

EDITORIAL

INTELLIGENT DESIGN, NATURAL SELECTION, AND GOD

Someone once asked me, “Could not God have used the process of natural selection to create living organisms?” What evidence might one use to answer that question?

*Richard Dawkins, biology professor at Oxford University makes the following statement at the beginning of his book *The Blind Watchmaker*:*

Biology is the study of complicated things that give the appearance of having been designed for a purpose.¹

Dawkins then goes on to assure us that living things have not been designed at all, but are the result of unguided natural selection.

It is not my purpose here to point out the flaws in the argument presented in Dawkins’ book — others have already done that.² I wish instead to focus on the meaning of the word “design.” According to Dawkins, living things present a powerful “illusion of design.”³ Thus, he uses the term design in the sense of purposefully crafted. Purpose, of course, requires an intelligence, so Dawkins’ use of the term could also be expressed as “intelligent design.” Dawkins makes clear he is against applying the idea to living organisms. According to him, natural selection mimics design, so that what appears to have been purposefully crafted was actually constructed through unintelligent processes. In this claim, Dawkins is being faithful to Darwin, who intentionally proposed the theory of natural selection to do away with the idea that organisms were purposefully crafted.

*The term “intelligent design” is used with a similar meaning by many scientists who disagree with Dawkins’ view. According to these scientists, living organisms appear to be designed because they were, in fact, purposefully crafted. A group of design advocates, including scientists and philosophers, met at Biola College near Los Angeles, California, to discuss these issues in November, 1996. One outcome of that meeting was publication of a book called *Mere Creation*⁴ (see the review on page 101 of this issue). Another*

outcome was a sharpening of the meaning of the term “intelligent design,” and a new method for detecting design — the “explanatory filter” (see the review for further explanation).

Now the point of all this is that both critics and advocates appear to agree on the definition of “design.” The word “design” refers to effects that are intentionally caused by intelligent agents. Now consider the nature of natural selection, which is, by definition, a process that does not involve an intelligent agent. To use Dawkins’ words:

... [natural selection] has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind’s eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all.⁵

This is consistent with Darwin’s use of the term.

In other words, if God is involved in the evolutionary process, it is not a “natural” process. If God is involved in selection, it is not “natural” selection. Thus, to the question (see above) whether natural selection might be the way in which God created, the answer must be no. Divinely directed natural selection is a contradiction of terms. Selection might be natural, or it might be intelligently directed, but it is not both.

What then, about “directed selection” as the method by which God created? Could God be directing mutation and/or differential survival to bring about creation of new species? How does such an idea play out?

Evolutionary selection involves two categories of events. The first category is variation caused by genetic change; the second category is differential survival and reproduction due to the effects of preceding genetic change. Theoretically, events in either of these categories could be divinely directed. What is the nature of the evidence concerning whether or not mutations and differential survival are directed?

How would we know whether an intelligent agent is directing mutations? One way would be to observe whether mutations are helpful or harmful. If God is directing mutations, we would expect mutations to be beneficial. There is a strong consensus among biologists that observed mutations are mostly harmful, or neutral at best. Many mutations are known to be associated with disease, which is not what one would expect from guidance by a righteous divinity. Helpful mutations are generally thought to be so rare that

their origin can be explained by chance rather than by design. Some experiments have suggested that helpful mutations seem to occur more frequently than expected by chance in bacteria undergoing nutritional stress,⁶ but this seems to be due to an increased rate of both helpful and harmful mutations in certain genes.⁷ Thus, if mutations are being divinely directed, the divinity directing them appears to be incompetent at best, or evil at worst. Neither description fits the God described in Scripture.

If mutations are not being directed, what about selection? Could it be that God is providentially preserving favored individuals in order to bring about evolutionary change? If so, the implication would be that God evaluates the potential of various individual organisms on the basis of their genes, choosing some to die and some to live. In this scenario, it is not individual organisms who have value, but genes. Unwanted individuals and their offspring are abandoned to die, while the survival of favored individuals and their offspring is enhanced. This is not a particularly flattering picture of God, but it might nevertheless be true.

One possible way to test this idea would be to examine small natural populations, to see whether there is a tendency toward genetic degradation, or whether individuals with favorable mutations are preserved with sufficient frequency to maintain the genetic vigor of the population. Results of such observations⁸ show that small populations tend to lose genetic variability and drift toward extinction. Thus, it appears that selection is not being directed by a righteous divinity, although one could postulate an indifferent divinity who would behave in this way.

The notion of directed selection does not seem to be supported by the evidence. Neither mutation nor differential survival appear to be guided by God. The creation process described in Scripture seems inconsistent with directed selection. In addition, the implications of directed selection for the character of God do not seem consistent with biblical revelation.⁹ Thus both nature and Scripture suggest that divinely directed selection does not appear to be God's method of creation.

But, could God's activity in nature be veiled so that what appear to us as random events are actually being guided by divine intelligence? Perhaps, but why postulate that some "force" is

affecting events when the “force” makes no sensible difference in the outcome?

Is this to say that God does not intervene in nature? Not at all. Indeed, God must have acted directly to bring a variety of living organisms into existence. He may be continually acting in nature to prevent it from falling apart. However, there is no persuasive evidence, empirical or revealed, that directed selection is God’s chosen method of creating. Rather, it appears that selection acts after the origin of biological structure, preserving it or modifying it, but not creating it. Intelligent design seems to be the best explanation for the origin of living creatures and their morphological “adaptations.”

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ENDNOTES

1. Dawkins R. 1987. *The blind watchmaker*. NY: W. W. Norton, p 1.
2. E.g., see: (a) Cogdell JR. 1988. *The blind watchmaker* (review). *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 40:112-113; (b) Nelson P. 1988. *The hopeless watchmaker*. *Origins Research* 11:10-16.
3. Dawkins, p 21 (see Note 1).
4. Dembski WA. 1998. *Mere creation*. Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
5. Dawkins, p 5 (see Note 1).
6. E.g., see: (a) Hall BG. 1997. On the specificity of adaptive mutations. *Genetics* 145:39-44; (b) Wright BE, Longacre A, Reimers JM. 1999. Hypermutation in derepressed operons of *Escherichia coli* K12. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA)* 96:5089-5094.
7. This does not preclude the possibility that the genome originally was designed with mechanisms whereby specific beneficial mutations were induced by environmental signals.
8. E.g., see Westemeier RL, Brawn JD, Simpson SA, et al. 1998. Tracking the long-term decline and recovery of an isolated population. *Science* 282:1695-1698.
9. The violence and brutality in nature, and the suffering caused by parasites and pathogens seem incompatible with God’s will as revealed in Isaiah 11 and 65, and Revelation 22. Such manifestations of evil are better explained as anomalies caused by corruption of the original peaceful kingdom (Genesis 6:11-12, Romans 8:19-21).