

What Is Intelligent Design?

Proponents of intelligent design (ID) contend human life is too complex to be explained by natural selection, and such complexity is the “signature” of a designer. Opponents argue that even discussing ID legitimizes the movement as a scientific alternative.¹

Although the movement attributes the origins of life to an intelligent cause, supporters claim they cannot identify this cause. Proponent William Dembski writes, “As a scientific research program, intelligent design investigates the effects of intelligence and not intelligence as such.”² However, the movement claims microbiology and mathematics can expose the signature of this intelligent cause.¹ In addition to criticizing the theory of natural selection, some supporters of intelligent design hope to reform the scientific method, which they term “atheistic naturalism,” altogether. The founder of the movement, Phillip E. Johnson, calls the alternative, which requires investigators to consider the influence of a transcendent non-natural deity in explaining natural phenomena, “theistic realism.”³

History and Politics

Modern intelligent design is preceded by theories of a deliberately-created rational universe. Some philosophers, including Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae*, and William Paley in his 1802 work *Natural Theology*, have argued the rational order of the universe proves the existence of a prime mover. Paley used the example of a watch found in a field as an analogy for the creation of human life. He argued an observer, upon finding the watch in a field, must infer it was designed by a “watchmaker.” As a watch is too complex to have formed spontaneously, Paley argued the same was true for the creation of man: just as a watch could not form naturally, man must also have a creator. As a young student, Darwin had been impressed by Paley’s work and had originally used Paley’s argument to support his belief in God.⁴

The intelligent design movement in its modern form began with Johnson’s controversial 1991 work *Darwin on Trial*. Johnson was originally an American Law professor at UC Berkeley until his religious conversion led him to take a sabbatical to study pro-evolution literature.³ The work was largely ignored by the scientific community until Stephen Jay Gould reviewed it

in 1992, criticizing the book for its misrepresentation of scientific data.⁵ In 1996, Johnson oversaw the foundation of the Center for the Renewal of Science and Culture (C.S.C.), sponsored by the Discovery Institute, a Seattle think tank. The C.S.C. sponsors research into intelligent design and has influenced many of its political actions.⁶

In 1997, Johnson began calling the movement’s mission a “wedge strategy.” The “Wedge Document,” a plan for implementing future goals of the movement, was leaked onto the internet in 1999. This approach seeks to discredit evolution by leading its proponents to admit, through public debate, that significant uncertainty does exist in the model of natural selection. This strategy has become the cornerstone of the movement’s “Teach the Controversy” campaign.⁷

Johnson’s “wedge strategy” has also appeared in federal legislation. In 2001, Johnson helped to author *The Santorum Amendment* to the “No Child Left Behind” bill, requiring public school science teachers to admit controversy exists on the validity of evolution. Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum is a vocal supporter of the movement but has recently distanced himself from the C.S.C. On June 14th 2001, the amendment was passed in the House of Representatives as part of the H. R. 1 Education Funding Bill on a 91-8 vote, but did not appear in the Senate version. Although the C.S.C. has often claimed the act as a legal mandate, a conference committee ultimately determined the *Santorum Amendment* did not hold the force of law.^{8,9}

Pennsylvania courts recently evaluated the constitutionality of teaching intelligent design in the classroom. On October 18th, 2004, the Dover, Pennsylvania Board of Education voted to require teachers to read students a statement suggesting intelligent design as an alternative theory to evolution, and recommended a pro-ID textbook, *Of Pandas and People*. In *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District*, Judge John Jones III, a Catholic and an appointee of the first President Bush, ruled the Dover Board of Education had violated the Establishment clause, writing, “The overwhelming evidence at trial established that ID is a religious view, a mere re-labeling of creationism, and not a scientific theory.”¹⁰

On August 2nd, 2005, President Bush endorsed intelligent design, remarking at a morning briefing, “You’re asking me whether or not people ought to be

exposed to different ideas, and the answer is yes.”¹¹ Some have speculated recent public opinion polls encouraged the President to make a statement. According to a Gallup poll, 46 percent of respondents believe “God created man pretty much in his present form at one time within the last 10,000 years” and another 38 percent believe “Man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life, but God guided this process, including man’s creation.” Just 10 percent believe “Man has developed over millions of years from less advanced forms of life. God had no part in this process.”¹²

Differing Viewpoints

The majority of scientists dismiss intelligent design as pseudoscience or dressed-up creationism, and many are reluctant to become involved in the debate. They fear that even debating intelligent design legitimizes the movement as a scientific alternative. Outside of the U.S. intelligent design has little influence. In an effort to bolster its scientific credentials, the most prominent scientist at the C.S.C., Michael Behe, insists biochemistry provides a scientific basis for ID.

In Michael Behe’s 1996 work *Darwin’s Black Box*, the author proposes intelligent design as an explanation for what he calls “irreducible complexity.” If certain biological systems were reduced to a mousetrap, the removal of one of the individual components of the mousetrap would cause the entire trap to malfunction. Behe claims these biological systems, like the mousetrap, are too complex to have formed through the successive modifications Darwin proposed. As an example, he cites the flagella of bacteria, whose movement requires dozens of different proteins working synergistically in a complicated motor.

In response, Brown University biologist Kenneth Miller, in an essay for *Natural History Magazine*, wrote that the individual components of a mousetrap can be removed and used for entirely different functions outside of their primary “design,” such as the catch as a fishhook. Miller contends Darwin’s successive modifications were not impossible as system components often served different yet useful functions and were adapted into new roles. In bacteria, a small group of the protein components of flagella can also be used to inject poison into other cells.¹³

The CPU Publishing staff asked prominent academics and political figures for comments on the political discourse surrounding intelligent design. Here are their responses:

“It is appropriate that the Columbia Political Union host a discussion of intelligent design, because it is fundamentally a political movement. It is part of the larger anti-science agenda of political forces who see it in their interest to undermine the reasoning ability of the students and citizens of this country in furtherance of their broader agenda.”

— David Helfand, Columbia University, Astronomy.

“In the past decades science has discovered that the cell, the foundation of life, is run literally by molecular machines of unrivaled - and unexplained - sophistication. The idea of the intelligent design of life arises straightforwardly from such data.”

— Mike Behe, Lehigh University, Biochemistry. Testified at Dover

“The Intelligent Design (ID) ‘wedge strategy’ was tested in court, and Constitutional law crumpled it like a stage prop. ID creationists fought the law and the law won. Their lobbying to ‘teach the controversy’ is, as the judge wrote, ‘a canard’ to avoid the scrutiny that the court saw they could not withstand. Evolution: it’s not just a good idea...it’s the law.”

— Robert Pennock, Michigan State University, Philosophy. Testified at Dover

“Scientific materialism is the intellectual pathology of our age. It suffocates the life of the mind by requiring science to underwrite materialism just when science is increasingly finding patterns in nature that are best explained as the result of intelligence, thus exposing materialism as a bankrupt ideology.”

— William Dembski, Southern Seminary at Louisville, Mathematics and Theology. Testified at Dover

“My work in astronomy has uncovered evidence of design in the form of an empirical correlation between the conditions required for complex life and the conditions required for scientific discovery.”

— Guillermo Gonzales, Iowa State University, Astronomy

“If Behe wishes to suggest that the intricacies of nature, life, and the universe reveal a world of meaning and purpose consistent with a divine intelligence, his point is philosophical, not scientific. To support that view, one should not find it necessary to pretend that we know less than we really do about the evolution of living systems.”

—Kenneth Miller, Brown University, Biology. Testified at Dover

The Columbia Political Union is a non-partisan group organized for and by the students and faculty of Columbia University. We seek to enhance involvement in the domestic and international political processes, as well as involve every member of the Columbia University community in an ongoing discussion of political ideas.

We have brought activists, political dissidents, journalists, top-level advisors, and leaders from all levels of government, local and international, to share their thoughts with the Columbia campus. In addition to hosting speakers, expert panels, and student debates, the CPU publishes the Columbia Political Review, Issue Updates, and voter education guides. The Columbia Political Union continues to be one of the most active and influential groups on campus, staying on the cutting edge of all sides of political discussion.

This guide was written by CPU Deputy Publisher Matthew Spinelli.

Please RSVP for the CPU discussion at: cupolitics.org/rsvp

Sources:

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⁷http://www.infidels.org/library/modern/barbara_forrest/wedge.html

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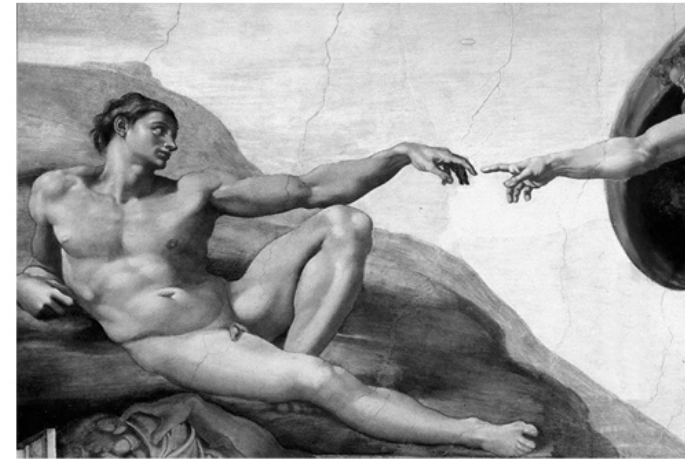
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I.D.

COLUMBIA POLITICAL UNION ISSUE UPDATE

columbia political union panel discussion
7:45pm monday february 27
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