

Unintelligent and Incompetent Design?

By GEORGE M. DIGGS, JR.

Sherman, Tx. — Imagine living in medieval times. Mental illnesses were thought to be caused by witchcraft, people with epilepsy were believed to be possessed by demons, and many diseases were viewed as punishment for sins. The unknown was terrifying, and the supernatural was the only explanation for many mysteries.

The Scientific Revolution changed these and other accepted “facts”. The essence of this revolution is that knowledge should be based on evidence. When something is not understood, scientists do not resort to superstition, magic, or religion as the explanation. Rather, they look for natural causes based on evidence. Science thus provided what Carl Sagan described as “a candle in the dark”; it pushed back the dark, frightening unknown.

I have taught courses on scientific thinking for more than 20 years, so a recent op-ed piece (*Design for Living*, Michael Behe, 7 February 2005) particularly disturbed me. That article defended a form of “scientific” creationism known as Intelligent Design (ID). A short summary of this idea is that life is incredibly complex and living things appear to have been designed. ID proponents argue that because there is “no good explanation for the foundation of life that doesn't involve intelligence,” life must have been purposefully designed by a divine designer or creator. Such an appeal to the supernatural is diametrically opposed to the modern scientific worldview. Scientists are the first to admit that we do not understand everything about life or any other aspect of nature. But, we are making tremendous strides—for example, the structure of DNA was only elucidated a little over 50 years ago, yet that molecule is already being manipulated to provide astonishing advances in health care. In the study of evolution, advances in molecular biology have provided more insights than were dreamed possible just a few years ago.

There is a serious logical flaw in Behe's argument. He proposes that because ID proponents are not convinced by the scientific evidence for evolution through natural selection, they are “justified in thinking that real intelligent design was involved in life.” Where is the logic in saying that since one cannot fathom a natural explanation, then there must be a supernatural cause with no explanation whatsoever? How can this possibly be considered science?

There are also problems in the idea of design as viewed by adherents of ID. While natural selection has resulted in the *appearance* of design in nature, upon close inspection the “design” exhibits quirks, oddities, and obvious flaws. Human susceptibility to low back pain, hernias, knee injuries, appendicitis, retinal problems, and a host of other physical ills are all easily explained by natural selection, yet present serious problems for ID. Likewise, inherited mental illnesses and cancers, birth defects that are passed through families, and a variety of chronic and degenerative diseases make perfect sense from the standpoint of a blind natural process. However, they raise questions about the nature of an “intelligent” designer. Indeed, if ID supporters knew of the overwhelming evidence of design flaws throughout the natural world, they would more likely conclude that the designer was either incompetent, sloppy, or mean-spirited.

Natural selection, the diversity of its products, and the immense time spans needed for major evolutionary changes are not intuitively obvious to those not trained in evolution. Evolutionary biology shares this counterintuitive nature with much of modern science. Who would have guessed a few decades ago that large tectonic plates and the continents on them continually move across the face of the planet, that billions of galaxies are in range of sophisticated telescopes, or that many diseases are caused by invisible beings we call bacteria? Ultimately, in the case of evolution, the problem is not the lack of a scientific mechanism but rather a lack of human imagination and understanding.

Fortunately, for anyone who has benefited from medicine or the technological spin-offs of physics, a resort to the supernatural is not the way scientists approach the unknown. Instead, they attempt to explain the phenomena of the natural world by making observations, developing hypotheses, and testing their ideas. Science is an evidence-based and breathtakingly successful approach, very different from the centuries old, tired, and utterly failed method of resorting to the supernatural as an explanation for the unknowns of the physical world around us.

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