing ‘natural forces’ in the naturalistic

compartment, whereas ‘design’ then becomes ‘the task of the designer’ in the other, truly a split creation. In reality, of course, for the Christian “there is but one God, the Father, from whom *all things* came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom *all things* came and through whom we live” (1 Cor 8:6, my ital).

### *God-of-the-Gaps?*

Whenever the subject of ID is discussed, it is not long before someone will remark: “But isn’t that the old god-of-the-gaps argument?” Despite protests to the contrary by my ID friends (yes I do have quite a few!), I am forced to agree. For ID apologetics constantly point to phenomena which science cannot currently explain, and then maintain that “therefore design must be the explanation”, and from that seek to infer a designer. As Dembski says: “...design becomes plausible only if material mechanisms can be effectively ruled out”. But even in the 9 years since Michael Behe’s book *Darwin’s Black Box* was published, many of his examples of supposed ‘irreducible complexity’ (such as the origins of the biochemical processes involved in blood clotting) are now much better understood [9] – and 9 years is a very short time indeed in the history of science. Christians have always been tempted by the ‘argument from personal incredulity’ – “wow, I can’t imagine how that could have happened, so God must have done it” - but this is really very weak theology. And invariably what happens is that in the fullness of time the gap in scientific knowledge closes and the tasks for this ‘god’ to do, based on the gaps in our current scientific knowledge, shrink like the fading smile on the disappearing Cheshire Cat in Alice-in-Wonderland.

The ‘god-of-the-gaps’ is very different from the great Creator God of the Bible who creates and sustains everything that exists. Within that robust Biblical theistic framework, whether we as scientists are currently able to explain God’s creative actions or not at a scientific level is theologically irrelevant. Of course that does not imply the belief that science can potentially explain everything that can be known – far from it! [10]. There are plenty of things which are excluded from science, in principle and not merely in practice, such as ethics, relationships, aesthetics, metaphysics and a host of other forms of vital human knowledge and experience. But these are not the kind of examples that ID proponents give when they speak of the ‘irreducibly complex’ phenomena which supposedly can only be explained by recourse to ‘design’. Instead they cite examples that any biochemist is familiar with, like blood clotting; the bacterial flagellum (that enables bacteria to swim); the complement pathway used in immune defence etc. Sure there are plenty of details on the origins of such systems that require further work – if that was not the case research scientists would be out of a job! But in science one learns to “never say never”. The history of science is full of examples where in one decade – or century – people say “well that could never be understood or done”, but then of course a few years later, or a century later, our understanding takes a quantum leap. That is a cause for praise to God for his wisdom in creation and for making us in his image so that we have the privilege of understanding his handiwork just that little bit better.

So the ID understanding of the ‘design argument’ is 180 degrees different from the traditional design arguments of people like Archdeacon Paley. An earlier generation of natural theologians pointed to God’s wonderful design in creation in those things that science *does* currently

understand: the more we understand the more amazed we are! But ID proponents argue the opposite: ‘design’ refers to that domain of events that, in their view, science does *not* currently explain very well. I would suggest that it is the former not latter position which is closer to the Biblical understanding of God’s actions in the created order.

### *God the Heavenly Engineer?*

Since some Christians are using the arguments of ID in their apologetics, it is good to ask the question: “just what is it that they’re trying to demonstrate?” ID proponents such as Dembski are explicit in denying that the detection of ‘design’ in biological phenomena necessarily points to the existence of the God of the Bible. As Dembski remarks, friends of ID include “Buddhists, Hindus, New Age thinkers, Jungians, parapsychologists, vitalists, Platonists and honest agnostics, to name but a few”, and ID “doesn’t even require that there be a God” [11]. “In particular”, writes Dembski, “ID does not depend on the biblical account of creation” [12]. The secular nature of the enterprise is further under-lined by the virtually total absence of any Biblical theology or even Biblical references in books like ‘The Design Revolution’ issued by evangelical publishers.

Of course it is possible on occasion for secular arguments to be taken over by Christians and used for their own apologetic purposes, and there are certainly examples of this happening in the history of apologetics. And no-one expects that such arguments will deliver the kind of full understanding of God’s nature which is found only from the Biblical revelation. But in that case it is especially important to consider whether the concept of ‘god’ delivered by the apologetic argument is at least *consistent* with the Biblical concept. Unfortunately the ‘designer god’ which ID arguments deliver

seems quite defective in this respect, perhaps partly because ‘designer’ language in current usage is so associated with images of mechanics and engineers. So within the context of ID arguments, the ‘designer god’ can easily conjure up images of a heavenly engineer or intelligent super-computer, occasionally tinkering about with the bits of the patch-work quilt that natural forces couldn’t cope with. It’s a picture remarkably vulnerable to the kind of critique that Leibniz launched against Newton in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when he lambasted him for bringing in the action of God to introduce occasional corrections in the movements of the planets, a bit like the clock-smith who occasionally adjusts the timing of an otherwise autonomous clock. The ‘designer’ that ID arguments deliver is very distant from the Biblical revelation of the personal God who is immanent in every aspect of the created order, the “Word made flesh” without whom “nothing was made that has been made” (Jn. 1:3).

### *The Issue of Theodicy*

Theodicy refers to arguments seeking to vindicate the justice of God in a world in which evil and suffering exists. All Christians, whatever they believe about origins, have to face up to questions of theodicy. One common position to hold is that God is the ‘primary cause’ who faithfully endows matter with certain properties which are constant and reproducible, except in the case of particular miracles in which God may choose to organise matter differently. It is God’s faithful sustaining of the properties of matter which renders the scientific enterprise possible, and it is the ‘secondary causes’ which arise from God the ‘primary cause’ which are the focus of scientific investigation. Such models of God’s actions in creation are useful providing we remember that the ‘primary cause’ is not some abstract philosophical

postulate, but the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who is both composer and conductor in instigating and up-holding the great hymn of creation. In this analogy the ‘secondary causes’ are all those properties and processes whereby the hymn of creation is expressed. But because of the consistency and reproducibility of those properties we face a world of danger and challenge: lightning strikes and people are killed; volcanoes erupt; gravity continues to exert its effects and people fall down mountains; and we are infected by dangerous bacteria. The theodicy question in this scenario is often addressed by pointing out that the things we don’t like, such as pain and bacteria, are necessary costs of living in a world where matter has such properties, a world in fact designed to render moral and spiritual growth possible in preparation for the new heavens and new earth that God is preparing for those who put their trust in Him.

Unfortunately the ID proposals render the issue of theodicy more problematic than it need be, particularly in the context of ‘natural evils’. Consider, for example, ID’s favourite example of the bacterial flagellum as an icon of ‘design’. This means that the putative designer has made a specific creative effort to make such a complex organ possible, in other words, to ‘design it’. But wait a minute, what is going on here? Bacteria kill millions of people every year. Many types of bacteria are far more efficient killing machines because they can swim around tissues and blood-streams using their flagella for locomotion. Without those their effectiveness would be crippled. But what ID is telling us is that the designer specifically designed flagella for bacteria that would otherwise have been unable to attain them by ‘natural forces’. What kind of malevolent designer is this? Wouldn’t it have been much better to leave the bacteria lacking in locomotion so that they wouldn’t be so lethal?

Browse through the ID literature and such examples multiply. Of course one can argue that in either of the scenarios painted above, God is ultimately responsible for all that happens. But I think there is a significant difference between the idea that there are necessary biological costs of living in a world in which our bodies are composed of elements such as carbon, oxygen and phosphorus - costs which are involved in God's ultimate purposes for humankind – and the idea, intrinsic to ID, that God specifically designs components of organisms such as bacteria, which they would not have had otherwise, with the result that they kill humans more efficiently.

### *Conclusions*

Every now and again a new emphasis or wave of fresh teaching washes over the Atlantic and rolls through the evangelical churches of Europe. Very often the wave is helpful and appropriate. My own life has been radically changed by such waves. But with each new wave discernment is required to distinguish the wheat from the chaff. There have been too many times when evangelical leaders were too hasty to accept something, only later to regret their error.

My own view is that the arguments of the ID movement are a Trojan horse bringing what is essentially secular un-Biblical thinking into the heart of certain evangelical fellowships within Europe. In its place we need to emphasise the great Biblical truths of the creative handiwork of God in every aspect of the created order without exception, an order in which 'nature' was long ago kicked into touch as an unnecessary appendage of pagan ancient philosophy and of enlightenment thinking.

And of course as Christians we should continue to challenge naturalistic thinking at every opportunity. But I would suggest that a more

Biblical strategy than that provided by ID is that used by Prof. Alister McGrath in his excellent recent demolition job of the naturalistic thinking of Richard Dawkins [13]. When we have such outstanding Biblical scholars as McGrath on our door-step, why go for imports?

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13. McGrath, A. (2004). *Dawkins' God – Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*, Blackwell. Read or listen to McGrath's recent lecture on Dawkins posted at: [www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis/](http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis/)