

Lecture 5c: What is Intelligent Design?



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This work is largely adapted from William A. Dembski, *The Design Revolution: Answering the Toughest Questions About Intelligent Design* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

I. What is Intelligent Design?



Intelligent Design makes a profound claim:

“There exist natural systems that cannot be adequately explained in terms of undirected natural causes and that exhibit features which in any other circumstance we would attribute to intelligence.”

~ William Dembski.

I. What is Intelligent Design?



The theory of intelligent design asserts that certain features of the universe and of living things are best explained by an intelligent cause, not an undirected process such as natural selection.

Thus, intelligent design is an effort to empirically “detect” whether the “apparent design” in nature acknowledged by virtually all biologists is either genuine design (the product of an intelligent cause) or simply the product of an undirected process such as natural selection acting on random variations.

I. What is Intelligent Design?



To be sure, intelligent design is distinct from creationism in that intelligent design only attempts to explain the arrangement of materials within an already given world; it does not offer an account regarding the nature and purpose of God nor a theological doctrine of creation.

I. What is Intelligent Design?



Design theorists contend that certain arrangements of matter, esp. in biological systems, clearly signal a designing intelligence...that is all.

Their fundamental starting point is the data of nature and from there, they contend that an intelligent cause is responsible for the specified complexity in nature.

Thus, intelligent design does not rely or depend upon prior assumptions but on reliable methods developed within the scientific community for discriminating designed from undesigned structures.

In fact, Dembski writes, “Scientific creationism’s reliance on narrowly held prior assumptions undercuts its status as a scientific theory. Intelligent design’s reliance on widely accepted scientific principles, on the other hand, ensures its legitimacy as a scientific theory” (pg. 43).

I. What is Intelligent Design?



Early versions of intelligent design are articulated as early as Plato and Aristotle, as did virtually all of the founders of modern science. In fact, until the latter part of 19th century most scientists accepted some form of intelligent design.

However, the scientific community largely rejected design in the early 20th century after the theory of Darwinian claimed to explain the emergency of biological complexity through the unintelligent process of natural selection acting on random mutations.

Then near the end of the 20th century new scientific research and discoveries ranging from physics, cosmology, biochemistry, genetics, and paleontology have caused a growing number of scientists and scholars to question evolutionary theory and propose design as the best explanation for the existence of specified complexity in the natural world.

II. Major Proponents:



Many major proponents of Intelligent Design are members of the Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture: 1511 Third Ave., Suite 808-Seattle, WA 98101 206-292-0401 phone-206-682-5320 fax e.mail: cscinfo@discovery.org or www.discovery.org

Members include:

Francis Beckwith	Philip Johnson
William Dembski	Edwin Meese
Michael Behe	J.P. Moreland
Walter Bradley	Nancy Pearcey
Bruce Chapman	Charles Thaxton
William Lane Craig	Jay W. Richards

III. Basic Argument:



1. We can often recognize the effects of design in nature.
2. The physical marks of design are visible in aspects of biology.
3. We have no good explanation for the foundation of life that doesn't involve intelligence.
4. In the absence of any convincing-non-design explanation, we are justified in thinking that real intelligent design was involved in life.

IV. Empirical Methodology:



1. Present reliable criteria for detecting intelligent design (same criteria principles used for detecting design among archeologists and forensic scientists); the main criterion that intelligent design employs to detect design is "*specified complexity*" or/and "*irreducible complexity*."
 - a. Specified complexity is apparent design.
 - b. Irreducibly complexity is that which consists of several interrelated parts whereby removing one part destroys the system's fundamental function.
2. Apply these criteria to biological systems. Once criteria are in place for detecting design, they need to be applied to actual biological systems.

IV. Empirical Methodology:



3. Show that these criteria effectively rule out material mechanisms. "*Criteria like specified and irreducible complexity purport to detect design. Yet if material mechanisms can plausibly give rise to systems that exhibit specified or irreducible complexity, there is no reason to attribute design...to rule out material mechanisms is to say that material mechanisms are unable to produce an object in question*" [pg. 271].

It takes on a high probabilistic form in which it is highly and realistically implausible that functionally specified structures cannot happen by chance. Thus, you can combine irreducible complexity to specified complexity.

V. Intelligent Design vs. Scientific Creationism?



Scientific creationists presuppose a Creator who originates the world and all its materials. Moreover, they argue for the scientific accuracy of the biblical account of creation by contending:

1. the first two chapters of Genesis offers a scientific account for a literal six-day creation,
2. the existence of a historical Adam and Eve,
3. a literal Garden of Eden,
4. a catastrophic world-wide flood, and
5. origin of sin.

Thus, scientific creationists take the biblical account of Genesis as its fundamental starting point and attempt to harmonize data of nature to the Book of Genesis.

V. Intelligent Design vs. Creationism:



1. *Intelligent design is distinct from creation* because one can have creation without intelligent design and intelligent design without creation. For example, it is logically possible that God created a world which provides no evidence of his handiwork. On other hand, it is logically possible that the world is full of signs of intelligence but was not created (ancient Stoic view whereby the world is thought to be eternal and uncreated and yet a rational principle pervaded the world and a produced marks of intelligence in it).

V. Intelligent Design vs. Creationism:



2. Intelligent design is distinct from scientific creationism:

Scientific creationism has prior religious commitments whereas intelligent design does not.

Creationism and Intelligent Design also differ in propositional content and method of inquiry.

V. Intelligent Design vs. Creationism:



A. Intelligent design is distinct from creationism in that scientific creationism has prior religious commitments whereas intelligent design does not. Creationism is committed to two religious commitments and interprets the data of science to fit those presuppositions:

1. There exists a supernatural agent who creates and orders the world.
2. The biblical account of creation recorded in Genesis is scientifically accurate.

B. Intelligent design has no prior religious commitments and interprets the data of science on generally accepted scientific principles. In particular, intelligent design does not depend on the biblical account of creation.

VI. Intelligent Design vs. Creationism:



C. Creationism is committed to the following statements:

1. There was a sudden creation of the universe, energy and life from nothing.
2. Mutations and natural selection are insufficient to bring about the development of all living kinds from a single organism.
3. Changes of the originally created kinds of plants and animals occur only within fixed limits.
4. There is a separate ancestry for humans and apes.
5. The earth's geology can be explained via catastrophism, primarily by the occurrence of a worldwide flood.
6. The earth & living kinds had a relatively recent inception (on the order of thousands or tens of thousands of years).

VI. Intelligent Design vs. Creationism



D. Intelligent Design is committed to the following propositions:

1. Specified complexity and irreducible complexity are reliable indicators or hallmarks of design.
2. Biological systems exhibit specified complexity and employ irreducibly complex subsystems.
3. Naturalistic mechanisms or undirected causes do not suffice to explain the origin of specified complexity or irreducible complexity.
4. Therefore, intelligent design constitutes the best explanation for the origin of specified complexity and irreducible complexity in biological systems.

VI. Concluding Observations:



1. It is important to keep in mind that it is the profound appearance of design in life that everyone is laboring to explain, not the appearance of natural selection or the appearance of self-organization.
2. Design should not be overlooked simply because it's so obvious.
3. We can't settle questions about reality with definitions or by searching relentlessly for a non-design explanation.
4. Intelligent design is not a religiously based idea even though religious people cite it in their arguments.
5. Intelligent design is based on physical evidence and a straightforward application of logic.

VI. Concluding Observations:



7. As the same for any evolutionary theory, intelligent design must be testable.
8. In the public square, intelligent design is free from charges of religious entanglement as opposed to scientific creationism because intelligent design shares none of scientific creationism's religious commitments.
9. Intelligent design does not make claims about the origin or duration of the universe, flood geology, creation of Adam and Eve, or origin of sin. In other words, "*intelligent design is a strictly scientific theory devoid of religious commitments*" (pg. 44).

VI. Concluding Observations:



10. Scientific creationism conforms to a literal interpretation of Genesis. In contrast, the I. D. designer is compatible with the creator-God of the world's major monotheistic religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam, the watch-maker God of the deists, the Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus* and the divine reason (i.e., *logos spermatikos*) of the ancient Stoics. In fact, one can have an agnostic view about the designer, treating specified complexity as a brute fact inherently unexplainable in terms of chance and necessity.