

Darwinian Apologetics: Big Questions, Inadequate Answers

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During the 1974 commencement address at Cal Tech, Nobel Laureate Richard Feynman provided some sage advice on science and ethics: “I would like to add something that’s not essential to the science, but something I kind of believe, which is that you should not fool the layman when you’re talking as a scientist.”¹ Unfortunately, when scientists become apologists for various beliefs about the nature of life and reality, it is almost impossible for them to fully live up to the ethical standard Feynman set. In no branch of scientific controversy is this truer than in the debate over evolution.

The quality of much that is written by advocates of all positions about the origin of life deteriorates exponentially in publications written for general audiences. That is not to say that all popular books dealing with Darwinism and ideas such as Intelligent Design (ID) are misleading, but many leave informed readers with two unpleasant options to consider: (1) The author is ignorant; or (2) the author is attempting to take advantage of the ignorance of the readers.

Francisco Ayala’s new book, *Darwin and Intelligent Design*,² is a striking example of this phenomenon. In fact, it is such a perfect example, so engagingly and concisely written (a mere 104 small pages), that I am recommending it to anyone who wishes to understand the arguments of ID opponents.

There are many flavors of argument leveled against ID in this book, and responding to each one of them would be impossible. Instead, I will focus on a few of the arguments presented by Ayala that represent general trends and are commonly recognizable in the arguments of other ID opponents.

One of the most useful tactics in any debate is to define the opposing position in terms which make the position being advocated win automatically. ID is easy to define accurately and succinctly; it is the religiously neutral observation that some aspects of nature most reasonably originated as products of intelligently guided, rather than unguided natural forces. The Discovery Institute, a leading ID think-tank, puts it this way: “The theory of intelligent design holds 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.”³ This is a definition that is easily understood by any thinking person and is widely available, and yet it is rarely, if ever, used by opponents of ID.

Instead of allowing advocates of ID to define ID, Ayala attempts to win over his readers by avoiding the widely used definitions and instead makes such statements as, “The intended meaning of the proponents of intelligent design is precisely this: namely, that organisms and their features have been designed by an external agent, God.”⁴ Ayala is not just a professor of biology, ecology and evolutionary biology; he is also a full professor of philosophy at the University of California, Irvine. None of these qualifications, however, makes him capable of getting inside another person’s brain and determining, if their “intended meaning” is different from the actual semantic meaning of the words and grammar they use.

The claim that ID amounts to a narrow argument for the Judeo-Christian God is preposterous, because ID is not a detailed metaphysic, it is embraced by people spanning a broad range of belief systems ranging from deist Antony Flew,⁵ all the way to Muslims, Hindus, and traditional Protestant and Catholic Christians. Even some professed atheists like Francis Crick, when proposing arguments like directed panspermia,⁶ employ ideas that closely resemble ID.⁷

One consistent trend in misdefinitions of ID is conflating ID with creationism. This may be because opponents of ID see creationism as an easier target, while some creationists see ID as a powerful argument that proves creationism true. Both views of ID are wrong. ID does not prove or even attempt to show that the God

of Genesis is the creator or that creation occurred in a manner resembling the Genesis description. On the other hand, ID is not inconsistent with biblical creation, but it is also not logically inconsistent with theistic evolution, progressive creation or directed panspermia. ID is remarkably metaphysically neutral.

Because opponents of ID commonly conflate it with creationism, they tend to recycle arguments against creationism that do not logically relate to ID. Ayala's book devotes a large portion of its space to attacking creationist claims rather than addressing ID. While these anti-creation arguments have their own set of problems, it is not necessary to counter them if the question is the strength or validity of ID. For Darwinists, ID is not acceptable because it allows open questioning of the adequacy of naturalistic mechanisms and does not embrace the materialistic metaphysic. For some creationists, ID does not go far enough in embracing the Biblical account of creation.⁸ ID relies on logic and data alone.⁹

Another problem is that science itself is commonly defined in materialistic terms that provide an advantage to ID opponents, although philosophers of science have struggled for years without agreement on an adequate definition of science. Most people reasonably assume that science has something to do with logical interpretation of data, and even Ayala states that "Science does not imply metaphysical materialism."¹⁰ Yet he consistently refers to science in materialistic or naturalistic terms.

The argument is that science is about empirical reality, and because science can only provide natural explanations for natural phenomena, ID cannot be science because ID is not metaphysically bound by naturalism. Furthermore, the claim is commonly made that ID cannot be tested and therefore is not science, but defining science in ways that exclude either Darwinism or ID makes no difference to whether either is true or not.

In any case, the methods of ID are testable. For example, if it could be shown that the kind of specified complexity seen in computers, jet aircraft, and living things is the product of unguided natural forces, it would call into question the claim that specified complexity logically infers an intelligent cause. Darwinism also is testable, as Darwin pointed out: "If it could be demonstrated that any complex organ existed, which could not possibly have been formed by numerous, successive, slight modifications, my theory would absolutely break down."¹¹ Specified complexity, particularly the specific case of Irreducibly Complex (IC) molecular machines inside cells, cannot be produced via successive slight modifications. Thus, biological IC causes Darwin's theory to "absolutely break down." This is why Ayala and others work so furiously to cause confusion about IC and the detailed examples that have been provided. Ayala's objections to IC are simply misinformed and appear to reflect ignorance of a widely available literature addressing his objections.¹²

As Ayala points out, there are ways of gaining knowledge about the universe other than science, although he clearly does not think ID is one of them.¹³ The catch comes when science is presented as the ultimate arbiter of truth in the natural or material world. According to this view, if ID is "not science," it cannot embody truths about the empirical world. The problem for Ayala's overarching argument is compounded by his invocation, without attribution, of Stephen J. Gould's Non-Overlapping MAGisteria (NOMA).¹⁴ NOMA is essentially an extension of the postmodernist fragmentation of knowledge. Its central claim is that "science and religion *cannot* be incompatible, because they concern non-overlapping domains of knowledge."¹⁵ But if ID is not science and is bad theology, then, because science cannot address theological questions anymore than theology can inform questions of science, using science to oppose ID is incoherent, and yet this is precisely what Ayala attempts to do for much of *Darwin and Intelligent Design*.

NOMA is a direct assault on the Christian understanding of a unity of knowledge embodied in one God, one faith, and one truth. The Christian quest is not to divide knowledge into autonomous entities that do not inform one another, but to recognize and be informed by areas in which tension exists between branches of knowledge like science and theology. To the degree that theology emphasizes revealed knowledge and

science emphasizes empirical knowledge and both rely on human logic, tension between the two areas is inevitable, but this does not logically imply that they lack the potential to inform each other. Separating science from faith renders both less relevant to human existence, denies the ultimate unity of truth and prevents different branches of knowledge from informing one another.

Just in case the “overwhelming” scientific evidence does not convince readers of the truth of evolution, Ayala does make a foray into theology, recycling arguments about the goodness of God and “imperfections” in the creation. In other words, the “science” of Darwinism is presented as a theodicy that gets God off the hook for the problem of evil, particularly natural evil; so much for NOMA. The link between this argument and ID is tenuous because ID makes minimal, if any, claims about God. From a strictly ID perspective, the presence of certain phenomena logically infers an intelligent cause, but the intelligent cause does not have to be good, wise, or nice. Though guns are designed to maim and kill, that does not mean they are not the product of intelligence.

Often arguments invoking imperfection in nature are arguments from ignorance: If we don’t know what something does, it must do nothing. This was the logic used to declare essential organs like the spleen “vestigial” remnants of evolutionary history.¹⁶ Ayala claims that “Embryonic rudiments are inconsistent with claims of intelligent design.”¹⁷ This stems from an earlier misstatement about ID: “The imperfection of structures is evidence for evolution and contrary to the arguments for intelligent design.” This is false. ID does not predict perfection (and neither does creationism for that matter). A 1970s Ford Pinto car complete with gas tank that explodes on rear impact and rudimentary rear bumper was still intelligently designed to meet very specific design goals.¹⁸

The argument from imperfection requires very specific theological assumptions, including that a perfect God would only create perfect creations and that we see those creations in their perfection now. ID takes no position on the perfection of God; and creationists who base their beliefs on Scripture understand that, while the creation was “good” when it came from God, what we now see is the marred product of thousands of years of sin and God’s curses on the creation pronounced at the fall. The question is not, “Why is nature broken?” but rather “Why is it still so incredible?” ID provides a partial answer to this, Biblical creation provides a more complete answer, and Darwinism provides an answer inadequate to account for the data.

Students of rhetoric will recognize many of the techniques commonly used to promote Darwinism as a science. Ayala’s book is rich with arguments from authority with numerous assurances that everyone—all scientists, the pope, and the church fathers—supports evolution and not biblical creation or ID. Possibly most startling is Ayala’s reliance on the ruling of United States District Court Judge John E. Jones III in the recent Kitzmiller case.¹⁹ It is weird to read an eminent scientist like Ayala relying on the authority of a judge rather than on a good argument, or at least a qualified scientist, to decide what is good science and what is not.

Arguments that are merely appeals to authority can only work on those who are not equipped to evaluate actual substantive arguments, which is why they are commonly employed in publications and debates claiming to make the case for Darwinism with the general public. A reasonable person would agree that everyone, from popes to the most eminent scientists of the past, has a long track record of being wrong on any number of issues. This is why science does not rely on arguments from authority. It relies, like ID, on logic, data and replicable results.

In many cases, Ayala abandons arguments for simple assertions. For example, he quotes Theodore Dobzhansky without attribution when he states “The theory of evolution needs to be taught in the schools because nothing in biology makes sense without it.”²⁰ This statement is absurd. Before Darwin plenty of things made sense in biology absent of any reference to evolution. Even during Darwin’s life, eminent biologists like Louis Pasteur made sense of the cell theory of life when he disproved the spontaneous

generation of life without reference to evolution or Darwinism (which happens to require spontaneous generation).

When an individual seeks to win a debate by resorting to simple assertion instead of logic, it is difficult to take the ideas being put forward seriously. Statements like “It is now possible to assert that gaps of knowledge in the evolutionary history of living organisms no longer exist.”²¹ or “The missing link is no longer missing”²² carry about as much weight as saying, “I’m right and you’re wrong – so I win.” Luckily for aspiring evolutionists, the missing link remains missing, so there is plenty of reason to keep looking, if you are a Darwinist.

At the beginning of this essay, I quoted Richard Feynman’s advice that scientists “should not fool the layman when you’re talking as a scientist.” Unfortunately, in the propagation of Darwinism this advice is routinely ignored. It would be nice to imagine that this is not the case in the creationist literature, but logical errors abound there as well. In both cases, this is unfortunate as the One who made all things promised His followers, “ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32).

In a world where truth is in short supply and genuinely liberating, confusion about creation sometimes threatens to overwhelm the precious truths given to humanity in God’s Word. Believing in the truth about creation is not about having all the answers; it is about having some very good answers and being unwilling to abandon them for clearly inadequate answers like Darwinism.

¹R. Feynman, “Cargo Cult Science,” adapted in *Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman!* from Richard Feynman’s 1974 Caltech commencement address. The entire text of this chapter is available on line at many locations including: <http://www.uky.edu/~holler/msc/roles/cargocult.html>.

²F. J. Ayala, *Darwin and Intelligent Design* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

³<http://www.discovery.org/csc/topQuestions.php>.

⁴Ayala, 54.

⁵Antony Flew was a famous British atheist for many years, but since embracing ID has declared himself a deist and distanced his beliefs from Christianity.

⁶Panspermia suggests that “seeds” of life existed already in the universe and that life on earth may have originated through these “seeds.”

⁷See F. Crick, *Life Itself: Its origin and Nature* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1981), 192. Note that, particularly since his death, an effort has been underway to distance Crick from these ideas. The argument is essentially that since discovery of ribozymes imagining how life could have evolved as it is now is much easier than it was at the time Crick wrote his book.

⁸See for example: Mark Looy, “It’s Intelligent, But Is that Good Enough?” <http://www.answersingenesis.org/docs2/4257gc3-24-2000.asp>. Also see: R. Moll, “The Other ID Opponents: Traditional Creationists see Intelligent Design as an Attack on the Bible, April 25, 2006. Available online at: <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2006/aprilweb-only/117-22.0.html>.

⁹T. G. Standish, “Changing the World with ID?,” *Ministry*, November 2003, 26-27.

¹⁰Ayala, 101.

¹¹C. R. Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 171.

¹²For example, Ayala’s claim that the type III secretory system may have been co-opted to produce the bacterial flagellum is disingenuous for multiple reasons. This objection has been dealt with in detail by flagella and type III secretory system expert Scott Minnich, see: <http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/filesDB-download.php?id=389>.

¹³Ayala, 90.

¹⁴S. J. Gould, *Rocks of Ages* (New York: Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999).

¹⁵Ayala, x; italics in original. Almost exactly the same words are used on page 91.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 8, specifically mentions the spleen without mentioning its essential function in the production of certain essential cells in the immune system or that William Paley was correct in suggesting that it probably does have a long term function of some sort. For a good discussion of this issue, see J. Bergman, “Do Any Vestigial Organs Exist in Humans? *Technical Journal* 14/2(2000):95–98; available online at: <http://www.answersingenesis.org/tj/v14/i2/vestigial.asp>.

¹⁷Ayala, 35.

¹⁸M. Dowie “Pinto Madness,” *Mother Jones* September/October 1977; available online at:
<http://www.motherjones.com/news/feature/1977/09/dowie.html>.

¹⁹For a discussion of some of the issues in this case, see D. K. Dewolf, J. G. West, C. Luskin, J. Witt, *Traipsing into Evolution: Intelligent Design and the Kitzmiller v. Dover Decision* (Seattle: Discovery Institute Press, 2006).

²⁰Ayala, 75. See also: T. Dobzhansky, “Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution,” *The American Biology Teacher* 35 (March 1973): 125-129.

²¹Ayala, 41.

²²*Ibid.*, 43.

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