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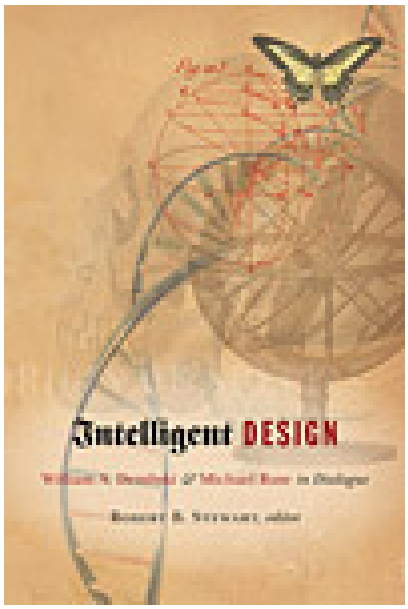

Stewart, Robert B., ed.

Intelligent Design: William A. Dembski and Michael Ruse in Dialogue

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Christopher Heard
Pepperdine University
Malibu, California

As the Intelligent Design (ID) movement closes in on twenty years of opposition to mainstream evolutionary biology, the controversy shows few signs of abating. Most leading scientists remain convinced that ID does nothing to advance scientific knowledge, while ID advocates complain about their marginalization within scientific discourse. In February 2006, the annual Greer-Heard Counterpoint Forum sponsored by the New Orleans Baptist Seminary invited prominent ID advocate William Dembski and noted ID critic Michael Ruse to address some central issues in the debate. Francis Beckwith, Martinez Hewlett, Wesley Elsberry, and William Lane Craig also participated. For the printed volume, editor Robert Stewart solicited further contributions from Ken Keathley, John Lennox, Alister McGrath, J. P. Moreland, Nancey Murphy, Hal Ostrander, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and John Polkinghorne. With this range of contributors, readers will immediately see that the book's subtitle, *William A. Dembski and Michael Ruse in Dialogue*, gets at only a small portion of the book's content.

The actual dialogue between Dembski and Ruse begins with opening statements, Dembski taking the lead. Dembski attempts to generate incredulity toward evolutionary explanations by focusing on complexity and subjective impressions of probability. According to Dembski,

> Many evolutionary biologists seem to think that if you can merely imagine a material force or process that could bring about some biological structure, then it's immediately going to trump intelligent design. But is there actual evidence for the creative power of these material forces? Or is the more compelling evidence on the side of intelligent design? It seems to me that really is where the issue should be. (15)

This sounds like a promising beginning, but Dembski does not deliver. He repeatedly claims, but does not demonstrate, that evolutionary biologists rest content with "imagining" evolutionary pathways; he addresses neither the fossil record nor DNA evidence, to name but two sources of data that outline such pathways and provide "actual evidence" for the "material forces" that evolutionary biologists study. Nor does Dembski provide "compelling evidence" in favor of ID. Instead, Dembski tries to set up ID as the preferred fallback position should mainstream biology fail to explain—to Dembski's satisfaction?—the evolutionary pathways leading to selected biological structures. To be blunt, Dembski does not really play fair. He asks, "[I]s it reasonable to argue that because we don't understand how the design of biological systems was implemented that it didn't happen by design at all?" (19). Yet Dembski offers *precisely* this argument against evolutionary biology: "if we don't understand how a given biological system (like the bacterial flagellum) emerged by evolution, it didn't happen by evolution at all."

Ruse, a self-described "evolutionist" and critic of ID, begins his opening statement with a long description of Charles Darwin's experiences in the Galápagos Islands and his resulting theory of speciation by natural selection. Ruse then considers the religious or theological dimensions of ID. Ruse very briefly traces the history of modern literalistic readings of the creation stories from Genesis, concluding that ID stands within what Ruse calls "indigenous American Protestantism" (32). Ruse finds ID scientifically problematic because, he says, "[t]he idea of irreducible complexity just doesn't work" (30); he examines several favorite ID analogies and finds them lacking. Moreover, Ruse finds ID theologically problematic because he thinks it requires the designer—which many ID advocates take to be God, though they often seem reluctant to say so in public, depending on who is listening—to take the blame for problems such as genetic flaws.

Stewart then presents a transcript of a brief dialogue between Ruse and Dembski. Here again Dembski comes off as if he wants ID to be given a pass on the standards to which he holds evolutionary biology. In response to Ruse's question, "What are you ID people actually getting in the biological world that we evolutionists are not?" (32), Dembski replies (in part),

> I don't think the burden on intelligent design is simply to come up with new experiments, new facts. The important thing is to find new ways to make sense of them. I believe that we are making better sense out of them than the evolutionary biologists. The point of my joke about imagining an evolutionary pathway was that we have not been given any detailed evolutionary pathways. (32)

Dembski's final claim in this quotation is not only false but also somewhat brazen, given his absolute refusal to accept for ID the "burden" of showing detailed design pathways.

A roundtable discussion involving Dembski, Ruse, Craig, Hewlett, Elsberry, and Beckwith follows the very brief dialogue between Dembski and Ruse. Craig kicks off the discussion with a question to Ruse about the evidence for evolutionary change, which (with a little help from Hewlett) slides into a discussion about natural and nonnatural causes and science's ability or inability to explore them. This fascinating exchange is not easily summarized.

Fully three-quarters of *Intelligent Design: William A. Dembski and Michael Ruse in Dialogue* features writers other than Dembski and Ruse. Participants in the Greer-Heard Forum contributed chapters 2–5. In chapter 2 Martinez Hewlett gives a succinct overview of "the task of science," followed by a brief but engaging history of the origins and development of evolutionary theory from Darwin to the present. Hewlett then argues that theism and evolutionary theory can be compatible if one strips away the "ideological shrink wrapping" in which some prominent Christians *and* atheists try to enclose evolutionary biology. William Lane Craig's essay explores similar territory, asking whether evolutionary theory inevitably leads to atheism by way of naturalism (the philosophical position that all of reality is contained within nature and that there are no supernatural realities). After describing several varieties of naturalism—antiteological, methodological, antisupernatural, and pragmatic—Craig concludes, "Evolutionary theory does not prescribe an epistemology.… I do not see why an evolutionist need be committed to any form of naturalism" (65).

An essay by Wesley Elsberry and Nicholas Matzke addresses recent American history and courtroom clashes over ID and evolution, as does Francis Beckwith's contribution. Elsberry and Matzke review the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* court case; readers familiar with the case will not learn much from this summary, while readers unfamiliar with case should pay careful attention. In the end, Elsberry and Matzke argue that ID is an ineluctably religious view and therefore should be excluded from U.S. public schools under the Constitution's "establishment clause." Beckwith treats the subject more generally and arrives at a somewhat different conclusion. Beckwith argues that one must distinguish between a law's *purpose* and a legislator's or citizen's *motive*: even if personal beliefs

motivate a person to support the teaching of ID in public schools, that teaching itself could have, Beckwith thinks, a legitimate secular purpose that would pass constitutional muster.

Chapters 6–12 and the volume's afterword come from writers who did not participate in the Greer-Heard Forum with Dembski and Ruse but who have various reasons to be involved in the debate. Alister McGrath's central argument, aimed mostly at Richard Dawkins, really cuts against both atheism and religious fundamentalism, as he attacks the sort of "absolute dichotomist thinking" that leads to an "either ID (understood as religious) or evolution (understood as atheistic)" mindset. J. P. Moreland's chapter on "intelligent design psychology" and evolutionary psychology can prove a difficult read. Moreland describes fifteen ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments of Christian ID psychology, but he never actually *justifies* these commitments or this approach. When he turns to naturalistic evolutionary psychology, he again focuses on ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments, stopping to offer critiques from time to time.

Hal Ostrander tries to use the anthropic principle and quantum cosmocausality to show the necessity of divine causation. Readers may be justified in suspecting Ostrander of begging the question, insofar as his argument seems to boil down to: (1) the universe in which we live is such as to allow us to exist (the anthropic principle); (2) therefore, the universe exists *in order to* allow us to exist (teleology, "cosmos for *anthropos*"); (3) therefore, God must exist, for such an anthropically purposeful universe is otherwise inexplicable (God as sufficient cause). In chapter 9, Nancey Murphy also considers divine action. She criticizes the ID movement for perceiving divine action only in events that cannot be explained by natural laws. Murphy promotes instead a view that God is active in every natural event. Her model of "quantum divine action" suggests that God does not interfere with the basic law of nature but that God nevertheless sustains and controls natural processes by determining the outcomes of otherwise indeterminate processes at the quantum level. John Polkinghorne also argues for a "concept of providence … that pictures God as ceaselessly interacting with creation by means of continuous action taking place within the divinely ordained open grain of nature" (174). Like Murphy, Polkinghorne contrasts his view with ID's focus on alleged discrete acts of special creation (or engineering) rather than a more holistic view of God's activity in nature.

After addressing several other interesting topics, John Lennox offers a partial defense of "God of the gaps" arguments by distinguishing between "bad gaps" and "good gaps." "Bad gaps" merely represent holes in our present knowledge, while science reveals "good gaps" at the outer limits of its own possibility. For example, Lennox thinks that "the beginning of space-time is a good gap in the explanatory of physics, [and] the origin of

life is a good gap in the explanatory power of molecular biology" (193). Ken Keathley digs deep into Christian history, offering a fascinating study of the debate over the shape of the earth between two sixth-century Christian philosophers, John Philoponus and Cosmas Indicopleustes. In an afterword to the volume, Wolfhart Pannenberg avers that "[t]he description of the world of nature by the sciences and the biblical faith in the creation of the world cannot simply exist in neutrality toward each other" because "both are concerned for one and the same world" (210). Pannenberg suggests that the biblical authors, not least the author(s) of Gen 1, used their theology to guide their thinking as they followed the "science" of their day in describing the natural world, and he commends this model for Christians today.

In this volume, Robert Stewart very helpfully brings together advocates and critics of the ID movement so that readers can appreciate many different facets of the arguments that swirl around this movement and its criticisms of mainstream science. Most of the essays are well-written (despite several notable typographical errors that escaped the copy editor[s]), and all treat fascinating topics. Anyone interested in these issues would do well to give Stewart's *Intelligent Design* volume thoughtful and sustained attention.