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LIST DO REDAKCJI / LETTER TO THE EDITOR

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How Can an Atheist Defend Intelligent Design?

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In 2009, when I was a philosophy professor at University of Colorado Boulder, I published a book with Broadview Press, **Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design**.[1] In the book, I show respect for what the proponents of intelligent design are up to. I engage with them as intellectually respectable fellow inquirers, not as opponents in a culture war. In the first decade of the 2000s, the topic of intelligent design had so much heightened emotion and vitriol associated with it — I'd like to think that my book played a role in calming the tensions.

But at the time my book was published, it made a lot of people mad. My philosopher of science colleague at the time, Carol Cleland, had a strongly pro-science attitude, and considered herself "NASA's philosopher". Her attitude toward me was one that many science-minded non-religious philosophers had — paraphrasing, the attitude was: "what were you thinking? How could you give cover to the enemy like this? This is a culture war and you're on the wrong side".

In this letter, I will answer that question "what were you thinking?". But let's go back to 2009 and set the stage more first.

Carol Cleland wasn't the only colleague who was unhappy with me. My metaphysician colleague at the time, Michael Tooley, got fixated on the fact that, when I give an extemporaneous talk to about 300 people as part of our department's "popular philosophy" series, I said "evolution is most likely true". He, having

[1] Bradley Monton, **Seeking God in Science: An Atheist Defends Intelligent Design**, Broadview Press, Peterborough 2009.

a strongly pro-science attitude, thought that this was a horrible thing to say, and wrote a long email to the whole department about how I shouldn't have said it. What was my sin? According to Tooley, I should have said that evolution is *extremely* likely to be true. I tried to respond by saying those two claims are actually compatible — evolution being most likely true is compatible with evolution being extremely likely to be true — but Tooley wasn't having it. He thought that on conversational implicature grounds, I should have made the more specific claim that evolution is extremely likely to be true.

Though tenure provides very limited protection in the state of Colorado, that was a time when I was glad I had it, because had I been on some sort of renewable position, I'm confident that my position would not have been renewed. I'm even more confident my position would not have been renewed had I told my colleagues what I really think, which is that I don't think evolution is extremely likely to be true. Part of the issue is my fault — I don't know enough biology to have that degree of confidence in evolution. But part of the issue is that I find the biology-based intelligent-design reasoning to have some force. I see their point that it is prima facie surprising that some "irreducibly complex" biological systems (like the bacterial flagellum) have evolutionarily developed, when it doesn't seem like the individual parts of the system could have any evolutionary purpose.

I'm not an evolutionary biologist — perhaps evolutionary biologists do have a compelling story to tell about how such complex systems have arisen (though I've looked and haven't seen it). Really, the story they tell would be just a guess though — we don't have access to enough data about the past to fully figure out how evolution of each individual biological system happened, assuming it did. It would be like a "just-so" story that the evolutionary psychologists tell, where for pretty much any given behavior, we can take a guess as to how evolution would have led to that behavior.

I didn't get further into biological details like this in my book, in part because I endorse a very different sort of response to that sort of biology-based intelligent-design reasoning. My response is based on physics. I think that the universe is most likely (but not extremely likely) to be spatially infinite, with an infinite number of stars and planets. In principle, that doesn't yield diversity — in principle, every planet could be exactly the same. But based on the part of the universe we can observe, we do see lots of diversity, and so this leads me to hypothesize that there continues to be diversity across the infinite universe. As a result, even an event that is extremely unlikely to happen on a particular planet is likely to happen somewhere in the universe. If the probability of some event happening on a particular planet is 10^{-1000}, but you look at a collection of 10^{1001} different planets,

it's likely that the event happens on at least one of those planets. My hypothesis is that there aren't just 10^{1001} planets, there are an infinite number of planets. So this extremely unlikely event probably occurs an infinite number of times (since there are an infinite number of different collections of 10^{1001} planets). These extremely unlikely events can include the evolutionary arising of irreducibly complex biological systems.

This, by the way, gets to the crucial mistake of William Dembski's 2001 book **No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence**, [2] and the crucial mistake of many related pro-intelligent-design arguments. Dembski just focuses on the *observable* universe, and hence assigns a small number to the availability of complexity on the basis of that limited slice of our universe. But there's no reason to focus on the observable universe, unless we have some weird metaphysical view that the observable universe is the universe. What we can observe is an arbitrary epistemic limitation; it's plausible to think that the universe is way larger. In fact, for complex physics-based reasons, it's plausible to think that the universe is spatially infinite — measurements of the large-scale curvature of the universe suggest that, as far as we can tell, it's flat.

So, back in the first decade of the 2000s, I concluded that Dembski was wrong, but I thought he was wrong in a philosophically interesting way. Other atheist-minded philosophers gave bad arguments against him, which bothered me for multiple reasons. Sometimes, the atheist-minded philosophers would misrepresent his argument as weaker than it is, which is always unfair to one's opponent. (In fact, the charitable thing to do is to help one's opponent in making their argument stronger, before explaining why even the strengthened version of the argument doesn't work. It's surprisingly rare how often I see that happen in philosophy – too often, people are just looking to score points). But sometimes, the atheist-minded philosophers would evince fundamental misunderstandings of the relationship between science and philosophy. I thought this was embarrassing, for the people who are defending the ultimate conclusion I support (that there is no God) to be giving such fundamentally bad arguments. So all this made me sympathetic to the proponents of intelligent design — it's like being sympathetic to the kid you see bullied on the school yard, especially when you are ideologically affiliated with the bullies.

One such fundamental misunderstanding that some atheist-minded philosophers evinced is that they said that science couldn't possibly provide evidence for

[2] William A. Dembski, **No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence**, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham 2001.

the existence of God. A philosopher who infamously did this is Robert Pennock, author of the 1999 book **Tower of Babel: The Evidence against the New Creationism**. [3] When I pointed out how mistaken Pennock's arguments were in a paper draft that I posted online, Pennock tried to bully me into taking down the paper by angrily making veiled legal threats against me. I found this appalling enough that I discussed it all in my book, and thankfully I haven't heard from him since. Those who use anger and bullying in a philosophical debate — not to mention legal threats — are most likely revealing to us that they don't have anything better to offer.

So one way I defended intelligent design is in this limited, "in principle" way: in principle, contra confused philosophers like Pennock, science could provide evidence for the existence of God. For example, science could provide evidence that the universe is spatially (and temporally) finite, and that there are complex biological systems that would be highly unlikely to arise via evolutionary processes in this finite universe. Maybe we just got lucky and they did arise and gave rise to us. But whenever there's an appeal to "luck", it makes sense to look for alternate explanations.

A key reason I deem the existence of God unlikely is that I think the universe is spatially infinite. (That in itself is interesting, right? It's not a claim you normally see at the core of pro-atheism arguments). But even if we discovered the universe is spatially finite, I wouldn't necessarily conclude that God exists. I'd be more likely to conclude that a designer exists, but that designer does not have features that would lead us to think of the designer as a traditional God. I'd be more likely to conclude that the designer is natural, not supernatural. This is another way that an atheist could defend intelligent design.

What sort of evidence could we get for a natural intelligent designer? Here's just one example. Consider the fine structure constant, which measures the strength of the electromagnetic force. This is a dimensionless fundamental constant of physics; its value doesn't change with a change of units. It's currently estimated to be 1/137.035 999 206, with some uncertainty about what those last two digits are. So far, it's been measured to 12 significant digits. Suppose that future physicists are able to measure the constant much more precisely — out to say 1000 significant digits. And suppose that, after 16 significant digits, the numbers are all zeros — so the fine structure constant looks like this: 1/137.035 999 206 346 400 000 000 000 000 000 … 000. This would be surprising, right? Why

[3] Robert T. Pennock, **Tower of Babel: The Evidence against the New Creationism**, The MIT Press, Cambridge — London 1999.

would a dimensionless fundamental constant of physics only be specified to 16 significant digits?

In the face of this evidence, I would conclude that we are most likely living in something akin a computer simulation, or perhaps a physical reality that was designed by finite beings utilizing a binary computer. The traditional God, being all-powerful, wouldn't have the need to truncate the digits of the fine structure constant at 16. But if you're an intelligent but finite computer programmer designing a universe, and you have to type in the value of one of the fundamental constants, you aren't going to type forever — a natural thing to do would be to type some digits and then stop.

That's just one example of scientific evidence that could lead me to conclude that intelligent design is most likely true — but it's still true in a way that doesn't lead me to question my atheism. I already think that there are intelligent aliens in existence elsewhere in our universe — in fact, I already think that there are an infinite number of them. (Alas, most likely they are all too far away for us to communicate with them, given relativity theory and the constraint of the speed of light). And I already think that some of these aliens are vastly more intelligent than us. (With an infinite number of alien species in existence, it would be hubris to think otherwise). But with that hypothetical fine-structure evidence, I'd be learning something new — that not only are there super-intelligent aliens elsewhere in our universe, but there are also super-intelligent aliens that were involved in the design of our universe. (Here's a fun aside: maybe they know that, in the universe they're living in, there are super-intelligent aliens involved in the design of their universe too. And so on? There is an interesting philosophical question here, about whether there has to be a fundamental metaphysical ground).

This hypothetical fine-structure evidence doesn't provide evidence for the Christian God. It doesn't provide evidence for an omnipotent being. It doesn't even provide evidence for a being that is worthy of worship or love. (At least, I wouldn't choose to worship the intelligent aliens who designed our universe, though I guess I'd be thankful that they created this system that gave rise to me. Given all the bad things that happen to innocent people, I certainly wouldn't view the intelligent aliens as being worthy of my love).

But what the hypothetical fine structure evidence does provide is evidence of an intelligent designer. Moreover, it's evidence of an intelligent designer that doesn't lead me to question my belief that nowhere in reality is there such a being that theists are talking about when they say they believe in God.

That's just one example of how future science could develop, such that we get scientific evidence for intelligent design. And once we're open to this line of thinking, we can see that there are many other ways future science could develop that would lead us to conclude that intelligent design theory is true. I readily acknowledge that some of those ways would provide evidence for a being that is closer to the traditional God that theists believe in.

I don't see the evidence now, but science is an ongoing process. The key reason I wrote my book — my answer to the question "what were you thinking?" — is that I wanted to promote the view that we should be open to the possibility that we get such evidence in the future. Moreover, there's nothing intellectually or culturally wrong with being open to the possibility that we get such evidence in the future — there's nothing wrong with seeking God in science. This is something that theists and atheists alike should be able to agree on.

Bradley Monton

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