



The Fallacies of Intelligent Design Theory

In the 1990s, creationism (calling itself “creation science”) led to something named intelligent design (ID) theory, which (in effect) claims that the world and its contents are the result of supernatural intelligent design. ID is pseudo science without the biblical literalism and explicit references to god. Creationism failed in the 1980s because its campaign to force into the classroom the idea of a “young earth” created 6,000 to 10,000 years ago was too obviously religious. In court decisions in 1982 and 1987, so-called “creation science” was declared to be religion and teaching it in public schools to be unconstitutional. This required a new approach for the creationist supporters.

The ID movement sprang up, coupled with something called the wedge strategy. The wedge strategy refers to finding what are thought to be cracks in natural science and driving wedges into those cracks, using the same (metaphoric) procedure as one would use to split a log. Natural science, which creationists hold to be contaminated by the philosophy of naturalism, is the log barring the way to Jesus. By bringing questions about Darwinism, naturalism, evolutionary biology, and intelligent causation to the public’s attention, an interest in supernatural intelligent design (leading to evangelical theology) will presumably be stimulated.

ID holds that some features of life and the universe are far too complicated to have evolved through processes such as natural selection; therefore, a designer must have been involved. However, ID is neither science nor scientific theory. It has no general theory of biological design. It does not even provide a hypothesis that is testable; thus, there is no way scientists can determine if it is true or false. ID advocates seek only to contradict prevailing theories, advocating willful ignorance over scientific research. Whenever there is a gap in scientific knowledge, a supernatural designer is invoked as the causal agent. This is often called a “god of the gaps” approach. However, by answering a mystery with a mystery, nothing is explained.

ID proponents are usually careful not to specify who the designer(s) might be. However, many ID supporters and organizations like the Discovery Institute in Seattle have at times acknowledged that they have the Judeo-Christian God in mind and that Intelligent Design is a way to get Christian theology taught in public schools. So any comments one sometimes reads to the effect that ID is just another benign alternative are incorrect.

To date, scientists have not seen convincing evidence for conclusions supporting the operation of supernatural causes in nature. While scientists do not categorically reject the possibility of supernatural causation, neither do they at present consider it seriously. This is due to a complete lack of convincing evidence. Yet ID advocates have alleged that science, by its very nature, is prejudiced against appeals to supernatural beings and supernatural causation. This claim is addressed further in the section below. Two additional claims are made. First, ID advocates allege that there are biochemical adaptations in organisms that defy explanation in natural terms and require supernatural intelligent design for their explanation. Second, they allege that modern cosmology reveals a universe that requires for its existence a supernatural intelligent designer. Both of these claims are addressed in articles accessible on this website.

Science and Naturalism

The intelligent design movement claims that science has been taken over by a destructive, secular philosophy calling itself by such names as naturalism, materialism, and modernism. ID advocates hold that it is philosophy and not evidence that underlies scientific support for evolution. In the minds of such individuals, the evidence in support of their position has become so strong that they propose, in the name of fairness, that it should become part of science texts and be taught in the science curriculum. However, ID arguments are little more than new variations on the old argument from design.

ID advocates do not discuss the real reason mainstream scientists reject the ID hypothesis, which is because there is no evidential support for supernatural design of life or the universe itself. The accusation that scientists reject ID theory because they are under the influence of materialistic or naturalistic philosophy is part of a smoke-and-mirrors strategy to cover up the lack of evidence supporting the ID position.

Scientists' approach to problem solving requires the gathering of good evidence and an impartial analysis of the consequences of such evidence. Hypotheses about spirits, souls, magical powers, astrology, psychic powers, ESP, etc., have been examined many times by science. These hypotheses have been rejected over and over, not because of philosophical bias, but because there was no empirical evidence whatsoever to support them. Standard scientific practice is to ask whether there are alternative explanations that will explain the same phenomena and to be concerned with examining the methods used to gather data. Critical thinking, not closed-minded thinking, is necessary. For example, in a 1999 study that claimed to show a positive association between church attendance and health, scientific reviewers found it flawed by failure to control for the fact that people with reduced capacity (and poorer health) were less likely to attend church and be counted.

A problem for ID is that the organisms we see in nature show evidence of either bad design or sub-optimal design. For example, the necessity for humans to get around on their hind legs causes many problems, from knee and ankle difficulties to lower back pain to hemorrhoids. Only a sadist would design creatures with so much built-in obsolescence. We get sick, we go bald, we get fat, we lose our visual acuity, our teeth fall out, our bones become brittle, our skins sag, our sexual performance fades, our brains shrink, our arteries clog, our senses dull, and our memory becomes unreliable. The appearance of such poor design can be interpreted as evidence of a bungling, unintelligent trial-and-error evolutionary process that has resulted in sub-optimal anatomical structures. Clearly, such structures appear to be inconsistent with the designs of an all-knowing, all-powerful, all-good supernatural entity. ID advocates argue that perhaps we do not know the intentions of the designer. However, a secularist can equally respond that perhaps these things just evolved in a way we have not thought of yet. Why should the first be a good excuse and the second a bad excuse?

The Flawed Bases for Intelligent Design

The Biological Case

In 1996, creationist Michael Behe, a biochemist, came up with an argument against evolution that he termed "*irreducible complexity*." This concept asserts that biological systems exist that are too complex to have evolved from simpler forms. Irreducible complexity refers to those biological systems that are composed of several interacting parts, where removal of any one of the parts would cause the system to cease functioning. However, among its defects, the concept of irreducible complexity does not take into account the well-documented biological process of co-option, in which structures that have evolved for one use have become employed for a different use. One of the best-known examples is the evolution of the mammalian inner ear from reptilian jawbones. Such redundant biochemical complexity has been pointed out to exist in all the examples Behe has presented in his writings, demonstrating they were not irreducibly complex.

The Case from Information Theory

Based on modern information theory, mathematician and theologian William Dembski claims to have proven that the kind of information inherent in the universe cannot be generated by natural causes. His “proof” has been shown to be a common creationist misrepresentation of the second law of thermodynamics.

The Case Based on the “Anthropic Coincidences”

Physicists have collected a large number of examples in which the laws and constants of nature appear to be consistent with the view that they are fine-tuned for the production of life as we know it on earth. Theists have interpreted this as meaning that our universe shows signs of divine purpose, with humanity as that purpose. This argument fails to consider the possibilities of life forms very different from our own that could exist in a different universe with different physics. It also does not correctly calculate and interpret the related probabilities. Current cosmological theories suggest the existence of many universes besides our own. Though such possibilities cannot be empirically proved at this time, the inability to disprove them may suffice to refute the (strictly hypothetical) fine-tuning argument.

The Case Based on Big Bang Creation

Christian philosopher William Lane Craig has updated the old Islamic *Kalam cosmological argument* that the universe had a beginning and so must have been created. The big bang is taken as evidence of a beginning to our universe. However, as a theist, Craig claims that an uncreated entity can exist, namely god, who had no beginning. Physicists argue that there is no scientific basis to assume that the universe had a beginning. In fact, fundamental physics shows no preferred moment or direction of time.

Thus, it follows that the universe need not have been created.

Each of the foregoing “Cases” is discussed in some depth in articles on this website. The focus for discussion is on scientific findings rather than philosophical argumentation.

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