Is Howard Van Till's Response to "Van Till and Intelligent Design" a "Right Stuff" Response?

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In reply to Howard Van Till's response, "Is the Creation a 'Right Stuff' Universe?" I shall make five major points as briefly and as clearly as I can. First, Van Till states that he will not provide a point by point rebuttal of my article, "Van Till and Intelligent Design," because the "work" most frequently cited by me is not anything that he has published. Van Till encourages "readers who are genuinely interested in what I have written regarding … the ID movement [to] find the relevant references [to my published views] in [what] follows" (p. 232).

On this, let me make three short subpoints: (1) In my essay, I do refer to Van Till's published works; (2) If I have misunderstood or misconstrued Van Till, then he should say so. That, it seems to me, would be reason to give a point by point rebuttal, not a reason to neglect to do so; and (3) Based on what Van Till has written in response, it looks as though I understand him just fine, since he mostly repeats what I have reported in my essay.

Second, Van Till commits an error in reasoning. He twice engages in what philosophers call committing the fallacy of making a "hasty generalization." The first instance of this fallacy involves Van Till's rightly noting that the RFEP (or something very like it) has been extremely scientifically fruitful for a number of centuries now. However, because of its previous successes, he mistakenly concludes that it will be ultimately successful in explaining every "type of organism that has appeared in the course of time" (p. 232). For Van Till, this "is a judgment call made, not in a vacuum, but against the background of centuries of scientific experience" (p. 234).

Fine. But by the same reasoning, one could just as easily (or perhaps even more easily, given the number of centuries this problem has plagued philosophers and scientists) conclude that the RFEP must be wrong (false, incorrect) because after all this time we still do not have the foggiest idea of how matter and the laws of physics can account for the crudest of conscious experiences. In other words, one could reason, as Van Till does, that the RFEP must likely be true because it has been successful in the recent scientific centuries in accounting for x, y and z. But, one also could argue that the RFEP must likely be false, because throughout the centuries, it has been unsuccessful in accounting for so many of the "organisms that have appeared in the course of time," viz., organisms that have consciousness.

The second instance of Van Till's commission of this fallacy involves failures of the so-called folk scientists to identify "gaps" in the formational economy. In geology, astronomy, and biology, for example, it was once thought that divine intervention played a role. Subsequent scientific analysis and theorizing, however, have eliminated the need to invoke such "divine tweaking." Since invoking the divine was rendered otiose in the past, Van Till assumes it too will be in the future with respect to ID.

But consider another situation. What do we say to a teenager with a half-dozen or so

failed romantic relationships when he or she cries in despair, "It'll never work out. I'll never get married!" Just because it has not worked out yet does not mean that it will not work out in the future. To think so is a fallacy. Now, Van Till is correct to point out here that it is a game of odds, a question of making a sound wager. But, as I pointed out in my essay, the successes historically of the scientists with theistic worldview assumptions vs. the successes of scientists with nontheistic worldview assumptions does not compel me to wager against the scientist with theistic worldview assumptions. Despite some popular misconceptions, theism historically has been quite good for the advancement of science. If the RFEP is, in fact, false and ID shows it to be so, that would constitute advancement in scientific knowledge. And at a minimum, if it is impossible for Van Till and others like him to be supportive of ID, then why not at least just leave IDers alone to see what they might come up with?

> Third, on page 236, Van Till writes:
> Having argued against the possibility of the "natural" formation of certain biotic systems, what model for extra-natural action does ID offer in its place? No specific models have been proposed, only the broadly stated conclusion that these novel biotic configurations must have been brought about by some non-natural, intelligent agent. However, if all natural agencies have actually been demonstrated to be inadequate to the task of actualizing certain biotic configurations, then we are left, it seems to me, with only *supernatural* agents to do the job.

This would be precisely why those who are averse to theism would be motivated to see ID fail. If it succeeds, their precious, deeply held worldview assumptions are shattered—unless they take the almost comical way out as the great scientist Francis Crick did after he and James Watson discovered the mind-boggling complexity of DNA, and posited that such intricate biotic structures were designed by space aliens.

Fourth, Crick could see that DNA was designed. He could detect design, although he could not give a very satisfactory account of its mechanism. So why does Van Till continue to demand that IDers give a detailed account of the "hand-like" mechanism of the design in biotic structures before they can declare that the structures were designed? It is simply not true that one has to know the precise mechanism that did the designing in order to see that something is designed. Imagine, for example, that a spaceship lands on earth and out of it pops an alien who holds up a magnificent, intricate object that resembles something like the insides of a computer. I need not know either the designer or the mechanism of its design in order to know that it was designed. Therefore, not being able (yet) to give an account of the mechanism of design in biotic structures does not abrogate ID's claim that certain such structures were designed.

Finally, let me make a comment about "folk science." If I understand Van Till correctly, a folk scientist is basically any scientist who engages in a scientific experiment in order to have a belief he or she holds about the world confirmed. If that is the case, then every scientist is a folk scientist. For what it means for me as a scientist to have a hypothesis is precisely to "guess" that the world is like this (or not like this, if the hypothesis in question is meant to rule out some possibility). That is why I will try a particular experiment rather than any of the virtually infinite number of other experiments I can imagine performing. In other words, in conducting any scientific experiment, I must first have some kind of belief about what the world is like before I do the experiment in order to have that belief either confirmed or disconfirmed. The idea that there are scientists who perform experiments in a vacuum without any prior commitments about what the world is like is a myth. It is simply mistaken.

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In conclusion, while space does not permit a point by point rebuttal of "Is the Creation a 'Right Stuff' Universe?" I hope it is clear that I have attempted to understand, analyze, and evaluate Van Till's ideas earnestly and critique them head-on. ✯