

EDITORIAL

IS INTELLIGENT DESIGN HARMFUL TO SCIENCE?¹

Critics of intelligent design often worry that acceptance of an intelligent designer in nature would be detrimental to science. Three claims have been made that, if true, might suggest that scientists should be wary of intelligent design. The first of these claims is that intelligent design inhibits scientific inquiry.² The second claim is that intelligent design is a sterile idea, and does not suggest any questions for investigation. The third claim is that, intelligent design is not an appropriate approach in science because it is religious in nature.³ What is the status of these claims?

The first claim, that intelligent design inhibits scientific inquiry, is quickly falsified by a brief look at the history of science.⁴ Most of the early pioneers of science believed in an intelligent designer. Many believed specifically in the biblical creator. Yet this did not inhibit their curiosity nor discourage them from pursuing scientific research. In fact, belief in an intelligent designer was a stimulus to research for many of these scientists. Indeed, today there are many successful scientists who believe the universe originated by intelligent design. Thus, the idea of intelligent design has been useful in the development of modern science. On the contrary, if nature is all there is, why would one expect to find order and regularity in nature? This criticism of intelligent design is false. Those who are inclined to explore the world through science will do so whether or not they believe in design.

The second claim is that intelligent design is a sterile idea, and does not provide any questions to explore scientifically. Hence it is useless for science, whether true or not. As noted above, this claim is falsified by the number of early scientists who were motivated to pursue science because of their faith in a rational God who created a rational universe. It is further falsified by contemporary design advocates doing research stimulated by the idea of intelligent design.⁵

The idea of intelligent design continues to stimulate scientific research in certain areas. Design is a historical explanation; hence it is not likely to have much application in exploring experimental questions in science. Since most science is experimental in nature, belief in intelligent design is unlikely to affect much of scientific inquiry. It could and does, however, suggest ideas for research in historical questions. This can be illustrated by comparing research questions in historical biology stimulated by Darwinism with those stimulated by intelligent design.

Under the dominant evolutionary paradigm, three major types of questions are being asked:

- a. What is the pattern of relationships among living organisms? Assuming the pattern is that of a single tree or bush, how are the various species connected within that single structure?
- b. What processes have led to diversification of life within the tree/bush?
- c. What is the history of the development of the tree of life in time and space?

Intelligent design poses the same categories of questions, but without the same assumptions about the answers. For example, design advocates are interested in the following questions:

- a. What is the pattern of relationships among living organisms? If there are numerous trees or bushes, what are the boundaries of the various independent lineages?
- b. What processes have led to diversification within each lineage, and what might be the limits of such processes?
- c. What is the history of life in time and space? What similarities and differences might we find in comparing patterns in time and space among various independent lineages?

Other ideas for scientific inquiry could be derived from the implications of design, but these examples should be enough to refute the criticism that the idea of intelligent design does not provide any questions to explore.

The third claim is that intelligent design is a religious idea, and religious ideas are not appropriate in science, in part because they inhibit free inquiry. The argument that religious ideas are not appropriate in science is basically an *ad hominem* argument — the claim that an idea should not be accepted because of its source. The value of intelligent design should be examined on its own merits, not on the personal views of its advocates. Mere religious motivation, by itself, is irrelevant to whether design should be considered as an explanation of nature. Furthermore, some religious values are necessary for science. For example, honesty is a religious value, but scientists have found it indispensable for the practice of science.

Although there is always the danger that ideology will negatively affect free inquiry, this danger is not the fault of belief in intelligent design, but of negative social interactions among scientists. The reason given why religious ideas are not appropriate in science is that they are harmful to free inquiry. The implication is that free inquiry must be protected. But

how does one advance the principle of free inquiry by banning particular approaches because one finds them philosophically disagreeable? Critics of the general theory of evolution may find that materialistic ideology is currently affecting their ability to pursue free inquiry. In addition, Cornelius Hunter has cogently argued⁶ that evolution itself is religiously motivated. The criticism that intelligent design should not be allowed because it is a religious idea is self-contradictory and sounds politically motivated.

In conclusion, the major attacks against intelligent design do not appear to be valid, nor even self-consistent. It sometimes seems that intelligent design threatens the hegemony of materialistic philosophy, and the opposition is more concerned with protecting materialism than in promoting free inquiry.

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ENDNOTES

1. Taken from a paper presented at the 2003 North American Division Faith and Science Conference, Glacier View Ranch, Colorado, and subsequently published in Ministry magazine, December 2005.
2. Pennock RT. 1999. Tower of Babel: the evidence against the new creationism. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, p 291-292.
3. (a) Ibid., p 352-358. See also: (b) Ruse M. 2003. Darwin and design. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p 287.
4. (a) Graves D. 1996. Scientists of faith. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications; (b) Kaiser C. 1991. Creation and the history of science. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company.
5. For example, research conducted by the group Wort and Wissen in Germany, and the Baraminology Study Group at Bryan College in Tennessee.
6. Hunter CG. 2001. Darwin's God: evolution and the problem of evil. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press.