

**HOWARD J. VAN TILL**

## **Apples, Oranges and Portraits of the ID Movement**

---

*During the past fifteen years North America has seen the rise of a movement known by the label, 'Intelligent Design'. This ID movement is characterised by several factors: scientific claims, rhetorical strategies, political goals and religious motivations. In a recent essay (S&CB 15:2, 2003) my assessment of the ID movement focused mostly on the rhetorical strategies and scientific claims made by leading ID advocates, principally by theorist William A. Dembski. Arthur Jones and David Tyler have offered a very different portrait of ID and charge that what I presented was a highly distorted picture of ID that misrepresented its leaders. In this response I shall explore some of the reasons for the vivid contrast between our two portraits of the ID movement in North America.*

### **One ID Movement, Two Perceptions**

The response by Arthur Jones and David Tyler to my essay, 'Are Bacterial Flagella Intelligently Designed?' (S&CB, 15 (2)) vigorously takes issue with my critique of the Intelligent Design movement (a predominantly North American phenomenon). In the course of their rebuttal, Jones and Tyler charge me with both, a) failing to understand the argumentation of ID theorists, and b) consistently misrepresenting the position advocated by proponents of ID. These are serious charges and, as a seasoned veteran of numerous discussions concerning the implications of modern scientific theorising for certain cherished religious beliefs, I am familiar with the intense passion with which such charges are levelled. However, I must say as candidly as I am able that I find Jones and Tyler's charges to be wholly without merit.

Is it possible to identify the underlying cause for these differences in judgment? To answer as succinctly as I can, it seems to me that there are two vastly differing perceptions of the ID movement, each one held with conviction, that are operative in this exchange. The evaluation of ID that I presented in my essay is based on many years of personal engagement with ID's chief theorists, advocates and major publications. This is no superficial measure. However, neither is it necessarily the picture of ID that its advocates or sympathisers wish to be seen in plain view. Nonetheless, it is one that I believe needs to be more widely known, which is precisely why I wrote the essay now under scrutiny.

The portrait of ID presented by Jones and Tyler, on the other hand, is a selectively informed and highly idealised one and, I believe, one that could be maintained only by presuming that the North American ID movement is using key terminology in the same manner that Jones and Tyler might themselves wish to employ it in delineating or advancing their own position on the actual-

isation of new kinds of life forms since the beginning of time.

### The ID Movement as I Have Experienced it

The ID movement of which I wrote in my essay is the one that I have observed, engaged with and critiqued for a decade and a half. As I recall, my first encounter with ID advocates occurred in 1990 (the year prior to the publication of Phillip E. Johnson's book, *Darwin on Trial*) at the annual meeting of the American Scientific Affiliation, the North American counterpart to Christians in Science.<sup>1</sup> Johnson and I (Johnson, a teacher of law, is the founder and energising force of the ID movement) shared the platform at that meeting for an exchange of ideas concerning such topics as creation, creationism, evolution and naturalism. Since that time we have shared the platform on several occasions and have also exchanged our views in writing.<sup>2</sup>

From the outset I have shared with Johnson and other advocates of the ID movement a concern that biological evolution ought not be taught in our state-operated school systems in such a way as to imply that it provided warrant or encouragement for a wholly materialistic (atheistic) world-view. At the same time, however, I have been very candid in rejecting Johnson's repeated contention that accepting the concepts of biological evolution and genealogical continuity effectively constituted a capitulation to materialism. For instance, after defining Darwinism in a way that necessarily entails the basic tenets of a materialistic world-view Johnson has asserted that 'all of the basic tenets of Darwinism are implied in the concept of ancestral descent'.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, I see no necessary connection at all between the biological concept of common ancestry and the metaphysical stance of materialism. On this question, however, Jones and Tyler apparently take the same position as Johnson. (More on this below in the section on genealogical continuity.)

Since my initial exchanges with Johnson and other Intelligent Design advocates, I have continued to engage with the literature of the ID movement.<sup>4</sup> My recent attention has been focused on the work of William A. Dembski, hailed as chief of the ID theorists for his work in crafting the probabilistic arguments now commonly employed as the foundation of ID's claims to have empirical evi-

---

1 Johnson, P.E. *Darwin on Trial*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press (1991).

2 See, for example, Van Till, H. J. and Johnson, P.E. 'God and Evolution: An Exchange', *First Things*, (June/July 1993) 34, 32-41, and also 'Intelligent Design: The Celebration of Gifts Withheld?', In Lamoureux, D.O., Johnson, P.E., et al. *Darwinism Defeated? The Johnson-Lamoureux Debate on Biological Origins*, Vancouver: Regent College Publishing (1999), pp. 81-90.

3 Johnson, *op. cit.*(1), p. 150.

4 Examples include 'The Creation: Intelligently Designed or Optimally Equipped?' *Theology Today*, (Oct.1998), 344-364; 'Does Intelligent Design Have a Chance?', *Zygon* (Dec.1999) 34(4), 667-675; 'Science & Christianity as Partners in Theorizing', In Carlson, R.F. (ed.) *Science & Christianity: Four Views*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press (2000); and 'Is the Creation a "Right Stuff" Universe?' *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith*, (Dec. 2002) 54(4), 232-239.

dence that certain biotic structures could have been assembled only with the aid of non-natural 'intelligent design' action. In the essay to which Jones and Tyler have responded I examined in detail, and against the background of more than a dozen years of closely following the Intelligent Design movement in North America, both the rhetorical strategies and scientific claims made by Dembski in his recent book, *No Free Lunch*.<sup>5</sup> In no circumstances would I accept Jones and Tyler's repeated accusations that I have either misrepresented or failed to understand the Intelligent Design movement.

On the contrary, by examining Dembski's written material in detail, and by determining the operative (and often very unconventional) meanings of key terms on the basis of a thorough consideration of the various contexts in which they are employed, I have discovered how ID rhetoric works to craft both its rhetorical and scientific cases. Jones and Tyler may wish that the ID movement were not as I described it, but that is a different matter. The chief purpose of my writing on this topic is to bring to light both the world-view convictions and the rhetorical strategies that are operative behind the shop-window display that many promoters of ID have set up.

Let me here remind the reader of some of the peculiarities that I have identified. For example, when North American ID advocates say, in effect, that 'we have empirical evidence that biotic structure X could not have been actualised by chance; consequently X must have been intelligently designed,' I find the following translation guide, developed especially for Dembski's book, *No Free Lunch*, to be essential:

- contrary to what readers might expect, 'by chance' effectively means 'by the joint action of all natural causes, both known and unknown'.
- 'we have empirical evidence' most often means no more than 'we are aware of no detailed and incontestable scientific account to the contrary'.
- 'X was intelligently designed' most commonly means that 'X was actualised in such a way that required, in addition to all operative natural causes, one or more episodes of non-natural, form-conferring intervention by an unidentified, unembodied, choice-making agent' (who, as it turns out, bears a striking resemblance to the God of Judeo-Christian supernaturalism). Although terms like 'design' and 'intelligent design' do occasionally refer to some more ambiguous type of non-natural action or mind-derived quality, I find the ID movement as a whole functioning largely a means of promoting a broadly Christian supernatural interventionism. I do not say this here as an argument either for or against it, but simply to say how it actually functions.

Furthermore, in order to understand what ID advocates like Dembski mean when they say, in effect, 'if a biotic structure X exhibits specified complexity,

---

5 Dembski, W.A. *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased without Intelligence*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield (2002).

then Darwinism, or the Darwinian mechanism, cannot account for the formation of X', I have found it essential to understand that:

- to exhibit 'specified complexity' means to be both 'sufficiently complex' and 'specified';
- for a biotic system X to be 'specified' it is sufficient that X exhibit a biological function (as the flagellum functions to give the *E. coli* bacterium mobility);
- biotic system X is considered to be 'sufficiently complex' if the probability,  $P(X|N)$ , of its being formed by chance (that is, recall, by the joint effect of all natural causes, both known and unknown) falls below the value of 10<sup>-150</sup>. In my essay I pointed out that  $P(X|N)$  cannot, however, actually be computed;
- 'Darwinism' is defined in such a way as to entail a commitment to the tenets of materialism. As such, Darwinism is not treated as a strictly scientific theory, but as a comprehensive metaphysical system that all theists would necessarily have to reject;
- the term 'Darwinian mechanism' includes only strictly gradualistic natural processes and excludes, as non-Darwinian, any biological mechanism or event that entails rapid or large changes. Consequently, Darwinism does not include all possible natural mechanisms.

These and other features of the rhetorical strategy employed by North American ID advocates were the subject of a major portion of my essay. I encourage anyone who is interested in coming to a better understanding of this movement to give Dembski's book, *No Free Lunch*, a thorough read and to see whether or not my assessment of that rhetoric is helpful toward understanding and evaluating the book's numerous claims.

### **The Intelligent Design Movement as Jones and Tyler Envision it**

Jones and Tyler describe the ID movement in terms quite different from mine. Some of their descriptions do, in fact, fit with some statements that appear in literature advocating ID. This overlap notwithstanding, however, my candid judgment remains that the view of ID presented and defended by Jones and Tyler constitutes a *highly selective and idealised view from a distance*. Perhaps their view of the North American Intelligent Design movement is taken from their own vision of what the term 'intelligent design' should represent. Or, perhaps it is what the ID movement could have become if it had been proposed and nurtured in an environment outside of the US, burdened as we are with our peculiar history of dealing awkwardly with the interesting challenges presented to Christian theology by modern science, especially by the theory of biological evolution. Regardless of the reasons, however, I find Jones and Tyler's description of ID to be built from a highly selective subset of the presupposi-

tions, strategies, definitions and claims that constitute the North American ID movement as it has been espoused in works by advocates like Johnson and Dembski.

According to Jones and Tyler, for instance, 'ID is not a credal movement.' Rather, it must be seen as 'a broad church that is compatible with a range of positions from agnosticism, through theistic evolutionism to young-earth creationism'. No doubt Jones and Tyler could find samples of ID literature that make a similar claim, but the reality is, in my judgment, a quite different and more complex matter. For instance, are ID advocates prone to offer any positive encouragement for incorporating ID into a religiously agnostic world-view? Rarely, if ever, I would say. The foundation of standard ID argumentation is a simple *either/or choice*: some biotic system (like the bacterial flagellum) was either formed by natural causation as part of the evolutionary process *or* must be the product of the non-natural action of intelligent design. For example, after explaining that design theorists find the either/or question, '*Which is correct, naturalistic evolution or intelligent design?*' to be 'a perfectly legitimate question', ID theorist Dembski goes on to explain that 'to reject fully naturalistic evolution is to accept some form of creation broadly construed, that is, the belief that God or some intelligent designer is responsible for life'.<sup>6</sup> I do not see this as a particularly warm welcome for persons who espouse a genuinely agnostic position.

What about theistic evolution? An even colder reception is in store for those who espouse this type of view. In Dembski's words,

intelligent design is incompatible with what typically is meant by 'theistic evolution' (or what is also called 'creative evolution', 'teleological evolution', 'evolutionary creation' or most recently 'fully gifted creation'). Theistic evolution takes the Darwinian picture of the biological world and baptises it, identifying this picture with the way God created life...Within theistic evolution, God is a master of stealth who constantly eludes our best efforts to detect him empirically...The current theological fashion prefers an evolutionary God inaccessible to scientific scrutiny over a designer whose actions are clearly detectable...Design theorists think the scientific evidence favors design whereas theistic evolutionists think it favors Darwin or one of his naturalistic successors.<sup>7</sup>

In even more strident language, Dembski has suggested that in the eyes of many people, "Theistic evolutionists lack the stomach to face the ultimate meaninglessness of life, and it is this failure of courage that makes them contemptible in the eyes of full-blooded Darwinists."<sup>8</sup> Given this level of denuncia-

---

6 Dembski, W.A. *Intelligent Design: The Bridge Between Science & Theology*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press (1999), p. 115.

7 *ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

8 *ibid.*, p. 112.

tion, it is difficult to imagine a theistic evolutionist feeling warmly welcomed in what Jones and Tyler describe as the 'broad church' of ID.

What about young-earth creationism? For pragmatic and strategic reasons, I suspect, there is an awkward ambivalence here. Young-earth creationism constitutes a very large community in North America, a community whose support could be of great assistance to the ID movement toward its goal of getting the ID perspective into the science classrooms of the state-operated school system. In the context of this political goal, I presume that it is no accident that the ID movement has chosen to remain silent on issues like the age of the earth or the occurrence of a global flood within human history. After all, why offend the large young-earth creationist community of potential allies by being critical of its core beliefs? At the same time, however, advocates of ID have remained comparably silent on the employment of biblical texts to warrant any episodic creationist perspective. After all, why give your opposition such an easy way of identifying ID as a religiously-motivated movement?

This time, however, ID's strategy of silence appears to be problematic to leading young-earth creationists. In a brief essay titled 'Design is Not Enough', (in the Institute for Creation Research's *Back to Genesis* pamphlet series, No. 127a, July 1999) Henry M. Morris, Founder and President Emeritus of the ICR, commented as follows:

There is a strong movement among evangelicals today to emphasize 'intelligent design' as the argument of choice against naturalism and Darwinian evolution. The movement is also called 'mere creation' or 'the wedge movement,' the idea being to avoid controversial subjects such as the biblical doctrine of creation in talking to evolutionists. Any discussion of a young earth, six-day creation, a worldwide flood and other biblical records of early history will turn off scientists and other professionals, they say, so we should simply use the evidence of intelligent design as a 'wedge' to pry them loose from their naturalistic premises. Then, later, we can follow up this opening by presenting the gospel, they hope.

But this approach, even if well-meaning and effectively articulated, will not work! It has often been tried in the past and has failed, and it will fail today. The reason it won't work is because it is not the biblical method.<sup>9</sup>

It would seem that even though Jones and Tyler may be happy with the intelligent design approach, not all of their young-earth creationist colleagues are pleased with the ID movement's strategy to downplay both biblical considerations and questions regarding the age of the universe.

### **Is ID No More than a Minimalist, Non-credal Perspective?**

According to Jones and Tyler, 'ID is a deliberately minimalist position' that

---

9 For the full text of this essay, see <http://www.icr.org/pubs/btg-a/btg-127a.htm>.

unites a diversity of proponents 'around just two basic assertions: "Naturalism is false" and "Design is empirically detectable."' Elsewhere they criticise a portion of my essay by noting that, 'The suggestion here is that a certain type of apologetic approach, or theological agenda is central to ID. This is simply false. So many critics of ID just cannot seem to grasp that...ID is not a credal movement. We are confident that the central goal for many, ourselves included, is not to develop a design apologetic to confront naturalism....'

I must admit that I am mystified by what appears to be a glaring inconsistency here. If the thesis 'naturalism is false' is one of two basic assertions of ID, as Jones and Tyler explicitly state, then how could it be the case that to 'develop a design apologetic to confront naturalism' is *not* a goal for proponents of ID?

That contradiction aside, however, which particular meaning of 'naturalism' do Jones and Tyler have in mind? In my essay I listed four variant meanings that I find to be especially relevant to the evaluation of ID – *maximal* (atheistic) naturalism, *minimal* (religiously agnostic) naturalism, *methodological* naturalism (a statement about science, not about the universe), and *naturalistic theism* (which places a strong emphasis on the ubiquity and necessity of non-coercive divine action). I then developed the thesis that failing to distinguish among these four has been a serious shortcoming of the ID movement. Having chosen to ignore those distinctions, Jones and Tyler have crafted a response that is permeated with one of the central misunderstandings that I sought to prevent.

To understand the Intelligent Design movement comprehensively, I believe that it is essential for a person to recognise that it has not only a scientific dimension but religious and political dimensions as well, each of which should be open to an appropriate form of scrutiny. To neglect the ID movement's religious dimension or to suggest that ID is a purely scientific enterprise that would exist even if the religious agenda of its most vocal advocates were absent would, in my judgement, be seriously to distort reality by presenting a small portion as if it were the whole. Furthermore, for anyone to suggest that the religious agenda of the current ID movement in North America is not dominated by the concerns of Christian supernaturalism would, I believe, require a denial of the obvious.<sup>10</sup>

### **Is it Fair to Ask ID Advocates What it Means to be 'Intelligently Designed'?**

In the opinion of Jones and Tyler, 'It is because he treats ID as a form of cre-

---

10 For an analysis of the multifaceted character of the ID movement, see Forrest, B. and Gross, P.R. *Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design*, New York: Oxford University Press (2004), especially the book's final chapter, 'Religion First—and Last'.

ationism that Van Till asks: "What do ID advocates actually mean when they say that 'X was intelligently designed' ... Presuming that intelligent design is some form of action, what kind of action? And action by what sort of agent?... How does a non-physical agent exert physical forces?" Jones and Taylor then proceed to say, 'We are at a loss to understand Van Till here.'

At a loss to understand why I ask what it means to be 'intelligently designed'? How could that possibly be? I ask ID advocates that specific question for one very obvious reason: their chief claim is, in effect, *We have empirical evidence that X was intelligently designed*. Jones and Tyler explicitly affirm this when they identify as one of ID's basic assertions, 'Design is empirically detectable.' However, until I know what ID proponents themselves mean when they say that some biotic structure X was *designed*, or *intelligently designed*, I have no basis for critiquing such a claim. People, including Jones and Tyler, use the word 'design' for all manner of differing concepts. Failure to clarify what is meant by 'design' and 'intelligent design' has led to massive confusion in the literature and in discussion. My request for clarification comes in the context of having observed that confusion in both the propagation and evaluation of ID for well over a decade.

Perhaps the puzzlement expressed by Jones and Tyler can be at least partially understood by looking at how they continue: 'ID is focused on ways of objectively testing design inferences. Once design is established as an objective feature of living things, the questions raised by Van Till will certainly become relevant.' This rhetoric and similar remarks elsewhere in their paper suggest that Jones and Tyler have in mind some preconception of 'design inferences' and of design 'as an objective feature of living things', and that the meaning of this terminology is so universally accepted that it needs no further explication. But that is simply not the case and the strategic ambiguity regarding the precise meaning of these key terms as they are employed by leading ID advocates represents one of the problems addressed in my essay.

### On the Question of my Religious Motivations

According to Jones and Tyler, my references to the religious motivation of the ID movement constitutes nothing other than a 'kind of *ad hominem* analysis' that functions as a 'polemic' that only 'serves to paint the movement in a negative light....' Furthermore, say Jones and Tyler, 'From Van Till's writings in general it is clear that his objection to ID is primarily philosophical/theological.'

There is, at best, a partial truth in the latter statement. Yes, I have openly and candidly criticised the philosophical/theological dimensions of ID in other publications.<sup>11</sup> In the essay under consideration, however, after noting the importance of understanding the ID movement as one whose primary motiva-

---

11 See, for example, the essays cited in note 4.

tion is religious, I chose to focus on two quite different aspects of ID: (1) its *rhetorical strategy*, and (2) its *scientific claims*. Furthermore, although I did, in my critique of ID's rhetorical strategy, make reference to Christian perspectives other than traditional supernaturalism, I did not argue in favour of any one particular religious/theological position. Jones and Tyler, however, imply something quite different – that my essay must be seen as an apology for some form of naturalistic theism, citing extensively, not from my essay, but from my contribution to an interview posted on the internet in 2004.

Two brief comments in response: (1) Because I did not explicitly argue in favour of naturalistic theism in my *S&CB* essay, references to it (or to the problem of evil) by Jones and Tyler are simply irrelevant. These references are wholly extraneous to the substance of the essay to which they are ostensibly responding. (2) In stating their criticism, Jones and Tyler appear to be seriously confused concerning what my theological perspective on divine action might actually be. First they assert that I reject traditional Christian answers to the problem of evil and instead seek 'to distance God from what actually goes on in the natural world'. Then they cite a portion of my interview with Rev. Ian Lawton in which I say that 'I seek a "God" who is intimately resident in all that transpires "naturally"'. So, then, what do Jones and Tyler think I am looking for – a God who is distant from what actually goes on in the natural world, or a God who is intimately resident in all that transpires naturally? Jones and Tyler are going to have to make a choice; they cannot chastise me for both!

### On Genealogical Continuity

Jones and Tyler close their critical commentary with a challenge to the idea of *continuity* that they find characteristic of Darwinism. They are correct, of course, to note that evolutionary biology finds that the idea of genealogical continuity, or the common ancestry thesis, provides the most fruitful way of accounting for genetic relationships among life forms. Even Michael Behe, one of the principals in the ID movement in the US, says, 'I find the idea of common descent (that all organisms share a common ancestor) fairly convincing, and have no particular reason to doubt it.'<sup>12</sup> But genealogical continuity is just one component of the far more comprehensive assumption that the continuity of natural processes need never be interrupted by occasional episodes of supernatural intervention in order to bring about the actualisation of new life forms. I have called this the *Robust Formational Economy Principle* and I find it to be one of the most fruitful assumptions in the scientific investigation of the universe's formational history.<sup>13</sup>

---

12 Behe, M. J. *Darwin's Black Box: The Biochemical Challenge to Evolution*, New York: The Free Press (1996), p. 5.

13 For a development of this principle, see my essay, 'Is the Universe Capable of Evolving?', In Miller, K.B. (ed.) *Perspectives on an Evolving Creation*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing (2003), pp. 313-334.

But the possibility of uninterrupted genealogical continuity is not acceptable to Jones and Tyler, who hold to the idea of independent creations of 'all the different kinds of living things' that continue to 'reproduce after their own kind'. Noting that not all Christians agree with this type of position, Jones and Tyler lament that, 'A number of Christians ... claim that there is a scientific theory of evolution (neoDarwinism) which they find acceptable, but that evolutionism, which springs from atheistic philosophy, is unacceptable.' But theistic evolution of any sort is rejected by Jones and Tyler, who unequivocally declare that, 'this view is fallacious: there is no scientific theory of evolution! The time is long overdue for the atheistic roots of all evolutionary theories to be addressed by the Christian community.'<sup>14</sup>

Given this sentiment, the deep discomfort expressed by Jones and Tyler concerning my critical evaluation of the North American ID movement is not surprising. Nonetheless, I am confident that my critique is based on a sound understanding and a fair representation of what the ID literature says, of how its rhetorical strategies function, and of whether or not its scientific case carries any probative force.

---

**Howard J. Van Till is Professor of Physics and Astronomy Emeritus at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, MI 49546, USA.**

---

---

14 Jones and Tyler express this judgment in a brief essay titled 'Darwinism and Neodarwinism in evolutionary change', posted on the website of the Biblical Creation Society. The basic tenets of the BCS can be found in its Creation Manifesto, which specifies that 'the earth cannot be more than a few thousand years old', and that the Noachian Flood 'was global' and 'really happened in history', that is, within the last few thousand years. Furthermore, for anyone to deny this 'is to disbelieve the words of Christ himself'. The full text of Jones and Tyler's 1992 article can be found at [www.biblicalcreation.co.uk/scientific\\_issues/bcs028.html](http://www.biblicalcreation.co.uk/scientific_issues/bcs028.html)

### **CiS – St. Edmund's College Templeton Lectures on Science & Religion**

Termly lectures held at Cambridge University cover a wide spectrum of topics relating to interactions between science and faith.

**See [www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis](http://www.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk/cis) for free down-load of transcripts and audio versions of lectures, together with texts of the extended Discussions held at St. Edmund's College after each lecture.**

*"A valuable resource for all those interested in the science-religion debate".*

Copyright of Science & Christian Belief is the property of Paternoster Publishing. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.