

## Clarifying the Science of Intelligent Design

by Lloyd Steffen

The latest rallying point for controversy in America's culture war goes under the rubric of "intelligent design." The idea of "intelligent design" goes back in Western thought to ideas in Aristotle, then was specifically articulated by Thomas Aquinas, the great Roman Catholic theologian, in the 13th century. Thomas argued that the universe is orderly and complex and logically could not have become operational the way it is without someone to design it. A planet, for instance, lacks the intelligence to determine its fixed and orderly orbit. Yet that orbit is present and observable. So concluding the presence of a "perfect" orbit and believing it could not have come about by chance, Thomas inferred that the universe was itself the handiwork of an intelligent being, "and this we call God" he wrote.

Intelligent Design was scientific in the 13th century context where theology was itself "Queen of the sciences," and Thomas' logical argument was a "proof" for God's existence in the sense that it confirmed the reasonableness of faith for those who already believed in God. That at least was its intent. There were five such arguments altogether, the first of which was the argument from motion. Just as a bicycle does not move without a rider to push the pedals, the argument from motion is simply that any motion requires some agent to start the motion. Aristotle had in the fourth century before the Common Era called that agent the "prime mover" and Thomas advanced this as another proof for God's existence. These "proofs" were not proofs in the sense of verifiable and convincing demonstration of what is the case. They were logical and rational arguments based on inferences or deductions that appealed to metaphysical categories.

These "proofs" are still discussed in humanities classes, especially in philosophy and religion courses. They are presented as rational arguments and what teachers and students do with them is argue them. I can recall from my own training in this area arguing William Paley's watch analogy. If walking through a field I bump a rock, I could say, "That rock has been there forever." But if I stumbled on a watch and examined it and saw its complexity and orderliness, I would logically infer that someone put the watch together and made it work. And so by analogy I infer a God if the universe I discover is orderly and functioning like a watch. More recent philosophers of religion have used a garden analogy—if I stumbled into a garden where the trees were pruned, the grass manicured, rocks of similar size encircle weedless flower beds, then I would logically infer that this garden was tended by a gardener. This constitutes a reasonable inference of the gardener's existence. Sometimes one concludes, as I have, that some of these arguments are valid as arguments, but when the analogy is pushed to the level of metaphysics, they are not sound because so much is not taken into account.

The current debate over intelligent design looks to many like it is a science debate, but it is a humanities debate over questions about logical inference, the nature of evidence, the evaluation of metaphysical claims, and the adequacy of the picture of "design" one

actually sees.

I am critical of the contemporary “intelligent design” perspective and offer here three concerns.

First, the “design” that is perceived is itself an idea that takes only certain things into account. I recall an experience in graduate school when a friend of mine and I went looking through the medical textbook section of the bookstore. My friend opened to pictures of horribly deformed individuals suffering various natural afflictions and diseases. His comment: “So much for design.” How does one decide what to include in a picture of natural orderliness? The fact is that a more complete and unromantic picture of nature would allow one to call Nature a great destroyer and the greatest producer of toxins for human beings: Could one not logically take a “glass half empty” view and infer the presence of a jokester, or even a malevolent designer? Intelligent design begs questions about destruction and evil, and this has long been considered the weakness of the argument.

A second comment. I am fascinated that Protestants are so involved in the “intelligent design” debate, since intelligent design is a piece of natural theology. Natural theology says that God’s handiwork is seen in nature and one can infer God’s existence through the creation. Many Protestant theologians, including the most important of the 20th century, Karl Barth, rejected such a notion. From Luther’s time on, Protestants like Barth have held in the main that God is known by God’s act of revelation through Scripture. “Scripture alone” (*sola Scriptura*) said Luther. Protestants have traditionally held that nature does not tell one anything specific about who the creator is. That so many Protestants have jumped on the intelligent design bandwagon could be seen as another erosion of traditional Protestant identity and a loss of confidence in the tenets of the Protestant understanding of faith.

The third and most disturbing aspect of intelligent design is, however, this. Intelligent design elevates an idea of science to a position where science is granted the authority to be the sole validator of knowledge and understanding. Proponents of intelligent design appeal to science to validate faith, to render faith not only reasonable but “certain.” But if an appeal to science through “intelligent design” is granted the power to establish the warrants for religious faith, then science becomes the final authority to establish the validity of faith. Situating science as the final arbiter of truth subordinates faith to science, which confuses faith and science as two distinct ways of knowing and understanding. People may want to believe that faith can be scientifically justified, but to rest faith on some appeal to science makes science the true object of faith itself. This failure to appreciate faith and science as distinctive ways of knowing and understanding is, I believe, dangerous not only for faith but for science—it is what we mean by “scientism,” that science alone has power to establish truth.

In the end, faith asks not for certainty but for courage. Faith asks people to trust and hope and love when there is ample evidence that could, logically, lead one not to. Intelligent design deprives science of freedom and its own need for a poetry, for whimsy and even a

sense of humor. But intelligent design deprives people of faith of an important reminder: that to be a person of faith requires courage in the face of uncertainty.

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