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**INTELLIGENT DESIGN:
FRIEND OR FOE FOR ADVENTISTS?**

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Intelligent Design: Friend or Foe for Adventists?

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If scholars are claiming the evidence indicates that life must have a designer, surely we would applaud that movement. Or is it something to be shunned? A group of serious scholars in science and philosophy have been building the case that the origin of living things requires a designer. This Intelligent Design movement has been growing since the mid 1990's¹, and continues to be controversial. Why the controversy? Should we be praying for its success, or should we not? Or perhaps a better question is what is its proper role in God's work?

What is ID?

Living cells are unbelievably complex. Each cell has thousands of microscopic biochemical machines, each doing its specific chemical task. Advocates of Intelligent Design (ID) maintain that these structures and biochemical processes are too complex to result from evolution, from chance mutations and natural selection. They study molecular features, like the blood coagulation system, that require several, or many parts to be present all at once before the system can function at all.² An analogy sometimes used to illustrate this argument is a common mousetrap. The mousetrap requires several parts, all properly assembled, before it will catch mice. If one part is missing it won't work, so how could it be "evolved" one part at a time when it is worthless until all the parts are put together? It is irreducibly complex, since it can't function without all of its complexity present at once. This illustrates the claim that biological features could not evolve either, one small step at a time, because even if one complex part happened to appear, it would be useless by itself.

This seems to be a big problem for the theory of evolution, because natural selection has no ability to see what will be needed in the future. Even if one protein needed for a new biochemical system happened to form, natural selection cannot know that this useless protein should be protected because it will be useful later. The result? Natural selection should eliminate the unneeded protein, rather than keep it around until enough of the other proteins can evolve to make the new biochemical system functional. Those who oppose ID present arguments they believe solve the problems for evolution presented here, but I find their arguments to be unsatisfactory. These issues are discussed in detail elsewhere.³

Objections to ID

If ID is finding good arguments that a Creator is needed to account for the existence of life, why would any Christians object to it? There are three main reasons why some persons object to the Intelligent Design movement. 1) The first group consists of persons who deny there is a designer, or if there is, he certainly was not involved in the origin of life or of the universe. It isn't hard to understand why this group would oppose ID, since they don't believe in God at all. I have not met any Seventh-day Adventists in this group.

2) The second group includes theistic evolutionists, who believe God used the evolution process over many millions of years as his means for creating. They don't believe God was directly active in the evolution process, however. To them the apparent design in nature is actually the result of natural selection, not from direct design by the Creator. They commonly believe that God allowed the universe to "make itself" through chance mutations and natural selection.⁴ There are some Seventh-day Adventists in this second group, in spite of theological conflicts over the origin of sin and evil that result from this view.⁵ Theistic evolution doesn't deny the existence of God, but does deny that life was divinely designed, and thus theistic evolutionists oppose ID.

3) There is a third group of objectors to ID, and this group has a very different reason for their objections. The third group, which includes some Seventh-day Adventists, objects to ID because ID stops short of typical conservative Christian beliefs. ID doesn't concern itself with the age of the earth or the age of life and it doesn't identify the God of the Bible as the designer. It doesn't advocate the flood or a literal seven day creation week. ID only addresses one issue: life is too complex to arise without intelligent design.

This third group of detractors maintains that since ID doesn't include a biblical creation and flood, or the biblical God, in its logical arsenal, ID is to be rejected. A literal understanding of the Genesis account of creation and the flood are dear to the heart of SDA understanding of the Great Controversy and the biblical plan of salvation. Since this is so important, perhaps ID isn't a good idea unless it openly supports these beliefs. Or is there something we missed in this thinking?

It will be helpful to clearly understand what ID is and what it isn't. The ID movement is not a group of persons who necessarily reject a literal creation, biblical flood and biblical plan of

salvation. The principal persons involved in the movement vary from young earth creationists who accept the Bible and interpret Genesis literally, to some who are not Christians at all. They agree on one thing – life has features that require an intelligent designer; life could not arise by evolution. Some ID advocates believe in the biblical God of creation, and the literalness of the Genesis account of history, and they still believe those things when they are advocating concepts of ID. If we appreciate the work of the ID movement that doesn't imply that we reject or even question a literal biblical creation, flood, and Creator-Redeemer. ID doesn't address the identity of the designer or when or how the design process occurred. ID just limits itself to a more specific issue – the necessity for intelligent design in the origin of life and the origin of complex life forms. It only addresses the need for some type of intelligent design. Does that in any way undermine SDA beliefs, or does it in some way support them?

The Wedge

By addressing the one specific issue, that life requires a designer, ID sets its sights on a more limited goal, but a very important goal. Its goal is to break the hold of the naturalistic world view that dominates science today. Naturalism is the belief that science must explain all phenomena in the universe by the laws of physics and chemistry alone, without reference to any divine or supernatural influences.

Naturalism and atheism became prominent in the scholarly world over 200 years ago, as part of a movement away from the controlling influence of governments and some religions and their overbearing attitudes during previous centuries.⁶ Naturalistic thinking gradually grew, and became the ruling philosophy for science in the minds of many scientists (and theologians) today. Naturalism does not allow science to even consider the possibility of a Creator or a God who inspired the Bible.

The biblical evidence and logic commonly used in favor of creation and a biblical flood can be effective when speaking with conservative Christians who already accept the Bible as the standard for truth, but to many scientists our arguments simply bounce off the protective wall of naturalism. If our explanations don't agree with naturalistic assumptions, our explanations are not heard at all, because they are considered, by definition, to be nonsense. This is why many scientists so vehemently reject the idea of creation or intelligent design of life.

So if naturalism has such a controlling influence in science, how can this situation be changed, to allow open public discussion of the merits of both secular and religious views of origins? Or will a completely secular view of life's origin continue to maintain a tight hold on the scholarly world?

We could take the position that we don't care what science says. We could decide that those scientists are hopeless, and we will just appeal to a more open-minded audience. But there are problems with that approach. A friend of mine who is an evolutionary biologist at a major university said "there are many scientists who don't know what to do with the evidence for evolution, but they are not willing to give up on God." I see reasons to believe he is right. And we must care about this large group. Jesus told doubting Thomas that those who have stronger faith would be blessed, but Jesus also cared about Thomas and gave him evidence to win his trust.⁷

If these scientists openly discuss their doubts about the ruling scientific concept of origins it could endanger their employment, because of the prejudice against creationism in the scientific community. Naturalism is now like a protective wall around science, keeping out any consideration of creation or intelligent design. So how can scientists and others who are searching find the answers to their questions? That protective wall must be broken down to allow free public discussion of naturalism vs. design.

The ID movement addresses its chosen, limited, issue to increase its chance of weakening the protective wall of naturalism. Trying to attack this wall of union between science and naturalism by a head-on attack is not likely to meet with much success. A person running full speed into a big log will only break his bones. But, the same person can break up that log with a good wedge and a large hammer. And here is where ID enters the picture. Phillip Johnson, the leading light behind the ID movement uses the concept of a wedge to describe a goal of ID. The sharp point of a wedge may have a better chance of opening a crack in a solid structure, and this crack can ultimately break the structure apart.⁸

For ID, the crack that needs to be opened is to break apart the union of science with the philosophy of naturalism, and open up a place for free discussion of the possibility that there is a Creator.

There are a couple of issues regarding the strategy used by the ID movement that can cloud one's perception of ID. Some ID advocates maintain that ID does not require the designer

to be the biblical God or any other divine being, but it could even be an alien from space. The only conclusion they draw from their science is that life requires an intelligent designer of some type. That is technically true, but then their writings or talks to Christian groups indicate they do think God is the designer. This is interpreted by others as deception. I think it would be better if they were more open from the beginning about their belief in God as the Designer, to avoid any implication of deception or duplicity. Also the political attempts to have ID taught in public schools generate much controversy. This can appear to be a violation of the separation of church and state. However, naturalistic views of origins are actually not science but a philosophical commitment that can be described as a religion. Perhaps the only valid way, in this instance, to keep religious preference out of public schools is to leave both views of origins out of public school science classes.

The role of ID in the controversy over origins

When we build a house the first step is to build a foundation. Without a foundation the house will not progress very fast. For the Christian the foundation is the Bible. Then a concrete floor can be poured on the foundation. But is that where we stop? If all we have is the concrete floor, the house will be incomplete and will not be very functional. If we are attempting to bring knowledge of the Creator to a skeptical culture we first need a smooth floor on which the structure can be built. The floor symbolizes openness to the possibility that God is real, and is the designer of life. But the strangle hold of naturalism must be broken before many biblical concepts can have a wider influence.

But if we stop with the floor the structure is very incomplete. We then go on to build a complete house on that foundation and floor. In my analogy of the study of origins, the Bible is the foundation, and the floor is ID, a platform that allows bringing a Creator into the discussion. The rest of the “house” is a more complete knowledge of creation, the flood, the entrance of sin, and the Creator’s redeeming grace so abundantly given to us. We don’t base our faith on science, but on Scripture. ID and other scientific work can play a supporting role in revealing God’s creative work, just as God’s response to Job didn’t answer Job’s questions about suffering, but drew attention to the greatness of God’s creative power.⁹

We have a critical part to play in building a completed house, filling in the picture that is only begun by the ID movement. Some ID leaders build solidly on the biblical foundation.

Others in ID may not recognize the Bible as the foundation, but their work can still help fill in the smooth floor to prepare the way for the building. Even if we don't agree with everything in the ID movement we can still appreciate the work of ID, because the efforts of that movement have done more than any other approach to open modern minds and lead them to doubt contemporary science's insistence that life is only the meaningless result of impersonal laws of chemistry and physics. The more successful ID is in its task, the faster we can progress in sharing what we have to offer to complete the picture of a loving God and his power to create and to save us from a world of sin and suffering.

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Notes

¹ See Phillip Johnson, *Darwin on Trial* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991); *Reason in the Balance: The Case Against Naturalism in Science, Law and Education* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997); *The Wedge of Truth: Splitting the Foundations of Naturalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000); Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: The Free Press, 1996); William Dembski, *Mere Creation: Science, Faith and Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998); *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science and Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999); *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot be Purchased Without Intelligence* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2002); *The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions about Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); *Darwin's Nemesis: Phillip Johnson and the Intelligent Design Movement* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

² Michael Behe, *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution* (New York: The Free Press, 1996)

³ Leonard Brand, A critique of current anti-ID arguments and ID responses. *Origins*, in press.

⁴John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1994, p. 76); *Science and Theology: an Introduction* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1998, p. 78)

⁵Leonard Brand, A biblical perspective on the philosophy of science. *Origins*, Number 59 (2006): 6-42. (grisda.org)

⁶Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism* (New York: Doubleday, 2004)

⁷John 20:26-29

⁸Phillip Johnson, *The Wedge of Truth: Splitting the Foundations of Naturalism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000)

⁹Job 38-41.