

Whose God? What Science?: Reply to Michael Behe

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Reports of the National Center for Science Education
Vol. 21, No 3-4, May-Aug 2001, pp. 16-19

In his review of my book *Tower of Babel: The Evidence against the New Creationism* that he recently published in *The Weekly Standard* under the title “The God of Science: The Case for Intelligent Design” (Behe 1999), Michael Behe takes me to task for criticizing the “intelligent design” group, of which he is a member, in the same pages that I criticize Genesis literalists and other religious anti-evolutionists. He writes:

Unfortunately, whatever merits exist in Pennock's analysis, they are obscured by biased rhetoric. His term "creationism," for instance, is one that readers will typically take to mean biblical literalism: a "young earth" created as recently as 4004 B.C., Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, and all the rest. But Pennock applies "creationist" to writers who believe in none of this. His actual opponents turn out to have doctorates in things like embryology, biochemistry, the philosophy of science, and mathematics from places like the University of Chicago, Cambridge, and Berkeley. And they write books and articles that engage, rather than avoid, serious issues in science and philosophy. (Behe 1999, p. 36)

Behe would have us believe that members of his group have disavowed classic “young-earth” views and do not base their “theistic science” in the Bible, but this is not so. I tried to be very careful not to misrepresent the views of those I criticized, as Behe has misrepresented my discussion in his review.

Behe is not himself a young-earthier, but he must know that other leaders of his movement are—Percival Davis, Paul Nelson and John Mark Reynolds, among others. Moreover, Behe and the old-earthers in his movement are creationists in the core sense of the term, namely, that they reject the scientific, evolutionary account of the origin of species and want to replace it with a form of special creation. Philip Johnson writes that “creationism” is, as he puts it, “not simply biblical fundamentalism, but *any* invocation of a creative intelligence or purpose outside the natural order.” (Johnson 1990) I was careful to distinguish different varieties of creationism and also to distinguish creationism from the more mainstream religious beliefs in Creation that do not reject evolution. Intelligent-design creationists (IDCs) try to disassociate themselves from other creationists, but the difference is mostly one of political strategy.

Henry Morris, founder of the young-earth Institute for Creation Research (ICR) writes that the idea behind the intelligent design movement is to begin with the design argument and postpone talking about the bedrock biblical doctrine. He explains:

Any discussion of a young earth, 6-day creation, a world-wide 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. (Morris 1999)

Morris, of course, does like the design argument (he has been promoting it for decades), but he knows that, contrary to Behe’s assertion in his review, it never convinced Fred Hoyle or anyone else to throw out atheism and become a theist, let alone a Christian.

In *Darwin's Black Box*, Behe trumpets his version of the design argument as one that “must be ranked as one of the greatest achievements in the history of science.” Heady stuff! However, anyone not distracted by the self-congratulatory fanfare will recognize that what Behe has dished up is not a revolutionary scientific discovery, but warmed over 19th century natural theology. Despite their vaunted “doctorates from places like the University of Chicago, Cambridge, and Berkeley”, IDCs have made no conceptual advance over William Paley's failed argument.

I spent several dozen pages in *Tower of Babel* showing errors in Behe's own arguments, but in his review he conveniently ignores these. As predicted, he chooses to “engage” only a single sentence. Behe tells origin-of-life researchers that they should throw in the towel, and accept his “finding” that biomolecules were miraculously created. Oparin inaugurated origin of life studies in the 1920s, but it is only in the last few decades that molecular biology has begun to develop the tools that will allow it to investigate the kinds of examples Behe cites. Behe knows full well that such research continues to reveal clues to unravel the mystery, just as he surely knows that origin of life experiments have done far more than produce what he claimed was merely “goo at the bottom of the test tube”. Creationists' rhetorical campaign against evolution has done nothing to undermine the overwhelming evidence in its favor. (Interested readers might check the June 25, 1999 issue of *Science* for a small taste of some of the exciting recent findings by evolutionary biologists, including a review of research on the chemical origin of RNA structure). If Behe's objection to me is that I am not sufficiently pessimistic about the prospects of such ongoing research, I plead guilty.

Although he fails to defend his own claims, Behe does attempt to come to the aid of Phillip Johnson and tries to justify IDCs' reliance upon negative argumentation. It is fitting that he does so in terms of political advertising, in that IDCs continue to rely upon propaganda rather than scientific research. He writes: “[E]vidence against Darwinism does count as evidence for an active God, just as valid negative advertising against the Democratic candidate will help the Republican, even though Vegetarian and One World candidates are on the ballot, too.”

But the fallacy should be clear even here. Even if a voter were to be misled by negative ads against the Democrat candidate, that will not automatically help the Republican. For instance, depending upon the details of the candidates' positions, the ad could hurt the Republican as well. Negative advertising could also cause a voter to be so disgusted as to not to cast a vote for anyone on the ballot, and wait for a better alternative. Moreover, Behe's voting analogy doesn't even apply to the case at hand, because IDCs consistently refuse to identify party affiliation or even the name of their candidate. No one is going to vote for a shadowy Mr. X if it is impossible to check his (its?) credentials or even existence. As for God, he gracefully declines to put himself on the ballot in opposition to real candidates, allowing voters (if we may stretch the political analogy) to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Like Johnson, Behe presumes that God and Darwinism are mutually exclusive options, but we have no evidence to back up that assumption, nor is it easy to imagine what such could even look like. The point is that even political candidates have to earn their votes by offering a positive program and a proven track record. In science, the standards are higher still, for the program must be supported objectively by the evidence, vouchsafed by peer review. IDCs call for a

revolutionary “theistic science”, but offer no details of their positive platform and so, like a weak political candidate, take the low road of slinging mud (or in this case “goo”).

Behe also tries to defend Phillip Johnson from another of my criticisms, arguing that Johnson should be excused for not having made careful distinctions, because he was writing “not for philosophers but for the general public”. But that is a feeble excuse, especially given that IDCs purport to be engaging in a scholarly, philosophical debate. Moreover, I doubt that many in the general public will agree that it is “logic-chopping”, as Behe calls it, to distinguish the evangelical's conception of “the True God of the Bible” from a universal life force or other view of God. Without argument, Johnson and company blithely dismiss entire traditions of Christian theology (not to mention non-Christian views), presuming that only the evangelical view matters. Behe says he is a Roman Catholic, but the Pope's recent statement supporting evolutionary biology and reiterating the Church's view that evolution does not imperil the faith seems not to have sunk in. “The God of Science?”—one detects no science in Behe’s “Case for Intelligent Design”, and it is clear that he and other IDCs recognize only their own particular notion of God.

IDCs, like other creationists, hold that one must choose between evolution and Christianity. William Dembski, the mathematician/philosopher with the Chicago Ph.D. Behe referred to, wrote that IDCs are “no friends of theistic evolution”. (Dembski 1995) In *Tower of Babel*, I defended a view of science that eschews both the strong atheist and creationist extremes and hews to methodological naturalism -- a moderate view that upholds what is necessary for scientific inquiry, and sets aside metaphysical possibilities

about God for theologians and philosophers to debate and the faithful to believe in as they may.

Let me make one last comment about Behe's closing appeal to the mid-20th century positivist physicist Percy Bridgman. Chiding me as a scientific "gatekeeper", Behe quotes Bridgman to the effect that "The scientific method, as far as it is a method, is nothing more than doing one's damndest with one's mind, no holds barred." Behe concludes: "No holds barred, even though that may force us to conclude that the universe reveals, in its intelligent design, traces of its intelligent designer." However, Behe has taken Bridgman's comment out of context, implying that Bridgman proposed that there are no methodological rules in science. This could not be farther from the truth. Indeed, a crucial element of Bridgman's approach was that theoretical terms in science must be given an "operational definition" if they are to have any cognitive significance. I have yet to see Behe or any other IDC give an operational definition of their vague "intelligent designer", let alone of God. Without such a definition, Bridgman would have judged their Creation hypothesis to be literally nonsense. IDCs quote a bit of positivist philosophy in one breath and a bit of postmodernism in the next as it suits their immediate purposes, and the result is an incoherent conceptual mess. Both science and religion deserve better.

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(Vol 21, No 3-4, pp. 16-19, May-Aug, 2001)

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