



The Positive Side of Intelligent Design: A Response to Loren Haarsma

Michael J. Behe

I appreciate Haarsma's cordial attitude in discussing a topic which too often engenders hostility. There is much in his article with which I agree, and some with which I disagree. I will confine my remarks to just a few points.

The most serious problem of the article in my view is that Haarsma appears to focus only on negative arguments for design. He repeatedly characterizes it as an argument from ignorance: "If we can show that first life and biological complexity is unexplainable (highly improbable) in terms of known natural mechanisms," we will have proven that "it was brought about by an intelligent agent" (p. 55). No, that is decidedly not the argument for design. Rather, the argument is a positive one.

As William Paley wrote two hundred years ago in his famous example about finding a watch on a heath,

When we come to inspect the watch, we perceive ... that its several parts are framed and put together for a purpose, e.g., that they are so formed and adjusted as to produce motion, and that motion so regulated as to point out the hour of the day ... The inference we think is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker.

Notice that there is nothing in Paley's example about "known natural mechanisms" — the phrase that keeps popping up in Haarsma's essay. Rather, in essence, Paley says we infer design when we see a finely-tuned system put together for a purpose. That is still the positive argument for design. Of course, Darwinists, self-organization theorists, and others claim they know of unintelligent mechanisms that can mimic design, so an important part of the job of an ID proponent is to rebut those claims. But one should

be careful not to confuse the rebuttal of Darwinian claims with the positive argument for design.

I strongly concur with Haarsma that the message "evolution or design, one or the other" is a flawed choice. To the extent that the public has gotten that impression, it is regrettable. There is nothing in the idea of intelligent design that precludes the design being unfolded over time, and I myself judge that scenario to be the most consistent with all of the data we currently have. What's more, I am mostly happy with his statement, "Suppose the laws of nature are fine-tuned not only for the self-assembly of molecules and stars and planets, but also for the self-assembly of biological life and biological complexity" (p. 61).

Nature may indeed be fine-tuned for the assembly of life, but I think the word "law" is quite inadequate to capture the extent of fine tuning that would be required. Rather, much more than just simple laws are necessary to account for the highly specified life we see in the universe, just as much more than simple laws of friction and momentum are necessary to account for, e.g., a highly specified trick pool shot that sinks a dozen balls at one stroke. Although laws may play their parts in the cases of both trick pool shots and the unfolding of life over time, in both cases, rather than to law, we should attribute the results to intentional design. ★

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