



A Look at the Intelligent Design Movement

by Warren Krug

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We find ourselves in a local junkyard, searching for a part for our automobile. Across the street is the county airport, and something there catches our eye. On a runway sits a shiny new aircraft, one we had never seen before. We watch as a man climbs on board, starts the engine, and takes off smoothly into the blue summer sky.

“That’s quite a plane,” we remark to the junkyard dealer. “I wonder who designed and built it.” “You haven’t heard?” he replies in surprise. “That windstorm we had last week—it blew some stuff out of my yard, and the junk landed across the street on one of the runways. It just so happened that the junk landed in such a way as to form that beautiful plane.”

Such a story, of course, could never be true. We know things such as airplanes, automobiles, and skyscrapers have to be designed, have to be built by intelligent beings following explicit plans. Yet such a story is believed apparently by many otherwise intelligent people when it comes to the natural world. They believe that all living things and the laws of nature which result in such a smoothly operating world just happened by means of luck and of nature itself.

Yet, not everyone in the scientific community subscribes to such a notion. The late British astronomer, Sir Fred Hoyle, is one who didn’t. Using an example like the story above, he is credited with comparing the likelihood of even a simple cell coming into existence by means of pure chance as being similar to the possibility of a Boeing 747 being assembled by means of a tornado sweeping through a junkyard. **1**

Creationist scientists have long pointed to the difficulty in holding to a belief in a universe that created itself and runs itself. However, creationists, no matter their training or expertise, are generally dismissed as being ultraconservative believers who have a right to their opinions but don’t belong in the scientific community where the real scientists reside.

Now a movement to counter this position has been organized. Called Intelligent Design (ID), it denies that the world as we know it could possibly have come into existence through the forces of nature and the laws of chance. As biblical creationists, we need to examine this movement to see if we can participate in it or at least give it our moral support.

A Short History of Design in Nature

People have long argued that the evidence of design in nature points to a Designer. Already in 44 B.C. the Roman writer and statesman, Cicero, challenged the evolutionary ideas of his day by pointing to design in his book, *De Natura Deorum* (*On the Nature of the Gods*). He argued that since a conscious purpose was needed to express art, nature needed purpose and an intelligent designer also, because nature is even more perfect than art. **2**

More recently, in the 18th century, William Paley used the design argument in his book, *Natural Theology*. He provided the example of a man finding a watch in the countryside. Upon examining the various parts of the watch (spring, gearwheels, pointer, etc.), the man concludes that the watch must have had a maker who “comprehended its construction and designed its use.” **3** Charles Darwin is said to have greatly admired Paley’s book during Darwin’s theological studies at Cambridge. However, Darwin then spent the rest of his life trying to prove that small, useful changes in nature could occur by chance and when added to enough other small, useful

changes (natural selection) could produce all the apparent “design” we see around us. **4**

Oxford Professor Richard Dawkins is a modern scientist who opposes the design argument. He and others promote the neo-Darwinian view that natural selection acts on genetic copying mistakes (mutations) which can lead to more genetic information (upward evolution). In his book, *The Blind Watchmaker*, Dawkins tries to counter Paley’s views by suggesting that natural selection is the “watchmaker”, a blind watchmaker in that it does not see ahead, doesn’t plan consequences, and operates without a purpose in mind. But creationist scientists have long pointed out how progress via natural selection, whether by means of mutations or not, is scientifically and mathematically impossible. **5**

The Birth of the Intelligent Design Movement

Despite the arguments of Darwin, Dawkins, and like-minded scientists, many, many people continue to have great difficulty in accepting the idea that there could possibly be any kind of natural force that could design and create the natural world we see around us and especially the living things we see therein.

In order to counter the dominance that the supporters of the evolution theory have on modern thought, the Intelligent Design movement was begun. Its birth might be traced to the year 1996 when a program was launched by the Seattle-based Discovery Institute called the Center for the Renewal of Science & Culture (CRSC). The CRSC drew up a plan to replace the naturalistic methodology of science with an alternative which they called “intelligent design.” **6**

The *New York Times* in an April 8 front page article on ID identified three people as the “intellectual fathers” of the movement. They are Phillip R. Johnson, a law professor and author of the popular book, *Darwin on Trial*; Michael Behe, a biochemist who authored *Darwin’s Black Box*; and William Dembski, a mathematician who has devised a mathematical method that he says can help distinguish between complete randomness and a complexity designed by an intelligent agent. **7**

The Wedge Project

In 1999 someone obtained an internal white paper produced by CRSC entitled “The Wedge Project.” This paper outlines a three-phase program in which Intelligent Design (ID) might seek to eventually replace Darwinian materialism as the dominant theory in science. Phase I involves research, writing, and publicity, and it has already begun with the writings of Johnson, Behe, Dembski, and others. In addition, university-sanctioned conferences by ID-backers have been held at Yale and Baylor and some success has been achieved in gaining the support of legislators on Capitol Hill and in some state legislatures. Also, the Discovery Institute is granting fellowships to individual researchers.

Phase II involves publicizing the results of the research carried on in Phase I as well as more opinion-making. The Center plans book tours, opinion-making conferences, editorials, television productions, apologetics seminars, teacher-training programs, and publications intended for distribution. Phase II is to be completed by the year 2003.

Phase III to be started sometime in 2003 may take as long as twenty years to complete. During this period it is hoped that materialistic evolution will have become completely discredited, thus creating a vacuum to be filled by ID. Phase III proceeds with more conferences, teacher training programs, and research fellowships. Among other things, this would include getting design theory into the public schools. **8**

The Media's Response to ID

The liberal *New York Times* in its April report on ID provided a basically even-handed report on the movement. The article portrayed the Intelligent Design movement as a more sophisticated challenge to evolution than that posed by biblical creationists. The movement was described as being led by “a group of academics and intellectuals and including some biblical creationists.”

It was admitted that some scientists recognized that despite the victory of evolutionists in Kansas, the evolution vs. creation issue is far from settled. “The most striking thing about the intelligent-design folks is their potential to really make anti-evolutionism intellectually respectable,” the director of the National Center for Science Education in Oakland, California was quoted as saying.

In the *Times* article, the ID backers were allowed to state their position that the complexity of plants and animals cannot be explained by means of natural selection and must be the work of an intelligent designer. The movement's minor successes in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and on the campuses of Yale, Baylor, and the U. of California at San Diego were mentioned as well. **9**

In August, the conservative *Washington Times* in an article titled “Darwinism in Denial?” came down strongly in favor of the Intelligent Design movement. Of course, Philip Gold, the author of this article admitted that he is associated with the Discovery Institute. Still, he lamented the “vicious” reaction of evolutionists to ID backers. Included in the strong reaction by the evolutionist camp are such things as the removal of Prof. Dembski from a position he held at Baylor and the virtual banishment of Dr. Jonathan Wells from the scientific establishment. Wells is the author of a book, *Icons of Evolution*, published by Cambridge University Press, which pointed out the many errors in science textbooks, errors that favor the theory of evolution. **10**

The Response to ID from the Christian Community

As was mentioned, some biblical creationists have been participating in the Intelligent Design program. However, others are standing back and raising the caution flag. Why?

The Intelligent Design movement is caught in a “catch-22” situation. If it appears to be too firmly in the biblical creationist camp, it will be treated just like other creationist scientists—with derision and discrimination. On the other hand, if the movement emphasizes how it differs from typical biblical and scientific creationism, then it risks attack from religious conservatives. Indeed, that is happening.

ID differs from traditional young-earth creationism in at least the following ways. (1) It doesn't try to identify the “intelligent designer.” This designer could be the biblical God, but it also could be a life-carrying meteorite from outer space, a mysterious inanimate new-age life force inherent in the universe, or any other possible explanation. (2) ID speakers for obvious reasons don't normally use biblical references when advancing their positions. (3) Many or most ID leaders accept the notion that the world is billions of years old. **11**

For these and other reasons, Answers in Genesis, a creationist organization that carries a strong evangelistic message criticized ID in an outline article. While acknowledging that ID is having some success in pointing out the scientific bankruptcy of evolution, the article found ID severely lacking because of the failure to identify the intelligent designer as the Creator God of the Bible. **12**

In its publication, *Creation Matters*, another creationist organization, the Creation Research Society, agrees that the Intelligent Design movement is “devoid of theological presuppositions.” However, it cautions that biblical creationists be prepared to identify the Intelligent Designer if ID indeed does help cause the evolution theory to fall. **13**

In Conclusion

When Saint Paul came across an altar in Athens dedicated to an “unknown god,” he used it as a springboard to inform the Athenians as to the nature of the true Creator God. Perhaps this incident from the Bible can help us decide how to handle the Intelligent Design movement. While we cannot fully endorse ID because of its shortcomings, just as St. Paul didn’t endorse the gods of the Athenians, we might deep down hope and pray that it achieves some success in overcoming the evolution monolith. Then if and when that happens, we ought to be prepared to step in and help lead people to the real Intelligent Designer, the God of the Bible, the Creator God who has made us and saved us through the Son of God, Jesus Christ. *LSI*

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