

ID'S [INTELLIGENT DESIGN'S] SCIENTIFIC, THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

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I appreciate Pastor Bornemann's interest in the Sept./Oct. 2002 column that dealt briefly with the Intelligent Design (ID) movement. Earlier columns, especially that on evolution in May/June 2000, are also relevant. My review of William Dembski's *Intelligent Design* was in Trinity Seminary Review 22.1; and a Covalence article, "Intelligent Design as a Theological Problem," is now available (with other relevant papers) at <http://puffin.creighton.edu/NRCSE/>. Robert T. Pennock (ed.), *Intelligent Design Creationism and its Critics* (MIT, 2001) may also be consulted.

009; Pastor Bornemann's argument for ID says little about what ID is. It has several faces, an ambiguity that increases its popular appeal. The ID movement does include some who accept evolution as well as some who reject it. It is, first and foremost, part of a cultural attack on "naturalism" led by law professor Philip Johnson. ID appeals to many Americans who may not grasp the important difference between affirming that the world is intelligently designed as a matter of religious faith and making that an element of a supposedly scientific explanation.

009; In its narrower sense, ID is the claim that some complex biological phenomena (Behe's "irreducible complexity" and Dembski's "complex specified information") haven't been explained by conventional evolutionary theories, and that they can be explained only by postulating an intelligent designer. It's clear from the writings of ID's proponents that this designer is God.

Claims that structures like bacterial flagella cannot be explained by natural selection and attempts to prove that natural processes cannot lead to an increase of information have been challenged by other scientists. But let us grant that they make the negative point that important aspects of life haven't been explained by present theories. That can be said with no reference to ID. Most scientists would then look for natural processes that could explain the phenomena. IDers, however, balk at this. They invoke God to do the job.

Presuppositions

The presuppositions of scientific work should be discussed, with the methods and contents of science, in schools. One presupposition of good science is "methodological naturalism," the limitation of scientific explanations to natural causes. ID proponents dislike this, but it is simply the way scientists work. No competent chemist or physicist, whatever his or her religious beliefs, would be content to explain a puzzling result of an experiment by saying "God did it." Only in

connection with the development of life do a few scientists think that appealing to the supernatural is appropriate.

009; The invocation of God in such cases has no predictive ability, one of the primary *desiderata* of good scientific theories. The God of the gaps only explains phenomena that have already been observed, and explains them in a way that could be done without even examining the phenomena. It takes no scientific understanding to say "God did it" about *anything*.

Pastor Bornemann thinks that ID is to be distinguished from the God-of-the-gaps theologies, but it is a prime example of such bad theology. We don't understand how certain biological features arose, so we insert "God" in the lacuna. The traditional objection that the "need" for such a deity decreases as gaps are eliminated holds here too. Supporters of ID want the gaps to be permanent but this is unlikely unless a "Stop" sign is erected to further research.

Further Problems

And the problem goes deeper. ID focuses on a divine specialist who does a few things science hasn't explained rather than on the Creator who is active in everything that happens in the world. Its insistence on a God who, in Johnson's words, "acted openly and left his fingerprints all over the evidence" hardly fits with a theology of the cross, the kenotic character of divine action, and Luther's idea that created things through which God works are "masks of God."

These latter concepts suggest that methodological naturalism is theologically desirable, and that a Christian philosophy of science should endorse it.

Of course *methodological* naturalism should be distinguished from *ontological* naturalism, which denies the existence of anything other than nature. Ontological naturalism should not be taught in public schools, and a teacher who suggests that evolution replaces religious belief in creation is as much out of line as one who teaches that the earth is 6,000 years old.

009; The author's suggestions that I do not understand what ID is about and am motivated by a sense of insecurity or an insistence on church-state separation are baseless. I'm opposed to the teaching of ID as science because it's bad science. And I'm opposed to church promotion of it because it's bad theology.

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