



Dialogue: Reply

The Filter Aspect of Intelligent Design: A Reply to Michael J. Behe

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There are several versions of the argument for design. Behe emphasizes a "recognition" version of the argument. In this version, advocates first make a positive argument for design by observing that an object has multiple parts which work together to perform an identifiable function, noting that this is a hallmark of designed objects. They then add secondary negative arguments that these parts could not have come together via known natural processes. These secondary arguments are intended to add weight to the design argument, but the initial positive argument for design is not necessarily intended to be dependent on those secondary negative arguments.

Much of the writings of William Dembski, Paul Nelson, and other ID supporters, however, emphasize a "filter" version of the argument for design. This version starts with, and depends upon, a negative argument that known natural mechanisms cannot account for something. Once known natural mechanisms and chance are eliminated as explanations for the object or event, a second argument is made that "design" is the most reasonable or compelling remaining explanation. (Many ID advocates construct the filter version of the design argument using, as their prime example, the contention that irreducibly complex biochemical structures cannot be explained by known Darwinian natural mechanisms.)

In my talk, I focused on this filter version of the design argument because I was scheduled to speak with Dembski, and because this version makes it easier to highlight which portions of the Intelligent Design theory are "scientific" even under narrow definitions of "science."

Atheists make similar two-part arguments against design in biology:

Scientific claim: Biological complexity can evolve via natural processes.

Philosophical claim: If biological complexity can evolve, then it was not designed.

When ID proponents focus all of their efforts on rebutting the scientific claim, they appear to be granting the philosophical claim of this argument. Evolutionary creationists believe that the philosophical claim is the real source of the problem, and that this is where the real battle lies.

I would love to see, henceforth, every argument supporting ID start with a vigorous rebuttal of the atheists' philosophical claim before proceeding to attack the scientific claim. And I would love to see, henceforth, that every evolutionary creationist on their way to argue against the atheists' philosophical claim would also acknowledge that ID raises valid scientific questions which can be studied scientifically. *

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