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Intelligent Design: Is It Really Worth It?

CHRIS DORAN

Imagine that we have all had occasion to look up into the sky on a clear night, gaze at the countless stars, and think about how small we are in comparison to the enormity of the universe. For everyone except the most strident atheist (although I suspect that even s/he has at one point considered the same feeling), staring into space can be a stark reminder that the universe is much grander than we could ever imagine, which may cause us to contemplate who or what might have put this universe together. For believers, looking up at the stars often puts us into the same spirit of worship that must have filled the psalmist when he wrote, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalms 19.1). Or perhaps the grandeur of the universe is what the apostle Paul had in mind when he wrote to the church in Rome, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made . . .” (Rom 1.20).

What if someone could build a scientific research program around this Christian intuition about the design of the universe? Over the last twenty years or so, the Intelligent Design (ID) movement has gathered steam trying to do just that. As prominent ID thinker William Dembski put it, ID’s goal is to put scientific muscle behind the intuition of the psalmist and the apostle Paul.¹ Yet why do ID proponents, often called design theorists, think that the claims of the Christian faith need to be bolstered by science? They argue that contemporary American culture does not take ideas seriously unless they can be proven scientifically and so Christianity is at a serious disadvantage as it jockeys for space in the marketplace of ideas.

So you might be asking yourself, “What exactly is the problem with this?” I grant that on the surface this ID concept seems like a good deal, but with just a little bit of reflection I am convinced that it is terribly dangerous for Christianity. In the remainder of this article, I sketch out four reasons why I believe so strongly that this is the case. Before we get to those reasons, we need to look at what it is that ID is trying to do.

WHAT IS INTELLIGENT DESIGN?

For proponents, ID is a simple enough idea whose time has come. ID thinkers would like us to remember that occasionally during the course of the history of science new ideas either push old ideas aside or supplement them dramatically. For example, in the first case, viewing the earth as the center of the universe was replaced by viewing the sun as the center of our particular solar system. Or in the second case, Albert Einstein showed us how Isaac Newton’s understanding of physics still works for really big objects (anything bigger than an atom), but that quantum mechanics is needed to explain how really small things work (anything smaller than an atom). Design theorists strongly argue that we find ourselves at the particular historical moment where we are realizing that the theory of evolution can explain quite a few, if not most, natural phenomena, but is

1. William Dembski, *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science & Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

in desperate need of being supplemented because it is no longer capable of explaining all of the wonderfully complex features and organisms that we see in creation.

Perhaps the most famous example comes from the biochemist and ID thinker Michael Behe.² He points out the breathtaking complexity that exists in even something as small as a one-cell bacterium. In particular, he points to the intricacy of the flagellum or whiplike tail that many bacteria use for locomotion. Behe argues that the flagellum is so complex that it could not have possibly arisen through evolution and thus necessarily begs the question of how it could have come to exist at all. He concludes that such a tail must be the product of an intelligent designer.³

The burden of proof for showing that something like a bacterium's flagellum is intelligently designed is incredibly high. Design theorists believe that they can meet this burden using various statistical analyses. Through these complex mathematical analyses, they contend that one can infer with reasonable certainty whether or not something in nature is designed or not. Design theorists, like Behe, are very careful to say that there is no way to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that something is in fact designed, but only that it would be highly improbable that something was not designed. An important point to remember is that design theorists claim that such an inference is based on research that does not fundamentally alter the current rules of science. They point to similarities in their scientific methods and practices with those used by scientists in the fields of forensic science, archaeology and cryptography.

It's clear that if something is designed, we want to be able to detect it, but what we don't want is false positives. If ID is going to succeed, design theorists need to be able to determine with incredible accuracy when something is designed and when something is a product of evolution. Design theorists note that we cannot expect perfection in the design detection business because a particularly devious designer might shield his work and make it look like something that is the product of evolution rather than the work of a designer. In other words, the designer could very well be a deceptive one. Also, design detection is inherently risky since an investigator may not have enough background information about the designer in order to figure out the "design fingerprints" he/she/it leaves behind. With these intrinsic limitations, design theorists seek to cast a net that is tight enough to catch designed features or organisms, but is admittedly loose enough that something might slip through the holes.⁴

Why use the term intelligent design anyway? Doesn't the term "design" by itself suggest some sort of intelligent agent working behind the scenes? Design theorists use "intelligent design" to distinguish their term from two other notions of design: apparent design and optimal design. Apparent design is used to describe something that looks designed, but really is not. Many evolutionary scientists use this term when they talk about features or organisms that one might intuitively think are designed, but are really products of natural selection. On the other hand, as Dembski puts it, optimal design "demands a perfectionistic, anal-retentive designer who has to get everything just right."⁵ ID thinkers argue that this position is impractical. Intelligent design, then, is meant to be a middle position between these two options. ID seeks to take into account our everyday experience of what design actually is: a compromise between competing factors. Just as an architect cannot design a skyscraper without taking an array of factors into account—like the strength of the materials available to build with, the speed of wind gusts at certain heights, and whether or not the building will be in an earthquake zone—so too must the designer behind ID.

Finally, design theorists maintain that ID should be treated as a legitimate branch of science because it does not have to speculate about the potential identity of the designer in order to detect design. Design

2. Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

3. For an easy to read understanding of how bacterial flagellum arose via evolutionary processes, see Ken Miller, *Finding Darwin's God* (New York: Perennial, 1999), 129–64.

4. Dembski, 139–41.

5. William A. Dembski, "Intelligent Design is not Optimal Design," Metanexus Institute, February 2, 2000, http://www.metanexus.net/metanexus_online/show_article.asp?2567 (accessed March 26, 2009).

is design. It is detectable regardless of who or what is behind the scenes. In theory, it is even detectable if we know nothing at all about the designer. According to proponents, this ability to detect design without presupposing anything about the designer makes ID different from traditional accounts of natural theology (proving God's existence through reflection on nature) that we might see throughout Christian history.

If design theorists are correct, then the payoff is quite dramatic. If there is truly no need to presume anything about the identity of the designer in order to detect design in nature, then ID could feasibly be taught in public schools and universities as a legitimate scientific enterprise. At the same time, a Christian could find ID persuasive scientifically and easily argue that the designer behind ID is the God we read about in the Bible. In other words, ID could provide scientific support for the design argument that Christians have employed for centuries. In a culture that supposedly reveres science as ID thinkers claim America does, ID would offer Christian believers a seemingly unbeatable proof of God. The problem is that if something seems too good to be true, it probably is, and ID is indeed too good to be true.

FIRST PROBLEM

The claim that ID can get by without presuming anything about the designer is false. The problem is a perhaps a small one, but one that is nonetheless clearly evident in their own literature as we saw in the section above. On the one hand, ID claims that it is a stand-alone scientific enterprise, like evolution, because it does not have to make any assumptions about the designer in order to find evidence of design in nature. Yet on the other hand, design theorists admit that they might miss detecting design if they don't know enough about the designer before actually beginning the task of looking for design "fingerprints." This ID admission makes my first point very clear: design theorists have to presuppose something about the identity of the designer if ID science is to function effectively. In other words, they have to assume that the designer actually leaves behind evidence of design! This is a fundamental contradiction in their initial starting point.

Let me illustrate this from another vantage point. As I discussed above, design theorists make a clear distinction between intelligent design and optimal design. They maintain that it is unfair to expect the designer behind ID to get everything just right. They say that to demand the designer behind ID act in a different manner from human designers is unreasonable. The problem that design theorists fail to address is this: Why should we expect the designer behind ID to act similarly to human designers? What allows ID to draw an analogy between the designer behind ID, who theoretically created the universe, and a human designer who is confined to the problems of design that come with existing on our little planet? Shouldn't we expect the designer to do things a bit more optimally? This failure to justify why the designer behind ID and human designers are so similar is an implicit assumption that design theorists are not being entirely forthright about.

This problem of not admitting to certain assumptions about the designer is further exacerbated by ID's claim that it is adhering to the rules of science. Remember, ID claims it shares similarities with the scientific disciplines of forensic science, archaeology and cryptography. The issue is not that ID claims to be operating by the same principles as these disciplines rather than by the rules of biology or chemistry (although that may need to be explored at a later date), but that these three particular scientific disciplines have at least one important thing in common: they assume that the subject whom they are studying is human. So, you might be asking yourself, why is this a big deal? It's a problem first of all because ID says that it does not need to presume anything about the designer in order for it to function as a scientific program, and here is evidence that they expect the designer to act at least somewhat human. Second, why should we expect the scientific methods of a discipline like forensic science to tell us anything about something that is not human? For example, what exactly is archaeology going to tell us about the tail of bacteria? Again, why does ID expect the designer to act, at least in some manner, human? Do all intelligent designers behave or design in ways that are directly analogous to human ways of behavior or design? This subtle but important point becomes even more relevant when I discuss the designer behind ID being associated with the God of the Bible in the section below.

SECOND PROBLEM

Let's pretend for a second that the issues I listed above are actually not problems that ID has to address. Let's assume that you're a believer who thinks that ID is really onto something, and that equating the designer behind ID with the God of the Bible seems like a fairly sensible conclusion. Before you assume that the designer and God are one in the same, we need to examine another of ID's primary claims again. Remember, ID says that design detection is risky business since there is not only the chance that the investigator might make a mistake due to a lack of background information, but also because the designer might in fact be deceptive and cover his design tracks. For the believer, this creates a significant predicament. How can a potentially deceptive designer be equated with the God revealed in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? God is portrayed in scripture as a God who is trustworthy when no one else is, not as a God who may be devious, particularly when someone is searching for evidence of the divine presence.

This issue leaves design theorists in quite a tough spot. Why mention the possibility of a deceptive designer at all? On the one hand, they could merely claim that a deceptive designer is only mentioned as a possibility on a hypothetical spectrum that has a deceptive designer on one end and a perfectly honest designer on the other end. This way design theorists cover all of their bases and the charge of having inside knowledge of the identity of the designer is addressed before opponents can point it out. Admitting to only the potential of a deceptive designer, however, does not actually help ID at all. They still have to answer exactly how a scientist would run a design research program if she is not assured that the designer is leaving behind accurate clues. We have to remember that science only works if the universe is set up in such a way that it gives an observer reliable information.

The other possibility is that if proponents of ID say they can trust the designer to be honest, then they would have not only explicitly admitted to the partial identity of the designer (which they say is not necessary for ID to compete with mainstream science), but they then leave themselves open to the very important question: How do you know exactly that the designer is so honest? It's very easy for a believer to admit that the designer is God and that's how we know that the designer is dependable. It's quite another thing for design theorists, who are trying to avoid ID being branded as a religious enterprise so that it can be introduced into public schools and universities, to admit that they know the designer is honest because he really is the God of the Bible.

THIRD PROBLEM

One of the fundamental affirmations Christians proclaim is that God is transcendent. Divine transcendence reminds us that God is everything that God is, but that we humans are not. God is holy. We are not. God is trustworthy. We often find ourselves breaking promises. God is merciful. We can all point to times in our lives when we sought revenge instead of extending grace. This concept is expressed in no clearer terms than when the writer of Isaiah proclaims, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isa 55.8-9).

The question then is this: Is the designer behind ID the transcendent God of the Bible? I think not. The designer looks far too human to be considered transcendent. Remember, one of the basic presuppositions of ID is that the designer should not be held to any higher standards than we would expect from human designers. This should make Christians take notice. Why should we not expect God to be held to higher standards than humans when it comes to designing organisms? While a Christian would not want to say that God is the "perfectionistic, anal-retentive designer who has to get everything just right," it seems reasonable enough to ask if God did in fact directly design particular organisms, then wouldn't God design them optimally? Moreover, should we really expect scientific disciplines like forensic science, archaeology and cryptography to yield insight into whether or not God has left behind evidence of the divine presence? These questions, the last one in particular, have yet to be answered by Christian proponents of ID.

PERHAPS A BIGGER PROBLEM

Laying aside these problems with the designer behind ID, there is perhaps a larger issue that believers must also consider when addressing this topic. How closely should faith be tied to science? The nature of the relationship between faith and science is undoubtedly an important one, since Christians have traditionally believed that there is some consistency in God's revelation in scripture (special revelation) and God's revelation in nature, addressed by the psalmist and the apostle Paul (general revelation). The tricky thing here is the particular way that ID thinks that science and faith go together.

At this point, we need to remember two things that we discussed above. First, ID proponents believe that if design can be at some level statistically verified, then ID can be used to bolster the claims of the existence of the God of the Bible. Second, ID thinkers are relying on a particular phenomenon that has occurred in the history of scientific inquiry in order to make a large portion of their case. When data comes along that is not explainable by the prevailing theory of the day, that theory is either discarded or supplemented by another set of ideas that better explains the data. Design theorists argue that we are currently in the middle of one of those fundamental shifts in thinking.

The irony though is that ID thinkers do not see that they are trying to have their cake and eat it too. What happens when design is no longer able to explain all of the data? The problem is that design theorists are banking on a time in the near future when everyone will agree with them that evolution is ultimately an incomplete explanation of biological complexity, but do not admit that ID might also one day be recognized as an incomplete or obsolete view. While initially that might seem like an academic or scientific problem for design theorists only, it is potentially a large problem for the growing number of Christians who believe that ID will be able to prove to non-believers once and for all that God exists. What will happen to the faith of those who have tied their wagon so tightly to the ID horse? Will at least part of their faith crumble in the same way that ID will?

This bigger problem brings us back to where we began this article. The psalmist and the apostle Paul looked to the stars and recognized God's presence, long before the advent of evolutionary theory or ID theory. So still can we. Make no mistake, science is an important way of explaining how the universe works, but it is ultimately *not* an appropriate judge for determining whether or not God exists or if the claims of Christianity are true. In the end, we should be confident in the proclamations of the psalmist and the apostle Paul who did not need science to prop up their faith, and ask members of the ID community why it is that they need to turn to science to reinforce theirs?

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