



Dialogue: Reply

Indirectness and the Displacement Problem: A Reply to Walter Thorson

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I argue that one can defend divine design without incautious appeal to direct intervention [and] that legitimate scientific inferences are not closed under naturalistic consequences, even with the enriched notion of nature proposed by Thorson.

In Walter Thorson's response to my paper, he provides two additional arguments for his view that Intelligent Design belongs to natural theology, not science. He argues that (1) Intelligent Design makes a premature appeal to divine causes and that (2) this appeal is redundant in science. In response to his first argument, I argue that Thorson attributes to Intelligent Design an assumption about divine agency which it need not hold. In response to his second argument, I argue that the same inference that establishes creaturely telos also points to divine design, and that limiting science to the creaturely falls afoul of Dembski's "displacement problem."

I agree with Walter Thorson that a purely mechanistic paradigm cannot account for the "functional logic" of living things, and that this motivates an enlarged conception of nature and a correspondingly more inclusive notion of natural science. However, Thorson sees this as an admission of "creaturely," not divine *telos*. Consequently, Thorson maintains that, insofar as it points to a divine designer, Intelligent Design (ID) remains part of natural theology, not natural science.

In defense of this conclusion, Thorson gives two main arguments. First, Thorson argues that Intelligent Design perpetuates "Aristotle's baneful influence,"¹ because it makes a premature appeal to a final divine cause, discouraging scientists from looking for "possible further meanings" in living things. Second, Thorson argues that because we can understand the creaturely *telos* "on its own terms,"² appeal to divine design is redundant in natural science.

I will try to show that a careful proponent of ID can handle both objections.³ In reply to his first argument, I argue that one can defend divine design without incautious appeal to direct intervention. In reply to his second argument, I argue that legitimate scientific inferences are not closed under naturalistic consequences, even with the enriched notion of nature proposed by Thorson.

Indirect Divine Agency

The worry that premature appeal to divine design will inhibit scientific discovery is legitimate. However, an ID proponent can eschew the naive view of divine agency that creates this problem. Consider an analogy from Reformation theology. According to Luther, God continues his creative work through the vocations of human beings. While God could provide our daily bread *ex nihilo*, he typically works through the means of bakers, truck drivers, and store clerks.⁴ Although God can create directly, he often chooses to use means. We should expect the same pattern when we investigate the world scientifically. God certainly can produce events directly (miracles). But he also can work through the laws of nature or by other means. It seems to me, however, that ID can grant all this, and that this has an important consequence: inferring that an effect is designed is not the same as inferring that the proximal cause of that effect is the designer, and so in no way discourages further examination of the cause.

This point is clear even with human design. Suppose that you are handed a piece of paper with a beautiful fractal pattern. Initially, you are tempted to suppose it sprang directly from the mind of an artist. Then you discern the telltale dots that evidence digital production, and you infer that it is a computer output. The computer is not an

intelligent designer. But the output still points to intelligent design. There is no known, unaided natural process that transfers fractal patterns onto paper in just this way. Since the proximal cause is a mindless computer, you realize that the intelligence lays further back, in the minds of computer programmers and users. But you are not discouraged from investigating how the computer generated the output.

Likewise, we should not simply cry, "Divine intervention!" upon discovery of biological systems that exhibit "complex specified information." We need not assume that the systems were created directly by God, and we should be interested both in their "functional logic," and their proximal causes. This, however, does not show that the design inference is unscientific. If a forensics expert infers that a bullet found in Madagascar was fired by a gun in Brooklyn, the inference is not undermined by the discovery that the bullet was mailed all over the world before arriving in Madagascar. Proponents of ID can agree on the importance of investigating the naturalistic chain of causes that resulted in a designed event. However, these causes are, at best, conduits of design, means of transmitting complex specified information. These conduits help to explain why such information is present at a particular time and place, but they no more explain the origin of that information than water pipes explain the origin of water.

The Design Inference and the Displacement Problem

Thus, in the human case, the fact that designers work through means neither undermines the design inference nor discourages the examination of those means. The claim of ID is that the same point holds in cases of supernatural design. As Del Ratzsch has argued, the logic is surprisingly straightforward.⁵ There are certain things of which unaided nature is incapable, but which humans can do. When we discover such things, we infer that they are human artifacts, even if we do not know how or why they were manufactured. Suppose now that we discover marks of design that no human (or other natural being) could produce, such as ancient biological information or the fine structure constants of cosmology. It seems that we are using the same kind of inference in both cases; thus, if the former inference is scientific, so is the latter.

The point is very strong when the characteristic necessarily has no naturalistic explanation. For example, Robert Koons argues:

By definition, the laws and fundamental structure of nature pervade nature. Anything that causes these laws to be simple, anything that imposes a consistent aesthetic upon them, must be supernatural.⁶

Why deny that inferences of this sort are scientific just because they do not happen to be closed under *naturalistic* consequences?

The point is strengthened by attending to Dembski's "Displacement Problem."⁷ Dembski argues that naturalistic processes can shuffle complex specified information around but cannot create it *de novo*. Consequently, following the information trail through various conduits only displaces the problem of the information's origin.

Suppose now we consider the functional logic of a living structure. Thorson may be right that we can understand how the creature works synchronically "on its own terms," without considering its possible origin. However, there is also the diachronic question of the means by which such a structure was produced. This, too, is a legitimate scientific question. As we examine the chain of natural causes that terminate in the structure, suppose we discover that complex specified information is never generated, but only rearranged in various ways. Suppose further that we can show that no known naturalistic process can generate such information, while we do know that intelligent agents can produce it.⁸ If there is no plausible natural candidate, why is it unscientific to *suggest* that the origin of this information is a supernatural being? The claim, of course, may be false, and it may be refuted by the discovery of some new natural process that does not merely displace the problem. But design inferences do not need to be saddled with theological finality. As putative scientific claims, design inferences lay themselves open to empirical refutation in just the same way as the claims of the naturalist. But if there is no naturalistic solution to the displacement problem, limiting ourselves to the creaturely would deprive science of discovering an important truth. ♦

Notes

¹See "Aristotle's Baneful Influence," pp. 13–4.

²See "A Creaturely Telos," p. 14.

³I do not dispute that some proponents of design may be vulnerable to the objections Thorson makes. If so, however, this arises from their operating with an inadequate conception of divine agency, and is not essential to the Intelligent Design program.

⁴See Gene Edward Veith, *God at Work: Your Christian Vocation in All of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), especially chaps. 1 and 2.

⁵Del Ratzsch, *Nature, Design and Science: The Status of Design in Natural Science* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001). Ratzsch defends the legitimacy of inferring supernatural design; see especially chaps. 9 and 10.

⁶Robert Koons, "The Incompatibility of Naturalism and Scientific Naturalism," in William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, eds., *Naturalism: A Critical Analysis* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2000), 49–63, 55.

⁷William A. Dembski, *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot be Purchased Without Intelligence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), section 4.7.

⁸For example, we know that Shakespeare could produce the complex specified information in his sonnets.

an online reading group and chat with Del Ratzsch

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July 1–31, '03