

GOD IS NOT A SCIENTIFIC HYPOTHESIS

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A shorter version can be found at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/Darwin.htm

Articles of related interest are “Creationism: Bad Science; Wrong Religion”

(www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/creationism.htm) and “The Three Story Universe”

(www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/gre13.htm).

In 2001 the Discovery Institute, affiliated with conservative evangelical Seattle Pacific University, ran full-page advertisements containing the names of dozens of scientists and philosophers objecting to a PBS series defending evolutionary theory. On the Institute’s website one of the scientists admitted that he had not seen the program, but that he had still signed the statement because he was a Bible-believing Christian.

The Institute was invited by the producer to offer scientifically tested and peer reviewed experiments supporting Intelligent Design. They were not able to meet this requirement, so they were offered, but declined, a spot on the last segment that covered religious responses to evolution.

In a recent column in *The New York Times* Michael J. Behe, a Senior Fellow at the Discovery Institute and professor of biological sciences at Lehigh University, argues that Intelligent Design has been misunderstood and that it should be accepted as a legitimate scientific alternative to Darwinian theory, which he claims fails to explain the existence of “molecular machines of the complexity we find in the cell” (Feb. 7, 2005).

Professional philosophers know Intelligent Design as the “design” argument for the existence of God. Most philosophers reject the argument as unsound, but Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne believes that the argument proves that God may have been the creator of the laws of nature, but not the order and structure of the universe, which could have come about by evolutionary development.

Interestingly enough this appears to have been Darwin’s original position. The first edition of the *Origin of Species* contains an epigraph that indicates that God created

the universe with natural laws that, working solely on their own, could produce both the physical and biological world as we know it.

American philosopher Richard Taylor has offered a defense of the design argument that relies on the premise that nature is filled with signs that tell us truths. Our sense organs are not simply marvels to behold, but they are they are also instruments of truth. They tell us something about the world that is totally independent of their own internal structure. It would, therefore, be irrational for us to believe that our sense organs came into being by accident.

Taylor offers a now famous example of travelers seeing a hillside sign “Welcome to Wales” made out of light colored rocks. Once they have booked into a Welsh hotel they inquire about who made the sign. To their amazement they are told that no one made, that it had always been there, and that was the reason they called the country “Wales.”

Taylor has certainly given us a great story, but he has failed to appreciate the blind but beautiful logic of natural selection. Adaptation through eons of time has necessarily made our sense organs truthful guides. An organism that could not trust its senses would fall out of the gene pool. And there is something else wrong with Taylor's example: rocks do not adapt to their environment, but living organisms of course do.

The appeal to intelligent design is an argument by analogy. The 18th Century Anglican priest William Paley referred to the making of a watch, and Professor Behe offers us the sculpting of the rock of Mount Rushmore. The Scottish skeptic David Hume granted that there is an analogy, but he claimed that it was actually quite weak. In most cases we can discover the specific reasons and mechanisms by which humans have created things, but we have no direct access, other than mostly figurative references in religious literature, to the reasons and specific mechanisms for a divine creation. Furthermore, divine creation, according to orthodox Judeo-Christianity, is creation out of nothing, while humans always produce out of existing materials.

Using God as a hypothesis for the order and structure of the universe fails as a scientific explanation. Christians claim, and their theologians have confirmed the proposition, that with God “all things are possible.” Therefore, whatever order and

structure the world might have, then God could have created it. This is the logical fallacy of arguing in a circle.

The evolutionary hypothesis has been spectacularly successful in demonstrating specific reasons for specific developments in thousands of the earth's creatures. For example, we know that sickle cell anemia developed for a specific reason in malaria infested Africa, but creationists are left with a profound moral dilemma with this and many other similar examples. Natural selection has no moral scruples, but creationists must defend a deity who creates a myriad of things that can have both good and evil effects.

Intelligent Designers cannot give the specific reasons that evolutionary theory can. They can only say "God made it that way, and we honestly do not have any good answers about the evil effects of divine creation." The standard appeals to divine mysteries are obviously not explanations.

I once witnessed creationist Duane Gish in a debate with the late Grover Krantz, an anthropologist at Washington State University. Gish finished his presentation with a series of slides about the stages of development of the Monarch butterfly. He challenged Krantz to explain how of this intricate and complex process came about by natural selection. Krantz said that this was not his field, but he assumed that biologists had not yet found an explanation. Compare Krantz's humble answer with Gish's implied but triumphant answer that "God did it."

The creationist answer is not only arrogant but ignorant about how science operates, and how it must remain agnostic when there are no plausible hypotheses. Claiming that God created the Monarch such that it would go through these stages explains nothing at all about how butterflies actually came about.

A hypothesis that explains all possible order and structure explains nothing about the specific operations of our incredible cosmos. Evolution has proved itself to be a very successful scientific hypothesis in this regard, but it has nothing to say about ultimate origins. At this point people should turn to philosophy and theology and choose their own answers to nonscientific, but critically important, questions such as "Why is there something rather than nothing at all?" The scientific method cannot

answer this question, but the world religions have lots of interesting and worthy answers.

Therefore, Professor Behe is wrong to assume that “in the absence of any convincing non-design explanation, we are justified in thinking that real intelligent design was involved in life.” I have argued that Intelligent Design is a philosophical and theological hypothesis, not a scientific one. As long as people continue to ignore this essential distinction, this controversy will continue with negative consequences for our cultural stability and the integrity of science education in this country.