

Why Can't We Discuss Intelligent Design?

J Scott Turner

I'd never had a heckler before. Usually, when I'm asked to give a talk, I discuss my research on termites and the remarkable structures they build. Usually, I'm glad just to have an audience. But what I'd learned from termites had got me thinking about broader issues, among them the question of design in biology: Why are living things built so well for the functions they perform? So I wrote a book called *The Tinkerer's Accomplice*, which was my topic that day.

The trouble started almost as soon as I stepped up to the podium: intrusive "questions" and demands for "clarifications," really intended not to illuminate but to disrupt and distract. In exasperation, I finally had to ask the heckler to give me a chance to make my argument and my audience a chance to hear it, after which he could ask all the questions he wished.

He was not interested in that approach, of course, and left as soon as question time began. I found out later that he'd complained at his next faculty meeting that the departmental speaker's program should never be used as a forum for advancing—what precisely? That was never quite clear, either to me or to my embarrassed host.

I think what stirred up the heckler had something to do with the word "design." Unless clearly linked to the process of natural selection, "design" can be a bit of a red flag for modern biologists. The reason is not hard to fathom. Most people, when they contemplate the living world, get an overwhelming sense that it is a designed place, replete with marvelous and ingenious contrivances: the beak of a hummingbird curved like the nectaries it feeds from, bones shaped to the loads they must bear, feathers that could teach new tricks to an aeronautical engineer, the nearly unfathomable complexity of a brain that can see — all built as if someone had designed them.



And that, in a nutshell, is the problem. Say "design," and you imply that a designer has been at work, with all the attributes implied by that word: forward-looking, purposeful, intelligent, and intentional. For many centuries, most people drew precisely that conclusion from the designs they thought they saw everywhere in nature.

Charles Darwin was supposed to have put paid to that idea, of course, and ever since his day biologists have considered it gauche to speak of design, or even to hint at purposefulness in nature. Doing so in polite company usually earns you what I call The Pause, the awkward silence that typically follows a faux pas.

If just one freighted word like "design" can evoke The Pause, combining two — as in the phrase "intelligent design" — seems to make otherwise sane people slip their moorings. If you enjoy irony, as I do, the spectacle can provide hours of entertainment. I wonder, for example, what demon had gripped a past president of Cornell University when he singled out intelligent design as a unique threat to academic and civil discourse. Aren't universities supposed to be a place for dangerous ideas?

Also amusing is the spectacle of independent-minded scientists' running to college administrators or the courts for help in defining what is science and what is permissible discourse in their classrooms. And I find it hard to suppress a chuckle at the sheer brass of books like Richard Dawkins's recent *The God Delusion* (Houghton Mifflin, 2006), which seem untroubled by traditional boundaries between religion and science as long as the intrusion is going their way.

Faced with all that hue and cry, I almost want to say: "Friends, intelligent design is just an idea." You might believe (as I do) that it is a wrongheaded idea, but it's hard to see how that alone should disqualify it from academic discourse. Academe is full of wrongheaded ideas, and always has been — not because academe itself is wrongheaded, but because to discuss such ideas is its very function. Even bad ideas can contain kernels of truth, and it is academe's role to find them. That can be done only in the sunlight and fresh air of normal academic discourse. Expelling an idea is the surest way to allow falsehood to survive.

A critic of intelligent design could reasonably reply: "That's all true, but there are limits to how much tolerance should be extended to wrongheadedness. Once falsehood is exposed as such, it needs to be shown the door." It's worth remembering, though, that we have been here before. Intelligent design is just the latest eruption of a longstanding strain of anti-Darwinist thought, which includes the Scopes "monkey" trial of the 1920s, the "creation science" controversies of the 1970s, and many other skirmishes, large and small.



The strain's very persistence invites the obvious question: If Darwin settled the issue once and for all, why does it keep coming back? Perhaps the fault lies with Darwin's supporters. Rather than debate the strain on its merits, we scramble to the courts or the political ramparts to expel it from our classrooms and our students' minds.

That is a pity because at the core of intelligent design is a question worth pondering: Is evolution shaped in any way by purposefulness or intentionality? Darwinism is clear in its answer — no way, no how — and that is not mere obstinacy, as some might charge. The banishment of purpose from evolution is Darwinism's *sine qua non*, which Darwin himself fought hard to establish, and which his descendants have defended stoutly ever since.

Most of the challenges to Darwinism over the years, including intelligent design, have arisen over what most people see as a self-evident link between design and purpose in the living world. A Darwinist would say that the purpose is only *apparent*, that what we believe to be design is actually the accumulated product of an unintentional process of "tinkering," using materials at hand to cobble together solutions to immediate problems — keeping those that work, discarding those that do not, but proceeding with no view of the future, only with the legacy of the past.

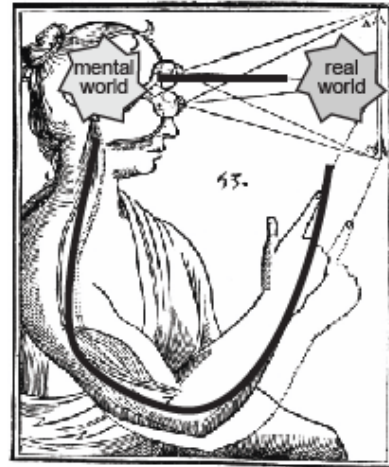
But what if evolution really is purposeful in some way? In fact Darwin dethroned only one type of purposefulness, the Platonic idealism that had previously underscored the

concept of the species. There's more to purpose than Plato, however, and it remains an open question how other forms of purposefulness might inform our thinking about evolution. What might purposeful evolution look like? Is design its signature? Can it be reconciled with Darwinism? If so, how? If not, why not?

It's hard to see a threat in asking such questions. Indeed, it's hard to see how asking them could do anything but enrich our understanding about evolution and how we teach it.

Here is where I have to give the proponents of intelligent design their (limited) due. Their intellectual pedigree might be suspect, their thinking might be wrong, but at least they are asking an interesting question: What is the meaning of design of the living world?

In our readiness to proscribe intelligent design, we Darwinists are telling the world not only that we are unwilling to ask such questions ourselves, but that we don't want others to ask them either. No wonder the war on Darwin won't go away.



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