

Practising Science in a Secular Society

Questions raised by the Intelligent Design Debate

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Introduction

It is easy to see the debate about Intelligent Design (ID) as being one between two extremes: 'the Goodies vs the Baddies'. But is it really as simple as that? We think the debate raises the following questions, and we have provided some of our comment in the footnotes to help understand the issues. What do you think?

The debate

1. What is ID and why all the fuss?¹
2. Why is there so much heat within the evolution camp towards the introduction of ID? Are we seeing the activities of a Thought Police² here?
3. Are there Thought Police on the ID side of the debate?
4. Why is the teaching of science fine but teaching of religion frowned on³? Is the community understanding of science and faith sufficient for us to teach both together as the one subject? If not, why not?

¹ One definition, derived from the website TalkDesign.org, puts ID as advocating:

(a) the action of an intelligent (presumably conscious) being involved in the emergence of living organisms.

(b) the existence of empirical evidence of this action, sufficient to justify a scientific inference that it occurred.

(TalkDesign website 2003)

Note that people who believe (a) but not (b) do not generally advocate ID. It is the claim that there is empirical evidence of design in biology and cosmology which has provoked the controversy.

² We see Thought Police as those, often self-appointed, who would vociferously guard their concept of orthodoxy on ideological grounds rather than on the basis of evidence or in pursuit of genuine enquiry.

5. Why do we need non-overlapping *magisteria*⁴?
6. Does evolution really disprove God? In other words does believing in evolution mean believing in non-intelligent, non-design emergence of life⁵?

The design issue

7. What is design? What does the postulation of design imply? Can 'Design' be objectively identified by science? Is there objective evidence for design⁶?
8. Does ID contradict or replace the theory of evolution? Is ID only for the bits we can't explain or is God the Lord of the bits we can explain as well?
9. Does ID complement, contradict or replace the 'Young Earth Creation' teaching?
10. Why is the anthropic principle acceptable⁷, but intelligent design⁸ not?
11. What is meant by Irreducible Complexity? Is there such a thing? How do you know when you have found it?

³ The answer of course is the whole history of modern secularism, which tries to keep issues of religion private, whereas issues of science are freely discussed in public. This has come about because religion was so often enforced on people at weapon point. Tolerance without discussing the issue has its problems also, see footnote 4 below.

⁴ The term from Stephen Jay Gould says that religion is one form of truth, science is another, and the two are separate areas of inquiry (*magisteria*) which do not interrelate with one another, hence 'Non-Overlapping Magisteria'. The ID school call it a 'gag-order masquerading as a principle of tolerance', and would argue that religion has much to say about science and science about religion.

⁵ Of course this is what some atheistic evolutionists believe. Dawkins' *The Blind Watchmaker* is a classic. But proving non-design is just as fraught as proving design! In both cases the meta-physics colours the physics (by meta-physics we mean the philosophical assumptions underpinning our scientific enquiry). Theism and atheism are two different meta-physical positions.

⁶ CS Lewis in his book *The Four Loves* states:

If you take nature as a teacher she will teach you exactly the lessons you had already decided to learn; this is another way of saying that nature does not teach....

(Lewis 1960 pp. 23, 24)

Thus Rom. 1:18ff would imply that God's voice in nature is clear but that humankind's hearing is faulty.

⁷ Anthropic principle: that the evolution of the cosmos was so fine-tuned (eg the big bang was not too small, and not too big, but just right) as to allow intelligent life (you and me!) to exist. The probability of such an event is so small it gives pause for thought. How come we are here? And yet there are other explanations (such as there are many universes and ours is the lucky(!) one) that do not require an Intelligent Designer. All of these explanations of course are outside the scope of science to prove or disprove.

⁸ One problem with Intelligent Design is that it is so limiting in providing new areas of knowledge to explore (why/how would you disprove that God intervened in the creation of the human eye?) Further, it relies on the phenomena we can't explain now (eg Irreducible Complexity). For details of the theory see Dembski <http://www.counterbalance.org> right hand column Intelligent Design Coming Clean. (Dembski)

12. What happens when the irreducibly complex becomes understandable, when the gaps in the explanation are filled in naturally⁹? Will this remove another 'proof' of God's existence and therefore be resisted strenuously?

Naturalism issue

13. Does intelligent design challenge naturalism—the concept that all that we can see and measure is all that there is¹⁰? Does evolution mean naturalism is the only option?
14. Is the universe we study open or closed¹¹? Can some 'being' outside of our senses intervene and change the way things are? If so, in what way? Does science provide the means to answer this question?

The Designer

15. If there is a Designer, who is s/he and what is s/he like? How can we know?
16. Does Intelligent Design prove God exists? Can we prove that God exists?
17. Is it appropriate to prove/disprove God's existence¹²?

Implementation

18. Is there a place for teaching ID in the school curriculum? How would this be fostered?
19. What are the consequences of teaching ID (and other theories of the origins of the universe) separate from teaching science?
20. What are the consequences of keeping the *magisteria* separate, especially not exploring faith/religion in schools¹³?

⁹ This would be the main theistic evolutionist's objection to Intelligent Design, it smacks of a 'God of the gaps' philosophy. Isaac Newton, the discoverer of the laws of gravitation postulated that God caused gravity to act, and that God prevented the far-flung stars from rushing together. Subsequent science has gradually reduced the need for God to be so obviously active in the universe in this way and, with it, the 'need' for God as an explanation of the world. Gradually the God of the gaps faded away. Of course it is possible to propose design, without invoking a God of the gaps idea. Evolution and intelligent design (lower case i & d) can co-exist.

¹⁰ Naturalism (*aka* materialism and physicalism) denies outside, non-physical forces, worlds or creations. Orthodox Christians believe God made 'all things, seen and unseen'. They also believe that God and heaven are part of the unseen world and that heaven is the place from which God rules over the whole of creation, the whole universe. How? That is the big unsolved question. Both theistic evolutionists and those who believe in intelligent design would believe in this orthodox teaching.

¹¹ Open or closed to influences from outside the natural order. See previous footnote.

¹² Christians would argue that we need to go beyond 'proof'. There is a personal knowledge where 'knowing' is a lot more than 'knowing about'. We can know about someone, but not know them. The French use *connaître* and *savoir* to emphasise that difference. Christians do not just believe about God, we believe in (trust in) God.

References

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¹³ This is a matter of growing concern and goes some way to explaining why the rise of Islam is generating suspicion and fear. Groups of people with firmly held but unstated beliefs and presuppositions find they don't understand each other and resort to animosity and violence as a reaction. As one of our number put it:
'It seems to me imperative that we make the area of Faith explicit in our society so that we can examine our and others' beliefs without heading into the trenches and hurling bombs (virtual and real) at each other'.