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Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions About Intelligent Design (Book Review)

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Book Review

The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions about Intelligent Design by William A. Dembski (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004) 334 pp. Reviewed by Tony Jelsma, Associate Professor of Biology, Dordt College.

When I was young I would occasionally have nightmares in which I was running away from some perceived enemy. The harder I would run, the more it would feel as if I were not making progress and the ground were slipping beneath my feet. William Dembski, one of the leaders in the battle to have Intelligent Design (ID) accepted in the scientific community, must often feel the same way. The more he rebuts particular challenges to ID, the less effect these rebuttals seem to have. The same objections to ID are raised over and over again, despite their having been addressed repeatedly by Dembski and others. *The Design Revolution* was written as a systematic response to all the critiques of ID theory. The book is not directed to the scientific establishment and therefore breaks no new ground in this debate. Instead, Dembski has written a catechism of brief essays in response to the many questions that are raised against Intelligent Design theory. Although such a format risks a "straw man" approach (i.e. only the easy objections are raised), Dembski addresses all the challenges to ID (and more) that I have encountered in my years of following this debate.

The book has 44 short chapters divided into six sections. In the first section, entitled "Basic Distinctions," Dembski explains what ID is, and what it is not. Opponents of ID often refer to it as "Intelligent Design Creationism." The intent here is to try to discredit ID by associating it with Creation Science. To counter this association, Dembski explains that Creationism and ID have distinct approaches. Creationism starts from Scripture and views science, particularly the science of origins, from the perspective of one's interpretation of Scripture. Conversely, ID, while compatible with theism, does not use Scripture in its arguments. Although ID purports to be able to detect the presence of design, the identity of the designer is not part of ID *per se*. To be sure, most (but not all) proponents of ID are Christians, and for them the identity of the Designer is known, but ID theory claims (and I agree) that such a conclusion cannot be reached by science.

In the second section, "Detecting Design," Dembski describes what he means by intelligent design, namely specified complexity. A particular feature may exhibit complexity. For example, the rocky face of a mountain may exist in many different conformations, all of which are equally improbable. However, when only one of the conformations specifies the faces of four presidents (as in Mount Rushmore), one is justified in inferring design. To make design detection as objective as possible, Dembski's explanatory filter lays out three criteria that allow one to infer that a feature bears the marks of intelligent design. Using the combination to a safe as an example, one must first ask if the particular combination was contingent: is there something about the correct combination that connects it to the opening of the safe? Since all combinations are equally improbable and the combination was arbitrarily chosen by the locksmith, the answer to this is no. Second, one must address the question of complexity: is the correct combination likely to be found by chance? If the answer to this question is also no, then one must address the question of specificity: is there something special about this particular combination compared to other combinations? In this case the answer is yes because this particular combination opens the safe. Only then can one infer design.

I found this the most difficult section of the book. The subtleties that Dembski addresses, e.g. between different types of complexity, may be lost on readers, but he feels compelled to articulate them in order to address the various misunderstandings and misrepresentations of ID theory.

The more approachable next section deals with information. Living organisms depend upon information for their formation and replication. Information is not an inherent property of the DNA of the organism but must be obtained from somewhere. Dembski points out that such information cannot come from nothing but requires an intelligence. Given that information is presently such a prominent part of biology (as evidenced by the increasing use of bioinformatics), this point is an important argument for ID.

Since ID directly challenges naturalism, the next section, "Issues Arising from Naturalism," addresses the relationship between naturalism and ID. Can a scientist who is looking for natural explanations of biological phenomena incorporate ID into such research, or does scientific progress work against and gradually invalidate ID? Dembski points out that this is a common misconception. On the contrary, new research is continually reminding us that biological features are far more complex than we had imagined and that evolutionary scenarios for their origins are becoming even less plausible.

In the next section, "Theoretical Challenges to Intelligent Design," Dembski goes on to discuss some commonly raised challenges that are raised against ID.

Isn't ID simply an argument from ignorance? This is known as the "God-of-the-gaps" argument. If we can't understand how something came about, one might assert that "God did it." Another argument claims that if ignorance of an evolutionary mechanism is used as evidence for ID, then ID is obligated to provide its own mechanism. Is it fair to demand that Darwinism provide details of an evolutionary scenario while ID doesn't need to? In response, Dembski argues that ID does not reduce problems in science to a "God did it" mentality, but scientists can use ID to identify features that show evidence of design. ID is not intended to describe mechanisms, evolutionary or otherwise; its minimalist program merely infers evidences of design. How that design occurred is a question that might or might not be addressed by science.

I found the last section, entitled "A New Kind of Science," to be the most enjoyable to read. In this section, which discusses what it could be like if ID were an accepted component of science, Dembski is the most candid. He avoids (and warns against) the dangers of triumphalism that often plague such movements, cautioning that ID has a long way to go before it will gain acceptance by the scientific community. For this to occur there needs to be a clear demonstration of the usefulness of a design paradigm. At present, the scientific community treats ID as a "science-stopper," accusing it of intellectual laziness in searching for the true (evolutionary) origin of a certain feature. Even though engineers are now looking at and copying the designs of biological structures, the designs that are being copied are treated as "apparent designs" that evolved by the Darwinian tools of random mutation and natural selection.

The biggest hurdle that ID must overcome before it can gain acceptance from the scientific community is its usefulness in advancing scientific knowledge. At present, examples of design are being discovered (Michael Behe lists several examples of irreducible complexity in his book *Darwin's Black Box*), but such a designation does not help us to understand the function of these structures. Scientists tend to be a pragmatic lot, and while there may be numerous closet ID sympathizers, they will not intentionally incorporate ID into their research unless it advances their research. Dembski lists several objective measures of progress that will gauge how well the ID movement is progressing. Judging by these measures and by my own experience, ID has a long way to go before it will have any impact on scientific research. Given this fact, it is curious that so many Darwinists are up in arms about the rise of ID. Indeed, some people have made a career out of fighting against the ID movement.

I have followed the ID movement quite closely for a number of years and have tried to see how ID might fit with a Reformed approach to science and epistemology. There is a danger that ID can be too "scientistic" and can use science to build a case for God the Creator. Dembski deftly avoids this danger by pointing out that ID takes a minimalist stance. The leap from identifying design to identifying the designer (let alone the attributes of that designer, as is done by natural theology) is not one that science can make. On the other hand, if we believe the world was created by God, we should not be surprised if our science would see evidences of His work in creation. But is it *necessary* to see design in creation? After all, the invisible qualities of God that are clear from creation (Romans 1:20) may not be amenable to scientific study. That's true, but many scientific studies, from cosmology to origins of life to developmental biology, raise significant difficulties for the argument that the world does not display evidences of design. Thus, I see ID as compatible with but not a necessary component of my faith.

One must wonder whether the term "revolution" is appropriate for the inclusion of ID as a part of science, as the title of this book implies. There would definitely be a conceptual change from the common recognition of "apparent design" to the recognition of actual design, along with well-developed criteria to detect design. As was pointed out in Thomas Kuhn's book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, revolutions do not occur overnight and may not be immediately apparent. A paradigm change occurs with a new generation of scientists who think differently from the previous one. As Dembski points out, if ID is to succeed, it will need to recruit a new generation of scientists who are willing to think differently and who can show the usefulness of an ID paradigm in scientific research.

This book is intended for a non-specialist audience, but it is not an easy read. I found it quite repetitious and at times wondered if Dembski really needed to go into such excruciating detail, particularly considering the intended audience. As the author noted, one need not read the book sequentially but can begin anywhere. The problem with such an organization is that the basic arguments need to be repeated in different parts of the book. *The Design Revolution* might serve best as a reference work that provides rebuttals to common criticisms of ID.